

The Evolving Crime of Sex Trafficking

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A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2024

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

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Abstract

Human trafficking is a global crime that occurs in all countries regardless of status or rank. It victimizes both genders and all age groups. The two most common types of human trafficking are for the purposes of forced labor and commercialized sexual exploitation. The demand for commercialized sexual exploitation has increased throughout the United States. Technology and social media have enhanced and made the ability to commit sex trafficking easier and more efficient. The ties between pornography and sexual exploitation have also had an impact on sex trafficking recruiting and grooming.

The Evolving Crime of Sex Trafficking

Human trafficking is one of the fastest-growing crimes in the world, occurring within borders or internationally. It influences all cultures and regions, as there is no specific victim stereotype. Human traffickers can work individually or operate with organized criminal groups. The United States Department of Justice defines human trafficking as, “a crime that involves exploiting a person for labor, services, or commercial sex with the use of force, fraud or coercion” (Department of Justice [DOJ], 2022, para. 1). There are various typologies of human trafficking.

Types of Trafficking

The two main types of human trafficking are forced labor and sex trafficking, yet there are diverse types not discussed: child trafficking for child marriages, war, and criminal purposes, and organ harvesting. Labor trafficking is the use of force, fraud, or coercion to exploit a person for labor or services. Forced labor occurs in factories, agriculture, construction sites, and other work types. Forced labor is a common form of human trafficking as 38.8% of human trafficking cases involve forced labor (United Nations, 2022). Sex trafficking is the recruiting, transporting, or harboring of individuals for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Prostitution and pornography are included as forms of sexual exploitation. Sexual exploitation is another usual form of trafficking as it accounts for 38.7% of cases (United Nations, 2022). Child trafficking is trafficking targeting specifically children that includes forced labor, sexual exploitation, child marriage, and using children in armed conflict. Child sex trafficking has four diverse types: “pimp-controlled, gang-controlled, familial, and buyer perpetrated” (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children [NCMEC], 2021, para. 3). There does not need to be evidence of force, fraud, or coercion for a minor to be considered as a victim of human trafficking due to anyone

under the age of 18, a minor, being unable to consent to sexual services under the law. Forced marriages accounted for .9% and forced criminal activity for 10.2% of cases (United Nations, 2022). Children have also been used by terrorist groups to be child soldiers or suicide bombers. It is estimated that there are 250,000 child soldiers in the world (Theirworld, 2024). Organ Harvesting is the illegal removal, transplantation, or sale of human organs, tissues, or cells. It is considered a form of modern slavery with .2% of trafficking cases (United Nations, 2022). Victims are preyed on for their body parts and are unable to make a voluntary decision.

Who are Traffickers?

Traffickers can be of any gender, culture, or race. Of convicted traffickers, 58% are men and 40% are women (United Nations, 2022). It is common to see males by themselves, females working by themselves, or the two genders conspiring together as the female trafficker recruits victims for the male counterpart. Females have a higher risk of detection due to having high involvement in the recruiting of victims. Human traffickers have different operational tactics: 46% of traffickers organize in a business similar to an organized crime structure, while 10% are traffickers working alone (United Nations, 2022). While they are the smaller percentage, individual traffickers are accountable for many victims. On the other hand, criminal organizations can traffic more people for longer periods of time. Traffickers' ages can range from below 18 to above 70 years old, through cases it was analyzed that most traffickers convicted were between 23 to 36 years old (United Nations, 2022).

A common misconception is that all traffickers are strangers that abduct randomly; while this may occur, it is only 6% of case victims that are considered to have been abducted or suddenly forced into the abuse (Polaris, 2021). On the contrary, traffickers have become more relationally involved as they can take on multiple different types of relationships. Traffickers can

be family members, neighbors, classmates, partners, or bosses. In 45% of cases, the traffickers are relatives or family members, while romantic partners or boyfriends make up 40% of traffickers (Polaris, 2022). In addition, 10% of traffickers were the friends or coworkers of the victims (Polaris, 2021). Overall, 90% of ‘recruiters’ use their relationships to exploit their victims (Polaris, 2020). Traffickers have prioritized a relational aspect to the recruitment of their victims.

Warning Signs of Traffickers

Regarding sexual behavior, traffickers can be pushy and demanding about sex, in addition to encouraging inappropriate sexual behavior. Economic warnings can look like the trafficker making the victim feel responsible for their financial stability and keeping financial matters open (Shared Hope International, 2024). Traffickers will also encourage their victims to achieve their goals through illegal activities. Vagueness in occupation and professions and making promises that seem too good to be true are also verbal warnings of traffickers (Shared Hope International, 2024). Characteristic warning signs can appear as jealousy, controlling, and violence (One Safe Place, 2024). Physical warning signs consist of gift giving of expensive items or being significantly older amidst female companions (One Safe Place, 2024). Not all traffickers display these exact behaviors, yet having knowledge of and being acquainted with potential warning signs can be beneficial for the safety of self and the community.

