

SEX TRAFFICKING IN  
NORTH DAKOTA:  
OUT OF SIGHT, OUT  
OF MIND?

---



## Understanding The Challenge

Human trafficking is a violation of human rights evident on a global scale<sup>1</sup>. It is a form of modern-day slavery, contributing to a \$150 billion global industry<sup>2</sup>. This industry is the second-largest and fastest-growing criminal industry in the world today.<sup>3</sup> This industry is run by criminals who neglect fundamental factors of human rights to meet a monetary quota in a system built solely to benefit the trafficker.<sup>2</sup> The victims, however, are subjected to the consequences and neglect of human rights. Globally, there are an estimated 40.3 million victims of human trafficking today.<sup>4</sup> This involves exploitation using force, fraud, or coercion. Force may include physical restraint, physical harm, or sexual harm.<sup>5</sup> Fraud involves false promises in terms of love, marriage, employment, wages, and working conditions. Coercion may consist of psychological manipulation, document confiscation, and threats of serious harm.<sup>3,5</sup>

### *Adaptability*

Another threat of human trafficking is its high level of adaptability. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, recruitment at foster homes, strip clubs, and schools decreased by 70%, 46%, and 38% respectively in the US.<sup>6</sup> The top recruitment strategy that year was through online platforms. There was a 125% increase in recruitment through Facebook and a 95% increase in recruitment through Instagram during this time.<sup>6</sup> Generally, if you shut down one venue of trafficking, they will find a new one. The incidence of domestic violence has seen a dramatic increase after the quarantine and isolation measures as well.<sup>7</sup> This is a worrying factor that may indicate the situations of sex trafficked victims. Lockdowns may have reinforced isolation, which in turn would reduce the chances of discovering, identifying, and rescuing victims.

### *Sex Trafficking*

The U.S. experiences some of the highest rates of sex trafficking.<sup>8</sup> Sex trafficking is defined as the recruitment, transportation, patronizing, or soliciting of persons for sexual exploitation.<sup>5</sup> The victims may be exposed to poor conditions that would influence their physical, mental, and emotional health.<sup>8</sup> Sex trafficked victims are susceptible to different sexually transmitted infections including gonorrhea, syphilis, and pubic lice. AIDS is also known to be prevalent, as well as urinary difficulties, pelvic pain, vaginal or anal tearing, and rectal trauma.<sup>8</sup> Unwanted pregnancy may be present due to rape and prostitution. Forced abortions, sterility, menstrual problems, and miscarriages can also result from sex trafficking. Trauma from psychological abuse may lead to mental health concerns such as depression, panic attacks, confusion, and stress-related disorders.<sup>9</sup> Feelings of hopelessness, distrust, humiliation, and shame are also common.<sup>8</sup>

### *Target Population*

Human trafficking has been reported in all 50 states in the US, including cities, suburbs, and rural areas.<sup>4</sup> In North Dakota, individuals may feel this is not a problem due to its low population and lower number of reported cases. This paper will focus on sex trafficking in adults aged 18 years and above and will highlight the relevance of this topic in the state of North Dakota. Human trafficking: out of sight, out of mind.

### *Risk Factors*

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that happen to an individual during childhood. ACEs can affect an individual's physical, mental, and emotional well-being throughout their lifetime.<sup>10</sup>

Traumatic events can include experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home or community; growing up in a household with substance use problems; growing up in a household with instability due to parental separation or household members being in jail or prison.<sup>11</sup> These events have a high tendency of having a negative effect on the individual. Some children respond by running away from home, seeking love, attention, and protection from friends or social media. These are some of the issues traffickers prey upon to lure young people into sex trafficking. They promise all sorts of things, like love, protection, clothing, and shelter to the individual. These vague promises proposed to the victims are used as bait and once they are trapped, they sometimes are unable to leave for years.

