

Sex Trafficking in San Francisco

The Issue:

Human trafficking is a form of modern slavery and is one of the most lucrative and fastest growing illegal markets in the world (1). Victims of trafficking can be forced into many forms of work, including agriculture and domestic servitude, but trafficking for the means of sexual exploitation accounts for 46% of human trafficking (2). The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that between 14,500 and 17,500 foreign women and children are trafficked into the United States every year (2). California is a major entry-point for human trafficking and 43% of all human trafficking occurring in California takes place in San Francisco and the surrounding areas of Fremont, San Jose, Oakland, and San Mateo (2). Of the 70 licensed massage parlors in San Francisco, 30 are suspected of housing prostitution services. San Francisco's trafficked population is predominantly Asian victims who have been lured to the US with promises of high paying jobs, but instead are commonly sold into brothels, where they are forced to work long hours, servicing multiple men per day. They often raped, beaten, and confined under inhumane conditions (3). Trafficking into the sex industry has both health and societal consequences as it contributes to the spread of HIV and AIDS. Despite the gravity of this health and human rights crime, American communities remain largely unaware of the scope of the problem and are incapable of detecting and combating trafficking. Without immediate intervention, human trafficking into the U.S. is projected to increase (1).

What is Human Trafficking?

Human trafficking is a crime that can affect men, women, and children. Since women are the predominant targets of trafficking and are uniquely

affected by the sex trade industry, the President's Interagency Council on Women specially defines the trafficking of women and children:

“Trafficking is all acts involved in the recruitment, abduction, transport, harboring, transfer, sale, or receipt of persons; within national or across international borders; through force, coercion, fraud or deception, to place persons in situations of slavery or slave-like conditions, forced labor or services, such as forced prostitution or sexual services, domestic servitude, bonded sweatshop labor or other debt bondage. (3)”

Some sex enterprises operate legally, and some operate behind front businesses such as restaurants or nail salons. Others operate through makeshift setups in mobile trailers or abandoned buildings. These centers of sexual exploitation are highly mobile and pose challenges to law enforcement efforts that seek them out.

Who is at risk for being trafficked?

Men, women, and children are all at risk for trafficking, but the those at highest risk are women and children who:

- Take part in risky migration, meaning that they lack information and do not use legal methods.
- Have a history of abuse, including sexual abuse, in their host community
- Are in debt or are fleeing social unrest or natural disasters (3)

What Factors Promote Sex Trafficking?

- Weak economies in countries of origin
- Male demand for sexual entertainment and

prostitution

- Gender-based social and economic inequality worldwide
- Globalization of internet technology
- High profit values and low risk of prosecution (2).

What are the Health Implications?

Mental Health: Women and girls trafficked into forced prostitution suffer extreme levels of violence, coercion, abuse, induced drug addiction, and lack of control over their decisions. Methods used to control women include denying freedom of movement, controlling money, threats, intimidation, drug and alcohol dependencies, and physical and sexual violence (2). A 2010 study published in the American Journal of Public Health indicates that survivors of sex trafficking display mental health effects similar to torture victims, as injuries and violence during trafficking were associated with PTSD, depression, and anxiety (3). Increased duration in trafficking was associated with higher levels of these mental health disorders and PTSD did not decrease in survivors with increased duration since escape. Additionally, 63% of interviewees reported that they had tried to hurt themselves or commit suicide (3). These findings highlight the need for mental health care for sex trafficking survivors.

Infectious Disease: 73% of polled victims reported that men expected to have sex without using a condom and 50% reported that men frequently became abusive if the woman tried to insist that he use a condom (3). Forced prostitution puts sex trafficking victims at severe risk for contracting sexually transmitted infections including syphilis, Chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes, HIV, and AIDS (4). These untreated infections serve as disease reservoirs for the community at large.

Violence: Violence is an intrinsic part of sexual exploitation and is used to control victimized

women. 86% of U.S. victims reported being physically abused by their traffickers, and 50% said that they endured physical abuse daily (3). Researchers conducting interviews with the victims noted that these findings represent underreporting of actual violence. U.S. women also reported higher rates of violence compared to international women in the sex industry. Reasons for underreporting include: difficulty to quantifying the rate and frequency of violent occurrences, refusal to talk about violence, normalization of violence, feeling shame in describing what happened, and reluctance to speak out because of fear of retaliation (2).

Inaccessible Health Care: Trafficked women are often not capable of accessing health services to treat these infections and wounds due to the nature of their captivity, language barriers, and fear of deportation (4).

Federal Policy Interventions:

The T-Visa:

The Federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) serves to assist victims in reconstructing their lives post-trafficking. In 2003, the TVPA authorized the creation of the T-Visa, which grants non-citizen victims the right to remain in the country legally for maximum three years if they agree to comply with any investigation of the trafficking process that they were a part of. In order to be eligible for T-visa, applicants must be victims of “a severe form of trafficking”. Additionally, victims of trafficking can apply for a U-visa, which works similarly but does not require “severe trafficking” and does not guarantee three years of legal documentation. These policies can be made more effective if outreach programs educate trafficked women about the options that they have. If victims feel confident that they will be protected and cared for, they may be more likely to flee their captors and speak out against them in court. (5)

What else can be done?

- **Enable Escape:** in order to help trafficking victims escape, victims must trust that they will not be deported and that their emergency health, safety, and living needs will be met. Shelter is one of a trafficking victim's most critical needs. Immigration and law enforcement must collaborate in order to prevent trafficking and protect trafficked victims once they escape.
- **Prosecute:** California's anti-trafficking laws enforce penalties that reflect the gravity of the crime. The current maximum penalty for human trafficking is only 10-15 years (5). This penalty should be increased to deter the crime. Authorities should target and arrest pimps rather than their prostitutes. Currently, police officers are not allowed to testify as witnesses and the testimony of victimized women is required for a trafficker's conviction (5). These mandates inhibit prosecution and should be revised. Wire-taps, currently prohibited as human trafficking evidence, should be permitted. Additionally, investigations into police corruption should be conducted to ensure that law enforcement officers are not affiliated and facilitating human trafficking.
- **Recognize:** Community members, health workers, social workers, and law enforcement officers need to be trained to recognize the signs of human trafficking. Only 28% of polled law enforcement officers reported that they were aware of sexual violence committed against women in the sex industry (2). The community must change attitudes about prostitutes and see them as helpless victims rather than immoral vagrants.

- **Prevent:** The community must address attitudes that perpetuate human trafficking. San Francisco's notoriously sexually permissive culture must try to curtail the male demand for sexual transactions. If the demand for prostitute services decreases, so will the market for trafficked women.

Further Information:

Want to get involved? Visit **The SAGE Project** (Standing Against Global Exploitation) at <http://www.sagesf.org> for volunteering and donation opportunities near you.

References

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4. Zimmerman, Cathy, Mazed Hossain, Katherine Yun, Vasil Gajdaziev, Natalia Guzun, and Charlotte Watts. "The Health of Trafficked Women: A Survey of Women Entering Posttrafficking Services in Europe." *American Journal of Public Health* 98.1 (2008). *Ncbi.com*. Web.
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