Victim Vulnerabilities

Victims can have any background, be of any age, or of any race and culture. All humans have a vulnerability which is why there is not an overall stereotype for victims, but the trafficker is looking for an easy need to meet, and there are certain needs that tend to be a common factor for victimization. People with an easily identifiable need or vulnerability, such as a lack of

housing, love, and support, become more at risk (The Exodus Road, 2024). The vulnerabilities and needs must be met to gain the trust of the victim and build a relationship and sense of security with the trafficker.

Gender and Age Demographic of Victims

In addition, all genders are susceptible to human trafficking. When it comes to forced labor, men have the higher victim percentage of 48% and females with 22% (Polaris, 2021). On the contrary, women have the higher victim percentage for sex trafficking. Throughout the globe, 64% of trafficked for sexual exploitation are women, and 27% are girls; 10% are males, both men and boys, and 2% are transgenders (United Nations, 2022). This defies the myth that sex traffickers only target women as victims. Men can be and are victims of sex trafficking, too. Furthermore, female victims have three times a rate higher than males to be subjected to extreme physical violence by traffickers, and even more, children have two times higher of a rate than adults (United Nations, 2022).

Traffickers have no set age that they prey on, but case summaries suggest that the age of detected child victims ranges between 14- and 15-year-olds for all forms of exploitation (United Nations, 2022). Children are of the most vulnerable targets. In 2022, NCMEC received more than 19,000 reports of possible child sex trafficking (2021). Although this is a massive number, this is the amount of only what is reported. Many incidents go unreported. Overall, one out of five girls and one out of 13 boys are sexually abused before the age of 18 (Child USA, 2023). This crime is impacting children by the thousands, and it is crucial to know what vulnerabilities traffickers' prey on.

Common Vulnerabilities

Although there are no stereotypes for victims, common vulnerabilities are found in victims of human trafficking. Lavinder (2020) lists specifically that “a background in the foster care or juvenile justice system, poverty, a history of domestic violence, sexual abuse, unstable living conditions, undocumented immigration, personal substance abuse, or addiction of a caregiver” are all characteristics that make a person vulnerable to human trafficking (para. 5). Housing and dysfunction in the home are two serious common vulnerabilities: 14% of victims have unstable housing, and 16% or one in six are runaways (NCMEC, 2021). Foster children and family dysfunction are also vulnerabilities. Neglect and abuse in the household have created a high-risk factor for trafficking: 16% of victims have vulnerabilities from migration (Polaris, 2021). Poverty is also an economic vulnerability for victims. In addition, there are also mental and physical vulnerabilities such as addiction and previous abuse: 18% of victims have addiction as a vulnerability (Polaris, 2021). It can be substance abuse, physical abuse, or more commonly, sexual abuse. This trauma has very close connections to human sex trafficking. Mental illness has also been on the rise: 13% of victims have mental illness as a vulnerability (Polaris, 2021). Although the home environment plays a huge role, Choi (2015) discusses how low educational attainment, low intelligence, learning disabilities, and dropping out of school can also be indicators of future victimization.

Common Methods of Control

Exploitation is maintained by traffickers establishing power and control over victims through multiple methods: 28% of victims stated that their trafficker used emotional abuse (Polaris, 2021). This can look like playing mind games, humiliating victims in front of others and name calling, blaming the victim or making them feel guilty about a situation, or manipulating

the victim into believing that the trafficker is the only one who cares for them. This manipulation can be used to make the trafficking situation not seem like anything exploitive and illegal is happening or that the victim is at fault for being trafficked. To continue, 26% of victims have experienced economic abuse and 23% of victims shared their trafficker used threats (Polaris, 2021). Economic abuse methods are creating debts that can never be repaid, prohibiting access to or the taking of money, and limiting resources to a small allowance. Coercion and threats can be a powerful method of control as well. Traffickers will threaten to harm the victim or their family members if an act is not performed. Traffickers also could threaten to expose or shame the victim by sharing explicit images from the victim to their family. More common in labor trafficking is the threat to report the victim to police or immigration. When force, fraud, and coercion are absent then victims are forced to sell or exchange sex for life necessities such as shelter, food, drugs, or money (Fedina et al., 2019). Victims are commonly forced into sex trafficking for the purpose of survival. Their life, whether personal necessities or the safety of family, begins to rely on their coercion in this crime: 20% of victims said that their trafficker used isolation, confinement, the moving of locations, or not leaving the victim left alone (Polaris, 2021). The trafficker tries to isolate the victim from family, society, and resources. The trafficker prevents access to the victim's family and friends. The victim is isolated from society by constantly moving to different locations, being accompanied by the trafficker in public places, and having a created distrust of other people and police (National Human Trafficking Hotline, 2024). Traffickers will also deny the victim the ability to learn English and go to school (Hope For Justice, 2024). The inability to understand English or another language is a huge vulnerability for victims.