Sometimes, trafficking is done by family and other relatives. This is known as familial trafficking.<sup>12</sup> The International Organization of Migration (IOM) estimated that in 2017, 41 percent of child trafficking experiences were facilitated by family members and/or caregivers.<sup>12</sup> Most times, anti-trafficking stakeholders overlook trafficking by family. The child is sometimes groomed from a young age and the parent preys on the child's innocence, loyalty, love, and trust. In North Dakota, the Family First Prevention Services Act was signed into law in 2018.<sup>13</sup> The law includes reforms to help keep children safe with their families and avoid the traumatic experience of entering foster care.<sup>13</sup> Although this law is very beneficial, in the case of sex trafficking where the trafficker is a parent, it makes the situation more complicated and difficult to prevent and eventually eliminate. Also, the notion that familial trafficking only occurs in low-income or poor areas makes it challenging to prevent, protect and prosecute accordingly.<sup>14</sup>

### *Social media*

Social media has also been used as a recruitment tool by traffickers.<sup>14,15</sup> The traffickers pose under the guise of friendship, companionship, and protection. The victims are most times already

in a state of vulnerability, needing some form of love and protection. Thus, it makes it an easy avenue for the trafficker. Sometimes, traffickers sell their victims via websites and other forms of social media avenues. Backpage was one of such websites that were used to advertise girls for sexual exploitation.<sup>15,16</sup>

### *Oil boom*

The oil boom in North Dakota came with a lot of advancement and economic uplift for the state.<sup>17</sup> There was a rapid increase in workers migrating to Williston, North Dakota to start working at the Bakken oil fields.<sup>17</sup> The population of the town grew rapidly, trucks were flooding the area, and people kept coming. These advancements also had their negative outcomes and there was localized inflation, sex workers set up at motels, and sex trafficking began to grow. There was a viable market for trafficking, the town had an influx of men, and it was known that there was a high demand for prostitutes. Arrests associated with pimping and prostitution increased.<sup>18</sup> Also, due to the understaffing of law enforcement in the area, no safe houses, and no advocacy groups, it was challenging to be able to effectively proffer solutions to the problem of sex trafficking in the town. It was said that getting a prostitute at the time was, “easier than ordering pizza”.<sup>18</sup>

### *Indigenous Women*

Man camps, a term used to describe temporary housing solutions for workers in oil fields are said to be associated with missing/murdered indigenous women.<sup>19</sup> The tribal police officers were unable to deal with the increased crime rate related to man camps.<sup>19,20</sup> It was discovered that a high proportion of men in the man camps were former sex offenders. The mindset of the men was that there were no consequences associated with assaulting an indigenous woman. There was also an increased inflow of trafficked indigenous women into the state which made the

problem more magnified.<sup>19,20</sup> This issue persists today and there has been little progress on tackling the issue of man camps in reservations.

## Barriers

Significant personal and environmental barriers involved in trafficking limit the victim's ability to seek shelter from their trafficker. Trafficking is a significant problem in the state of North Dakota that affects many lives.<sup>21</sup> Victims of human trafficking suffer greatly as their basic rights are violated.<sup>22</sup> Traffickers often target minority and low-income communities, coercing them with promises of money and status. Victims are forced into prostitution, forcing them to pay all their wages to their traffickers. Victims often feel trapped and threatened that if they leave, there would be severe consequences. Furthermore, victims of sex trafficking are often introduced to drugs and alcohol as a form of coping.<sup>22</sup> This is advice coping mechanism causes the victims to be chronically addicted to a variety of substances, mentally trapping them, and ensuring that they will not leave their captors. This abusive behavior place is a tremendous burden on the victim, affecting their physical, mental, and behavioral health. This continuous abuse perpetuates various mental coping mechanisms employed by women in this population to survive.

