

Human Sex Trafficking: Recognition, Treatment, and Referral of Pediatric Victims

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ABSTRACT

Defined as the exploitation of human beings, human trafficking includes sexual exploitation, forced labor, or servitude through threats or force. Estimated to involve more than 2 million victims worldwide, human trafficking is recognized as a human rights violation. Approximately 1.2 million children are trafficked for sexual exploitation worldwide and over 200,000 American minors are at risk for being trafficked. Health care providers may be the only professionals to interact with trafficking victims while they are still in captivity. Nurse practitioners fulfill a unique role in the ongoing screening, treatment, and referral of individuals at risk for human trafficking.

Keywords: child sex workers, child sexual exploitation, health risk, human rights violation, human sex trafficking

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Human trafficking, also known as modern-day slavery, is a worldwide problem that includes the United States.¹ This human rights maltreatment includes forced labor, sexual exploitation, and servitude through threats or the use of force. Affecting over 200 million people worldwide it is estimated that 17,500–20,000 victims are trafficked into the US annually.² The US is considered to be a primary country of destination, based on the high profits available to traffickers.^{3,4} Despite efforts focusing on increasing community awareness of human sex trafficking, many people remain unaware that more US citizens are victims of sex trafficking within the country than are foreign nationals.⁴

Human Sex Trafficking (HST) is defined as sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age.^{1,5} Sex trafficking victims include people of all ages and both sexes. The majority of the victims trafficked into the US annually are women and girls, and more than half of all victims trafficked in the US from other countries are

children.¹ Statistics regarding trafficking of boys are limited. Research indicates that boys victimized in sex trafficking are unwilling to self-identify; this unwillingness may be due to the shame and stigma associated with exploitation.⁵ United Nations Children's Fund statistics reveal that approximately 1.2 million children are trafficked for sexual exploitation worldwide and over 200,000 American minors are at risk for being trafficked.⁶ Research estimates that 199,000 youth enter trafficking each year.⁷ The average age of entry into HST is 12–14 years old.⁸

Many victims arrive in the US through 3 main trafficking hubs: Los Angeles, New York City, and Miami. The states of Georgia, Florida, and North Carolina have been identified as transit points along destination routes for traffickers, with Florida being identified as a trafficking hotspot.^{3,4,8} Victims of HST are most likely to be from poor or underserved areas, but trafficking has no boundaries. This profitable endeavor is believed to be one of the fastest growing industries in the world, is closely tied to illegal arms dealing, and is becoming the second largest criminal industry. Many traffickers are drawn by the profits of

this industry, estimated to be in the \$25–30 billion range.^{9–11} The complex nature of HST renders the documented statistics as undercounted; however, these statistics provide a picture of the prevalence of child exploitation within the US.^{7,12}

Perpetrators of HST prey on children and adolescents who suffer from low self-esteem and who have minimal support systems. This vulnerable population often includes runaways, homeless youths, kidnapped children, or children living within foster care.⁵ A common precursor to sexual exploitation is physical or sexual abuse during childhood.⁶ Trafficking of women and girls for forced prostitution is among the most well-recognized forms of human trafficking. Due to the illicit nature of HST, data regarding the full extent of the problem is challenging to obtain. Difficulty in victim identification is directly related to victim isolation, threats of violence, exposure to violence, and debt bondage that many trafficked victims experience.¹² Feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem reinforce the victim's perception that traffickers care for them and have their best interests at heart.⁵ Through manipulation, the trafficker responds to the emotional needs of victims, recognizing their need for love, protection, and family. Once the victim is drawn in by manipulative tactics, more direct forms of coercion and manipulation are used, such as force and beatings.⁶

In many situations, victims create a trauma bond (Stockholm syndrome) with their captors; through this bond, the victim may feel compelled to protect the person who has inflicted trauma.⁷ This attachment can result in the victims supporting the trafficker, thereby perpetrating the hidden nature of HST as the victims fail to see themselves as victims of trafficking. Domestic trafficking occurs frequently within the US, leaving vulnerable children at risk for sexual exploitation.

EFFECTS AND CLINICAL PRESENTATION OF HST AND HEALTH

It is imperative that nurse practitioners (NPs) increase their capacity to identify and refer victims in trafficking situations while providing sensitive and safe services to victims after trafficking.¹³ Although HST poses serious health risks for the victims both mentally and physically, the health of trafficked

persons has been a neglected topic. Health risks and consequences for people who are trafficked may begin upon being recruited into the trafficking process and last well beyond the period of release.⁸ The number of minor sex trafficking cases being identified annually is growing and these individuals have an increased need for health care, dental care, mental health services, continued education, and training programs.³ Communities must learn to identify victims through health care, criminal justice, and social service systems, focusing on victim identification, trauma treatment, and medication management.⁸

Health Risk

Children trafficked for sexual exploitation often experience mental health problems, suffer physical and sexual assaults, have low self-esteem issues, and are at risk for HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, and have poor access to health care. Victims often face some of the worst health outcomes in society.¹⁴ Miller et al. indicated that 69% of HST victims reported homelessness; they also found that “homeless youth have higher rates of infectious diseases, such as hepatitis B, HCV, and HIV, as well as increased risk for pregnancy and violence.”^{14(p5)} Studies also indicated that victims reported a high incidence of health problems after trafficking (Table 1).¹⁵

Common physical health problems of HST victims include headache 82.3%, fatigue 81.3%, dizziness 70.3%, back pain 68.8%, and memory problems 62.0%.¹⁵ An investigation of risk factors associated

Table 1. Red Flags or Potential Indicators of Trafficking (Polaris, 2010)

Discrepancies in behavior and reported age
Evidence of sexual trauma
Multiple or frequent sexually transmitted infections
Excessively large number of pregnancies
Tattoos or other types of branding
Use of slang relating to involvement in prostitution
Evidence of controlling or dominant relationship
Malnourishment or generally poor health

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