Fourteen percent of victims have experienced physical abuse by their trafficker as a method to assert control (Polaris, 2021). Physical abuse takes on many forms. Traffickers can physically abuse through hitting, kicking, and strangling their victims (Polaris, 2021). Burning, branding, and tattoos are common, too. There is also the use of harmful chemicals or creating drug addiction to continue to control the victim. Physical abuse can take the form of purposefully denying life essentials such as food and water. For victims of sex trafficking, physical abuse can look like the forcing of pregnancy termination; 10% of victims said that their traffickers used intimidation to maintain power and control and another 12% of victims said that their traffickers displayed weapons, or harmed others (Polaris, 2021). The threats of weapons, harming others or pets, or the destruction of property are all forms of intimidation. Another form of intimidation is the trafficker lying about law enforcement involvement in the situation (Polaris, 2021). Finally, another way that traffickers can assert control over their victims is by hiding or destroying important documents, such as birth certificates, licenses, passports, and visas (Polaris, 2021).

Victims' Warning Signs

Those affected by human sex trafficking do not see themselves as victims, despite it legally being under the crime of sexual abuse. Regardless, it is important to discuss how victims end up with physical health symptoms, behavioral violence, and trauma. The physical health and mental symptoms that come from the trauma of sexual exploitation are numerous. Fedina et al. (2019) share that there is a high risk of overall poor physical health, HIV/AIDS, unintended pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among sexually exploited youth. These victims go through sexual violence as they are used by the commercial sex industry through customers and pimps. Choi (2015) continues to list mental health symptoms such as posttraumatic stress disorder, suicidality, anxiety, and depression. These symptoms and violence

tend to be common among all victims. Some physical risk factors also include gynecologic infections and pelvic pain. There was also found to be high substance abuse with substances such as tobacco and alcohol (Choi, 2015).

More warning signs should be paid attention to for victims of human trafficking. Physical signs would be physical abuse marks such as bruises, cuts, or burn marks (Shared Hope International, 2024). A new tattoo can also dictate trafficking as they are used as branding marks. Changes in lifestyle can also be a warning sign. Such changes include overly tired or unexplained absences in class, being dressed less appropriately than normal, or being dressed in outfits more expensive than before (Shared Hope International, 2024). Having older boyfriends or new friends with a different lifestyle can be a warning sign. A new devotion to gang affiliation is a warning sign of lifestyle change. Warning signs can also come from what the victims are saying. These can include bragging about having to make or receive large sums of money or talking about wild parties or events. It can also involve the person not being able to talk for themselves or being controlled by an adult (National Human Trafficking Hotline, 2024). Behavioral warning signs include being withdrawn, distracted, depressed, or even sexualized behavior.

Where Does Human Trafficking Occur?

In addition, human sex trafficking occurs all over the world. No country is exempt from this crime. Most victims of cross-border trafficking tend to be discovered in nearby border countries or within the country of origin's region. Europe and Central Asia have 66% of their exploitation being sexual exploitation, Africa and the Middle East with 53%, and the Americas with 48% (Cox et al., 2018). Youth, especially females, are in the highest demand globally for

sexual exploitation. The crime occurs in all continental regions, and each region is different in the prioritized form of trafficking and the targeted victims.

Europe

European victims are commonly detected in the sub-regions of Europe (United Nations, 2022). In the European region there is an estimated 6.4 million people in human trafficking (McGeough & Schooneveld, 2023). In Western and Southern Europe, women and girls are mainly trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation, men for forced labor, and boys for the purposes of criminal activity (United Nations, 2022). Central and south-eastern parts of Europe also have a high percentage of women being trafficked for sexual exploitation (McGeough & Schooneveld, 2023).

Africa

Victims from Sub-Saharan Africa are the most detected in transnational trafficking and in 2020, represented the highest substantial transregional growth (United Nations, 2022). In the African region there is an estimated 7 million people in human trafficking (McGeough & Schooneveld, 2023). In Sub-Saharan Africa, both girls and boys are trafficked for the purposes of forced labor (United Nations, 2022). Child trafficking for forced labor is the most prevalent form of trafficking in the region. In North Africa, male adult victims are commonly trafficked for forced labor, and boys for forced criminal activity (McGeough & Schooneveld, 2023).

