

January 6th, 2023

Human trafficking is an epidemic across the world. It impacts every country, every state, every town, and every population. Yet, it's hardly ever talked about. Human trafficking is a difficult subject to discuss, but the more we keep it in the shadows, the more it thrives. January is Human Trafficking Awareness Month. At The Center, we are here to talk about it.

What is Human Trafficking?

Human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act. In the US in 2019, 11,500 human trafficking cases were reported through the national human trafficking hotline. In CT alone, 59 human trafficking cases were reported.

Who Are the Victims?

Anyone can be a victim of human trafficking. Trafficking transcends age, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, etc. However, it is impossible to discuss human trafficking without addressing the intersecting forms of oppression that make it possible: sexism, racism, homophobia/transphobia, classism, and so on. Those in marginalized communities face higher risk of victimization and are often overlooked or not identified as victims.

Human trafficking is rooted in the exploitation of people of color through colonization and slavery. Native Americans were exploited through forced prostitution, sexual abuse of children, rape of Native women, forcing Native people to work as interpreters or informants, and enslaving Native populations, often using violent force. Black people were literally bought and sold as property and put up for auction for both sexual and labor purposes. Owners of enslaved people could legally use them as sexual objects. People from Africa were kidnapped and exploited to work as indentured servants and labor in production of crops and cotton (The Racial Roots of Human Trafficking, UCLA Law Review, 2015).

“The racialized sexual exploitation of people of color that developed during slavery and colonization impacts cultural expectations and beliefs about the availability and use of children of color for commercial sex today.”

Today, victims of human trafficking more often are people of color; 77% of victims in US were people of color (Bureau of Justice). Of the 210 referrals that DCF in CT received in 2018 for high-risk or confirmed victims of human trafficking, 153 of those referrals were children of color. That number equates to 73% of all referrals. Children of color are estimated to be victimized at 4x higher rates than white children (Love146). Additionally, LGBTQ+ youth and adults are particularly vulnerable to being trafficked. Many LGBTQ+ youth face homelessness due to family rejection or violence, leaving them financially and emotionally vulnerable.

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It's equally important to note that while victims can be anyone, so can the traffickers. Traffickers are often those who can hide in plain sight. They often have families, successful careers, status, or power in their communities. Traffickers are master manipulators that know how to blend into society and target those most vulnerable.

Human Trafficking and Domestic/Sexual Violence

Human trafficking is inextricably linked with domestic violence, sexual violence, and child abuse. Multiple studies show 70-90% of sexually exploited children have a history of child sexual abuse (1). In studies done by the Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault, more than 60% of sex trafficking victims reported domestic violence in the household, 51% of victims in one study had a father who abused their mother, and 62% of victims were physically abused as children. Additionally, 16% of trafficked children in upstate New York were trafficked by parents or other family members. These vulnerable children experiencing trauma at young ages grow into adolescents in desperate need of safety; this is what traffickers look for and know how to exploit.

Other key risk factors for potential victimization include homelessness, child welfare involvement, foster care system, alcohol/drug use or abuse, poverty/low socio-economic status, immigration status, poor health/mental health, and disconnection from the education system. Many of these risk factors can be linked to previous traumas and systemic racism.

Trafficker tactics are very similar to abuser tactics: controlling/possessive, controlling of finances, manipulative, use of violence, threats, isolation, and more. Traffickers often target vulnerable individuals and pose as a romantic partner to them, offering them love, acceptance, and perceived safety. In reality, the relationship becomes exploitative and abusive, under the guise of love. How does this happen? Let's use Savannah and Ryan.

Savannah is a 16-year-old high school student. Her biological dad left when she was born, and her stepdad has sexually abused her since she was nine. Her mom works two jobs to make ends meet and is rarely home. She gets bullied for her dark skin and doesn't have many friends. Savannah meets Ryan on Instagram after posting about how life sucks. He relates to her, she confides in him, and he makes her feel heard and seen. Eventually Ryan tells Savannah he is 22 years old and has his own place. He offers her to come live with him so that she doesn't have to deal with her abusive stepdad. Savannah moves in with Ryan but just two months later, Ryan loses his job. He can't make rent, so he asks Savannah if she could strip for some of his friends for cash. He says it's just this one time to make rent, and that she owes him for taking care of her. She doesn't want to, but she loves Ryan and doesn't want to lose him and have to go back to her stepdad. After, Ryan tells her he took videos of her stripping and threatens to post them all over social media and send them to her school if she doesn't continue. He forces her to have sex with men for money, blackmails her to keep quiet, and she turns to alcohol to numb the pain. He eventually offers her heroin, and soon she becomes addicted. He uses her addiction to exploit her further; he withholds the drugs until she brings in more money by sleeping with more men.

Savannah's story is a common one. A vulnerable, young person taken advantage of and lured into a life through false promises of love and safety.

 **24/7 Domestic Violence Hotline (203)731-5206**
24/7 Sexual Assault Hotline (203)731-5204

 **TheCenterCT.org**

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What Can You Do?

If you made it this far in the article, it's important to recognize that most people reading this would have already scrolled past or turned the page by now. This is not an easy topic to discuss, but this is happening right here in Connecticut to youth all over the state.

If you're wondering how you can help, you've already taken the first and biggest step by caring. You've cared enough to read this article and pay attention rather than turn away. This is not something to minimize, since one of the biggest ways we can combat human trafficking is by bringing more awareness to it. But what else can you do to combat this issue?

1. Educate yourself and others. Bring The Center for Empowerment and Education into your place of work, your child's school, your place of faith, to host an education program on this topic.
2. Advocate for stronger laws that protect victims, hold buyers and traffickers accountable, and increase education and awareness. Last year, advocates at The Center and across the state helped pass HB 6657, An Act Concerning Human Trafficking. Stay connected to The Center to learn more about our upcoming legislative priorities.
3. Increase awareness in your town. Post on social media, share resources, or host a documentary screening, book club, or other awareness event. Our team would be happy to collaborate with you on this and provide any information and resources you need.
4. Support our programs and services, either by volunteering or donating. The Center provides comprehensive services to victims of all ages impacted by domestic and sexual violence, including human trafficking. We also provide prevention education to at risk youth.

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