Traffickers psychologically intimidate their victims by presenting them with small amounts of affection, followed by massive doses of punishment and abuse. These punishments include extinguishing cigarette butts on their arms, physical torture, along with other cruel and inhumane punishments. Punishments are often carried out in the presence of other victims; this is done to emphasize consequences and provoke paralyzing fear in their victims. Controlling the females in this way guarantees a constant supply of cash for the trafficker.<sup>1,2</sup>

Trauma bonding or Stockholm syndrome is when a trafficker uses rewards and punishments within cycles of abuse to foster a powerful emotional connection with the victim.<sup>23</sup> The trafficker in this situation may take on the role of protecting and developing a sense of connection with the victim.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the victim may develop a sense of attachment and loyalty to the trafficker. This kind of relationship can make it difficult to help the victim out of the situation. Trauma-bonding may cause ambivalence in receiving help, inaccurate reporting, or the victim being unwilling to co-operate with law enforcement.<sup>23</sup> To approach this issue, interventions based on the specificities of the victim's relationship with the trafficker are advised. Also, because the term and criteria for trauma bonding are not clearly established, it is advised that the term be used carefully.<sup>23</sup>

## Solutions Landscape

The current federal policy allows for only a limited number of women to be housed in one facility. This inadequate response does not match the magnitude of the problem. Increasing access to halfway houses that provide safety, away from the manipulation of their abusers is a vital step in reducing the incentives for human trafficking. Furthermore, we need more education and awareness to help educate the public on the signs of human trafficking. Two laws have been added to the century code namely: the uniform act on prevention of and remedies of human trafficking and racketeer influenced and corrupt organizations.<sup>24</sup> The addition of these laws has been very influential in changing the views of law enforcement to regard sex workers and victims in need of help rather than perpetrators of the law.<sup>24</sup> This ensures that victims can obtain help and is a key step in rekindling the relationship between police and the victims.

## Leverage points and Intervention Opportunities

Medical Providers are important stakeholders in addressing the issue of sex trafficking.<sup>25-27</sup> A research study observed that 87.8% of trafficking survivors reported accessing healthcare services during their trafficking situation.<sup>25</sup> Thus, it is important for collaborative services among healthcare providers, law enforcement, and advocacy groups. The medical providers and healthcare system is a leverage point to proffering helpful solutions.

Awareness/Education is also a beneficial avenue to provide help and support in addressing the issue of sex trafficking.<sup>28-30</sup> Collaboration with stakeholders such as religious organizations, schools, and advocacy groups is important in spreading the message and providing guidance for victims and other individuals in the state.

Previously, very little distinction was made between the victims trafficked and the traffickers themselves. Arrest often consisted of Police officers arresting and booking victims, with the sole intention of addressing community concerns regarding unwelcome solicitation. Currently, the view has changed, and there is a distinct separation between victims of sex trafficking, and the perpetrators who use others for their own monetary gain. Human traffickers often seek out vulnerable girls through the Internet, convincing them to participate through false promises and coercion.<sup>12,15</sup> After being abducted, victims are often forced into sex work, and they are silenced with threats and intimidation. A key factor that will help many is to provide safety resources for victims by funding a support system, incorporating safe houses and community resources. This will help victims trying to escape their captors.

## Key Insights and Lessons Learned

Sex trafficking in North Dakota is a very important public health issue. Although, there are measures put in place to address the issue, there is the need to intensify in education and awareness of individuals that might be vulnerable to such act.

The use of media as a collaborative tool to promote the spread of beneficial information is likewise highly needed.

Medical practitioners and healthcare providers are very important key stakeholders. Training on how to screen and connect victims with helpful resources will play an important role in reducing the prevalence of sex trafficking in the state.

To solve the issue of sex trafficking, everyone in the community has a role to play. The law enforcement, the religious organizations, schools, tribal communities, government bodies must work together to eliminate sex trafficking.

# LINKS

Visual Map: <https://embed.kumu.io/21eedc5ff1bce2ae7ec1f37b031e0652>



Causal Loop: <https://embed.kumu.io/c08b60b6820996a0aa32b1e62989b058>