Asia

The trafficking of Asian victims out of South and East Asia has had a large growth (United Nations, 2022). The Asian and Pacific regions have the highest number of people in human trafficking with 29.3 million victims (McGeough & Schooneveld, 2023). Most regions have detected victims from East Asia. Popular regions that are destinations for trafficked victims

from South Asia are Western Europe, East Asia, and the Pacific (United Nations, 2022). There are fewer victims detected in the Americas and the Middle East from South Asia, yet there has been an increase in East Asian victims detected in the Middle East (United Nations, 2022). In South Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific both male and female victims are equally trafficked for the purposes of forced labor and sexual exploitation (McGeough & Schooneveld, 2023).

Americas

In the Americas there is an estimated 5.1 million people in human trafficking (McGeough & Schooneveld, 2023). North America, Central America, and the Caribbean more commonly detect female victims, both women and girls, trafficked for sexual exploitation (United Nations, 2022). In North America, sexual exploitation is the main form of exploitation (McGeough & Schooneveld, 2023). Central America and the Caribbean also have their main form of exploitation as sexual exploitation, but their predominant victims are little girls (United Nations, 2022). In South America, women are trafficked for sexual exploitation and men for forced labor.

North America

In North America, the main form of exploitation is sexual exploitation (Department of State, 2021). Sexual exploitation predominately targets females as 64% of detected sexually exploited victims are women, and 27% are girls (United Nations, 2022). Males can be victims of sexual exploitation as well. Males, both men and boys, equate to 4% of sexually exploited victims (United Nations, 2022). Transgender persons equal about 2% of victims (United Nations, 2022). This includes transgender men, women, boys, girls, and non-binary persons. Some United States' citizens travel to foreign countries to engage in extraterritorial child sexual exploitation and abuse (Department of State, 2021). The trafficking flow of North America is that 66% of

victims are domestic, 25% of victims are cross-border from other regions, and 9% are cross-border within the region (United Nations, 2022).

Southern Border

The United States-Mexico border has been a vessel for the enhancement of human trafficking into the United States. In 2021, 147,000 unaccompanied migrant children entered the United States through the southern border; 122,000 were taken into U.S. custody (Rodriguez, 2022). Based off the statistics, 25,000 unaccompanied migrant children are unaccounted for, and ultimately, there can be a higher number of children who were snuck passed border security. On average, over 12,000 unaccompanied migrant children are entering the United States monthly throughout 2023 (Davis, 2023). It is estimated that 60% of Latin American children who cross the border alone or with smugglers have been caught by cartels and are being exploited through child pornography or drug trafficking (Rodriguez, 2022).

Four main corridors on the southern border are used by cartels and traffickers that consist of these cities: Tijuana, Mexicali, Nogales, Ciudad Juarez, Nuevo Laredo, and Matamoros (Asmann & Dudley, 2023). The first corridor is Tijuana and Mexicali, which border the state of California. The human traffickers in this corridor operate as local pimps (“padrotes”) and family clans, using diverse tactics such as false companionship and job advertisements. The victims often are migrant women from Central and South America (Asmann & Dudley, 2023). Organizations operating in this corridor are the Sinaloa Cartel, Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), and the Tijuana Cartel. It is estimated that hundreds of trafficking cells between four and 20 individuals are sexually exploiting women and girls between Tijuana and Mexicali (Asmann & Dudley, 2023).

The second corridor is the Sonoran Desert. The Sonoran Desert predominantly is between Mexico and the state of Arizona and reaches a small part of California. The biggest border crossing in this region takes place in Nogales, a city between Mexico and Arizona. There is sex trafficking in Zona de Tolerancia, a red-light district in Nogales, where victims are exploited at brothels, motels, and bars (Asmann & Dudley, 2023). The Sinaloa Cartel has influence in this region as well. The third corridor is Ciudad Juarez, which directly borders El Paso, Texas. In this corridor, criminal organizations operate in multiple different layers. In 2013, police arrested six members of the Aztecas, a local gang with Juárez Cartel roots, who formed part of a human trafficking network (Asmann & Dudley, 2023).

The fourth corridor consists of Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros. These are three cities in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, which borders the southern part of Texas. This area's traffickers are more directly involved in the exploitation. In Nuevo Laredo, the Northeast Cartel, formed from the Zetas, controls the flow of drugs, people, and contraband across the border (Asmann & Dudley, 2023). Nuevo Laredo is the busiest border crossing point throughout the entire border. US Customs and Border Protection has the highest migrant encounters in this corridor and has declared it as one of the most prominent places on the border for human trafficking (Asmann & Dudley, 2023).

Unwatched Locations

War-torn areas and orphanages are two locations often missed when assessing where human trafficking occurs. Conflict enhances the number of victims that are exploited inside and outside of a country. Most conflicts of today are in Africa and the Middle East, which results in victims originating from and being trafficked to these countries. In 2020, 73% of detected victims of trafficking originating from a country of conflict were from Sub-Saharan Africa, and

11% from North Africa and the Middle East (United Nations, 2022). The Ukraine- Russia conflict has caused serious displacement and relocation of people, which enables the ability for human trafficking: 90% of those who have fled Ukraine are women and children, with 4.3 million out of 7 million of Ukraine's population of children being displaced (U.S. Department of State, 2023). That means that 4.3 million children are currently susceptible to trafficking. Russian forces forcibly transferred and relocated thousands of Ukrainians to Russia by the end of March 2022 (U.S. Department of State, 2023). This has included transferal to remote locations. Russian troops have also prioritized the use of sexual violence in the war against Ukraine. Traffickers and predators are using this conflict as an opportunity to expose the vulnerable through exploitation and sexual violence (Kumar Sen, 2022).

Orphanages are also an unwatched location, as there are no parents or guardians to oversee and account for the children. Orphanages can be an institution in which trafficking is conducted through, or children can be 'adopted' for the purposes of trafficking (Walk Free, 2024). In Ukraine, there are approximately 104,000 children institutionalized in state-run orphanages that have been complicit and willfully negligent in the sex and labor trafficking of girls and boys (U.S. Department of State, 2023). This also occurs in places where international and private adoptions commonly occur. In China, it is estimated that more than 200,000 children are sold every year under the purpose of international adoption (Walk Free, 2024). Some orphanages can be connected to 'baby factories.' For instance, in Nigeria, traffickers hold women against their will, rape them, and force them to deliver their child for the purpose of selling the child (Walk Free, 2024). This specific process is called child harvesting. Al Jazeera reported in 2020 that male children were being sold for \$2,000-\$2,700, and female children for \$1,350-\$2,000 (Obaji, 2020). Illegal baby factories have also been found in Guatemala and

Thailand (Atiomo, 2021). Child harvesting has thrived throughout the continents of Africa, South America, and Asia.

Finances

Human trafficking is very much a business transaction, as it is controlled through the means of supply and demand. Countries such as Europe, Australia, and North America typically are the demand nations, while countries that are not as affluent tend to be the supplying nations for trafficked youth (Cox et al., 2018). Affluence has determined which countries have a rise in this crime due to the increase in demand as victims are moved from lower-income to higher-income countries. Sadly, the United States has played a big role in the continuance and success of human sex trafficking.

Supply and Demand

The demand for sex is high, which results in more victims being groomed into trafficking. What sets sex trafficking apart from other crimes, such as the drug trafficking industry, is that there is an endless supply. The criminal act can occur over and over for one singular victim of sex trafficking. Technology and the internet have made it easier to buy and sell commercial sex.

The Human trafficking industry is worth \$150.2 billion per year (International Labour Office [ILO], 2014). The two most prominent forms of trafficking account for the majority of the industry's income. Globally, sex trafficking amounts to an estimated \$99 billion per year (ILO, 2014). Profits per victim are higher for sexual exploitation than they are for forced labor. Forced labor trafficking generates a third of the profits resulting in \$51.2 billion (ILO, 2014). This could be due to the high demand and prices customers are willing to pay. The forced sexual exploitation sector has a global average profit of \$21,800 per year per victim, which is six times

more profitable than forced labor (ILO, 2014). Some regions have higher profits. Asia has the highest profits of \$51.8 billion and Developed Economies with \$46.9 billion (ILO, 2014). Asia is a region that has one of the highest numbers of victims. Developed economies are countries and regions with higher wealth and resources. There is a higher profit per victim in these countries. There is also the question of where the money goes to. Customers or 'johns' pay the pimp or traffickers. The victims are unaware of the monetary amount exchanged. Traffickers sometimes use this to assert control over their victims. They will use debt bondage to keep all of the victim's earnings to reimburse travel costs (ILO, 2014). Traffickers and exploiters normally have a chain connection that benefits from the profits. There is the recruiter who imposes the recruitment fees, those who are in charge of travel, those who ensure the safe arrival of the victim to the location of exploitation, owners of the houses or brothel and prostitution manners, and perhaps corrupted law enforcement (ILO, 2014). Technologies and online marketing tactics have helped traffickers thrive. Pimps have an average annual income of about \$75,000, and more than a third making \$100,000 (Henion & Finn, 2016). These people are all intermingled in the crime working for the profits through the exploitation of others.

COVID-19

The global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 had a dangerous impact on sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. The pandemic resulted in financial hardships and the loss of jobs and housing. People were relying on others for that need to be fulfilled, making them susceptible to trafficking. The pandemic forced the world to go inside their homes and turn to the online world. Children started learning and completing their education online and had free access to the ways of the internet. Parents knowing that their kids were online for educational purposes, may not have noticed what else children were doing on the internet in their wandering: 53% of trafficking

victims in the United States in 2020 were children (Fight the New Drug, 2022). Online solicitation was the most common tactic that traffickers used. In 2020 there was 83% of sex trafficking cases involved online solicitation (Fight the New Drug, 2022). Traffickers took advantage of the fact that the closure of public places allowed the capability to act in less visible places, such as the Internet. NCMEC reported a 106% increase in reports in April 2020, which was 4.2 million reports of child sexual exploitation (Fight the New Drug, 2022).

Rise of Technology

In the past decade, there has been a rise in the creation and use of technology. Technology has adapted to artificial intelligence which is a tool to help the human brain to create and solve. Social media apps also have the power to discover and send images and videos with ease. It is vital to understand the ways technology has been adapted to be used to enhance sexual exploitation and sex trafficking.

Use of AI

Artificial intelligence (AI) has been on the rise and is becoming a serious problem in terms of child sexual abuse material. Since the beginning of 2023, there has been an increase in cases of perpetrators using generative AI to create Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) and exploit children (WeProtect, 2024). Perpetrators can use AI to create realistic images of children being sexually abused and claim them to be real children. This helps fuel the perpetrator's fantasies and encourages further forms of abuse and increasing tolerance for the increased sexualization of children (WeProtect, 2024). AI can be used to alter images by adding or taking away from the images to make them better for consumption. It can also be used to script sexual extortion or grooming interactions and provide methods for sexually abusing a child online or how to find the material (WeProtect, 2024). In the same sense, AI can give suggestions on how

to avoid detection from law enforcement (Caldwell et al., 2020). It continues to pose a threat to law enforcement as it makes investigations more difficult to determine and ensure that it is not a real child.

Common Access Points

Gaming and chat rooms have been a way for traffickers to have access to minors. In 2022, the FBI reported an explosion of online exploitation of children and teens, predominantly targeting young boys from the ages of 14-17 through gaming, chatting platforms, and social media (WeProtect, 2024). Traffickers use the sources to ask for sexually explicit images and videos. A vast number of apps and websites are used for the recruitment of sex trafficking or sexual exploitation. Pimps, traffickers, and johns have identified the internet as the leading venue for buying and selling adults and minors for labor and sex trafficking in the United States (Polaris Project, 2011). Common websites include Craigslist.com, Backpage.com, Eros.com, and Myredbook.com. In 2020, 65% of underaged victims of sex trafficking were recruited online through Facebook, 14% through Instagram, and 8% through Snapchat (Feehs & Wheeler, 2021). Facebook and Messenger are popularly used to share images of sexual exploitation. In 2022, Meta reported 20 million incidents of offenders using Facebook and Messenger to share images of children being sexually exploited (NCMEC, 2023a). Meta platforms produce a steady market for CSAM. In 2021, 27 out of 29 million cases of online CSAM came from the combination of Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger, and Instagram (Proxy Impact, 2022). These social media platforms have also been used to sell pornography. Of young U.S. adults selling and looking for pornography, 95% used YouTube, 71% used Instagram, 65% used Snapchat, and 42% used Twitter in 2021 (Smith & LeSueur, 2023). Social media apps are being used as vessels for the selling and transporting of pornography.

The Dark Web

The dark web is another source used for the selling and purchasing of people for human trafficking. The most common way to enter the dark web is through the browsing network TOR (The Onion Router), which results in dark web websites ending with .onion extension instead of the typical .com and .org (Bloomenthal, 2024). The dark web is separate from the standard search engines as it is an underground network. About 48% of the dark web content correlates with illegal activities, with the dark web having a yearly intake of almost \$1 trillion (Eser, 2023). The dark web depends on cryptocurrency and anonymizing technology to hide the illicit transactions occurring with drugs, weapons, child pornography, body parts, social security numbers, and hiring for criminal acts (National Institute of Justice, 2020). Human traffickers take advantage of the dark web to hide their identity and their activities. Traffickers disguise their actions through code words and slang to conceal their communication (Ngo et al., 2024). The lack of exposure allows the dark web to be a breeding ground for the dissemination of CSAM. The 10 most harmful CSAM sites on the dark web marketplace had over 3,000,000 registered accounts in 2021 (Human Trafficking Front, 2023). The dark web aids and amplifies the distribution human trafficking and CSAM.

Pornography

Pornography plays a role in the relationship between sex trafficking and the internet through the process of pornography desensitization leading to possible sex trafficking and pornography being used as a tool by traffickers. Pornography is the illustration of sexually explicit material for the purpose of evoking sexual arousal in viewers. The average age of first exposure to pornography is between nine and eleven years old (The Bark Team, 2023). Before the age of 18, 93% of boys and 62% of girls have seen online pornography (Smith & LeSueur,

2023). The pornography industry is vastly growing. The industry is worth 97 billion dollars (Lindner, 2024). In the United States, pornography sites receive more website traffic than Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Netflix, and LinkedIn combined (Fight the New Drug, 2024). Pornhub is the fourth most visited website in the U.S.: as of 2023, it totaled over 2.14 billion visits in a single month (Smith & LeSueur, 2023). As pornography has increased in views, it has also increased in its violence: 9 out of 10 scenes on porn websites show physical aggression, violence, or deviant form of sexual intercourse, and about half of the scenes contain verbal aggression as well (Fight the New Drug, 2024). Pornography can have a tremendous impact on the brain.

Dopamine and the Brain

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that transports signals between nerve cells, neurons, in the brain linking emotions to behavior. It is the dominant player in the brain's reward with reward-motivated behavior (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). Dopamine helps produce feelings of pleasure and excitement. When viewing pornography, the brain produces a large amount of dopamine (Biello-Taylor, 2024). Pornography regular viewers crave the dopamine that results from it which leads to them craving pornographic material. The desensitization of the sexual content forces viewers to need a more extreme content of pornography to get the same effect of the dopamine high (Biello-Taylor, 2024). The porn industry offers aggressive and violent options for pornographic videos for viewers to receive that extra high.

Developing brains are impressionable and vulnerable to risks that could turn towards addictions. The brain is not fully developed until the early twenties, and it has been noted that the earliest age of exposure to pornography is between nine- and eleven-years old. Viewing pornography at a young age has the potential to lead to desensitization and eventually a potential

pornography addiction. One of the leading pornography sites in the world, Pornhub, claimed in 2019 to have had 42 billion visitors, and 39 billion searches performed, which broke down to 115 million a day, five million an hour, and about 80,000 a minute (Smith & LeSueur, 2023). By watching pornography daily, the viewer's mind and body adapt to the intake of what is being viewed. Desensitization causes viewers to turn to visual sexual stimulation (DOJ, 2023). There will be comfort in viewing it, and the body will not be satisfied or respond to the experience as it used to (Biello-Taylor, 2024). This leads to the search for new sexual responses. There are two different approaches to the relationship between traffickers and pornography.

Traffickers and CSAM

Traffickers' desensitization to pornography could lead them to pursue more violent or extreme versions of pornography such as Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) Cyber Tipline received more than 32 million reports of suspected child sexual exploitation in 2022 (NCMEC, 2023b). They organize all the reported imagery into three categories: CSAM, Exploitative, and Predatory Text. CSAM is child sexual abuse material that violates federal law or a company's Terms of Services. Exploitative is content that has identified child victims but does not reach the CSAM threshold, and can include nudity, non-pornographic content associated with CSAM, or sexually suggestive content of the identified child victims (NCMEC, 2023b). Predatory texts include sexually predatory comments or personal information about a child victim that could pose safety concerns. The problem with CSAM is that they are often circulated and shared on the internet repeatedly. This circulation for a single case of CSAM can occur years after the initial abuse occurred. Over 49 million images and almost 38 million videos were some of the total 88 million files reported to NCMEC in 2022 (NCMEC, 2023b). Traffickers' desensitization to pornography

could also possibly lead them to want to enact the pornographic experience in real life. They turn to trafficking to get the victim needed to enact their fantasies. This action can take the approach from pornography to an adult female victim or from pornography to CSAM and then the need for a real-life child. Some offenders will participate in online sexual exploitation of minors and then travel to perpetrate hands-on child sexual abuse (DOJ, 2023).

Traffickers' Use of Pornography

Another relationship between traffickers and pornography is seen through traffickers using pornography to their advantage to recruit and groom victims. Sexting is the sending or receiving of explicit messages, images, and videos between phones. One out of four teens exchange sexually explicit texts which puts them at risk for sextortion (Hurley, 2021). These sexts create the vulnerability of being exploited. Traffickers use sexts as a method to desensitize their victims to the viewing of sexual material. One out of seven teens have reported unwanted provocations of invitations to meet offline, asking to talk about sex or sexual questions, or asking for explicit photos (Ciancio, 2021). Traffickers want to normalize sexual demands and the sexual abuse that victims would encounter. Unfortunately, the normalization and desensitization incline victims to comply with the trafficker's desires. Traffickers can also use pornography as a method to train their victims in how to do sexual acts: 52% of prostitutes claimed that pornography played a key role in educating them of what was expected to meet the demands of the 'johns', and even further 80% of trafficking survivors said that their johns showed them porn to illustrate what they wanted (Farley, 2012).

In addition, the Pornography Industry is a platform for and a method of exploitation. The third most prevalent form of sex trafficking is pornography (Polaris, 2020). When viewing pornography, the viewer is unable to know if the person in the video is willingly participating or

not. If the actor was manipulated or coerced into the production of pornography, it is legally defined as sex trafficking. Almost 20% of sex trafficking cases reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline in 2021 had pornography as the sex trafficking venue (National Human Trafficking Hotline, 2022). Pornography was listed as the highest sex trafficking venue reported.

Sextortion and Grooming

Grooming is when traffickers develop relationships with their victims for the purpose of manipulation that leads to sexual exploitation. Grooming can occur in-person, online, or both. Victims can be targeted by strangers or people they know such as family members or partners. When grooming online, traffickers will use photos of other people to appear as someone younger to gain the trust of the victim (NSPCC, 2023). Grooming is viewed more as a short-term lure than a long-term seduction technique (Lanning, 2018). Traffickers have perfected their skills to obtain quickly what they want through the manipulation of the grooming process.

Grooming Techniques

The tactics groomers use have a similar pattern. The trafficker will create a fake profile and use it to communicate through texts or chats frequently (RAINN, 2020). They will present themselves as physically and emotionally available to listen by acting supportive and giving compliments. Traffickers commonly use gift-giving as a way to groom their victims. This is to help satisfy a want or need of the targeted victim. They will then isolate the victim from their surrounding community of family and friends so all that there is to rely on is the trafficker. That is when the trafficker will start to cross over into sexual boundaries and make the victim feel comfortable with compromising actions. The Sexual Grooming Model of Sex Trafficking lists five stages of the grooming process: victim selection, gaining access and isolation, trust development, desensitization to touch, and post-abuse maintenance (Winters, 2022).

Grooming Vulnerabilities

The vulnerabilities of grooming are very similar to the vulnerabilities of trafficking. These vulnerabilities include easily influenced, naïve, and emotionally dependent (Lukes, 2018). Traffickers look for and target people who are compliant. Other vulnerabilities include substance use concerns, homeless/runaway youth, and unstable housing (Polaris, 2021). Traffickers can use substance use to control their victims physically with the substances (Lukes, 2018). Homeless youth and unstable housing are a vulnerability because the victims rely on the traffickers for the basic need of shelter and will do what the trafficker wants to gain that necessity (Polaris, 2022). Economic hardships relate to the previous vulnerability as the victim would be relying on the trafficker for provision.

The Internet and Grooming

Grooming capabilities are enhanced by the internet. The internet has allowed traffickers to reach out to an unlimited amount of people and gives a space to be in communication with them: 30% of children from 12 to 15 years old have been contacted by strangers to be friends online (Internet Matters, 2023). Traffickers can target and send out numerous requests at one time and wait to see who accepts and responds. For those who do respond, it is common for traffickers to ask to move the conversation to a separate chat or a private site (Internet Matters, 2023). This allows for the conversations to be kept secret and reach a deeper level of trust and communication. It allows for the grooming process to begin and get children to the point of comfortability in sending explicit and compromising images and videos: one out of five young people who have shared nudes were blackmailed for more photos (Internet Matters, 2023). This is known as sextortion: using the fear of exposing a victim's nudes for more images or sexual acts. Overall, 45% of perpetrators carried out the threats of sextortion, and 40% of victims of

sextortion met their perpetrators online (THORN, 2022). The internet has enhanced access to the fulfillment of sextortion.

Statistics have shown the immense dangers of the internet in relation to grooming. One out of ten children who video chat with people they have not met had been asked to change or undress (Bentley, 2018). Children have given trust to people that they have never met which has resulted in leaving them in compromising positions. In addition, one out of five children who met an online friend face-to-face for the first time did not tell or take anyone with them (Bentley, 2018). The data collected did show that girls were more likely to tell or take someone with them than boys: 20% is a high percentage of children approaching danger without another person's knowledge, whether that is a parent or friend. Finally, 2 out of 5 children have not told anyone about the worst thing that happened online to them (Bentley, 2018). The ability to maintain secrecy allows the relationship to continue and last longer.

Conclusion

Human trafficking is a notorious crime that has various methods of action. This global crime impacts every country's population. The internet has significantly enhanced the capabilities of grooming. Traffickers can target and develop relationships with children at the press of a button. It is important to be knowledgeable in trafficker's grooming patterns and online safety measures to properly protect the younger generation.

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Appendix

Human Trafficking Hotline

To Get Help, Report a Tip, or Learn More:

Call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888

Or Visit Their Website at <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en>