



Human Trafficking Among Utah Girls and Women

Setting the Stage

Human trafficking is a global problem that involves the exploitation of people for profit through the means of force, fraud, or coercion.¹ It takes a variety of forms, including forced labor, debt bondage, domestic servitude, and sexual exploitation.² Systemic inequalities, such as mass displacement, extreme poverty, and lack of access to education and job opportunities are examples of contributing factors that can fuel trafficking of vulnerable populations.³ While the scale of trafficking in persons is difficult to determine, estimates suggest that there were over 40 million victims worldwide in 2016.⁴ In fact, during the COVID-19 pandemic, various regions and countries reported increased domestic human trafficking as a result of loss in financial livelihoods and restrictions placed on movement.⁵ While human trafficking occurs across sexes and gender identities, approximately 20% of victims detected globally are girls and 50% are adult women.⁶

Despite public perceptions that human trafficking is only an international problem,⁷ it occurs in the United States and even within urban and rural areas of Utah. For example, in February of 2021, six people were arrested for human trafficking and prostitution in massage parlors after police intervention in Utah County.⁸ In 2020, the National Human Trafficking Hotline received 182 contacts about 64 reported human trafficking cases in Utah.⁹ In 2019, 157 victims and 39 traffickers were identified,¹⁰ and in 2018 the Utah Attorney General's Office conducted 49 human trafficking investigations and reportedly prosecuted eight cases and served 44 victims.¹¹ Importantly, however, these figures are likely underestimates of the prevalence of human trafficking in the state.

The Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) seeks to better understand the status, experiences, and challenges of *all* Utah girls and women in order to empower them. This includes girls and women in our state who are victims and survivors of human trafficking. This research snapshot focuses on three main areas:

- 1) Overview of human trafficking definitions, contributing factors, and significance;

- 2) Direct and indirect costs and consequences of human trafficking; and
- 3) Recommendations to eliminate human trafficking in the state of Utah.

Overview of Human Trafficking

In the United States, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA)¹² of 2000 defined “severe forms of trafficking in persons” as:

“(A) sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or

(B) the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.”

Human trafficking happens in domestic work, agriculture, mining, fishing, factory work, traveling sales crews, restaurants, construction, massage businesses, residences, motels, and other venues.¹³ Debt bondage involves victims who perform labor or services in order to pay off the debt set by their traffickers, who often withhold payments, levy high interest rates, and charge for basic needs such as food and housing.¹⁴

Various structural, interpersonal, and individual vulnerabilities contribute to human trafficking and fluctuate based on the country context. For example, structural factors that make it more likely that someone will be trafficked include poverty, family separation, forced displacement, oppression, religious persecution, natural disasters, restrictive migration policy, political dissension, armed conflicts, and situations in which social, economic, and employment opportunities are lacking.¹⁵ Other factors that increase vulnerability to trafficking include substance dependence, homelessness, abuse (sexual, physical, and emotional), undocumented immigration status, running away from home, involvement with the foster care system, and being formerly incarcerated.¹⁶

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Contrary to representations in popular culture, traffickers are unlikely to kidnap a complete stranger from the street.¹⁷ While a trafficker may be a stranger, they may also be an acquaintance, friend, romantic partner, or family member.¹⁸ Others may be lured by fake job advertisements, staffing agencies, and false promises of employment (e.g., domestic work).¹⁹ Traffickers exert control through a variety of tactics, including intimidation; physical, sexual, and verbal abuse; inducing substance abuse; withholding earnings; and threatening reports to immigration enforcement.²⁰

Research demonstrates that both the cases and the victims of human trafficking are varied and complex; there is no prototypical victim or case. Trafficked persons may be girls, boys, women, men, and non-binary people who are diverse with respect to race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, among other factors. However, those individuals who are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking include immigrants, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), LGBTQ+, and those who live with disabilities.²¹ Those with socioeconomic vulnerabilities, including those who lack employment and educational opportunities, are also at an increased risk of being trafficked.²² Some research suggests that victims of sex trafficking are more commonly female, while males are more often victims of forced labor. Of the US federal criminal court cases that were active in 2020, 98% of victims of sex trafficking were female, and 60% of victims of forced labor were male.²³ It should be noted these rates may only reflect those who are identified, rather than the actual rates of those trafficked.

In Utah, the Asian Association of Utah (AAU), which serves survivors of all ethnicities, saw a 39% increase in clients served in their Trafficking in Persons Program between 2018 and 2020. Their program served 251 human trafficking victims in the years 2019 and 2020 combined. In 2020, 68% of those served were female, 81% adults, 51% foreign nationals, and 49% US citizens or legal permanent residents.²⁴ Half of clients were victims/survivors of sex trafficking, 46% labor trafficking, and 4% combined sex and labor trafficking. AAU reports that Utah's top sex trafficking settings are hotels, public streets, and massage parlors. Utah's top labor trafficking settings are hotels, restaurants, and places in which animal husbandry is practiced. The most requested services by Utah victims are housing, case management, legal services, medical/dental assistance, basic needs, substance abuse treatment, and mental health services.²⁵

As mentioned previously, in 2020 in Utah, the Human Trafficking Hotline received 182 tips, which came mostly

from community members or victims of trafficking themselves. Of the 182 tips, 64 were considered evidence for potential human trafficking, most of which were sex trafficking (66%) in illicit massage or spa businesses, in other venues, or via pornography. Labor trafficking accounted for 17% of probable trafficking situations, 5% combined both sex and labor trafficking, and 13% did not specify trafficking type. Of the victim demographics, 73% were adults, 81% females, 8% identified as US citizens or legal permanent residents, and 11% identified as foreign nationals.²⁶ In 2019, 157 victims were identified through the hotline, as were 39 traffickers and 28 trafficking businesses.²⁷ This represents a substantial jump from 48 victims identified in 2017.²⁸ As mentioned previously, figures from both the AAU program and the national hotline are likely underestimates of the prevalence of human trafficking in the state.

Costs and Consequences

Human trafficking is a moneymaking industry that results in many negative consequences for those directly and indirectly involved. Economies and security, both global and domestic, are consistently threatened as the human trafficking industry continues to grow. Forced labor is thought to generate over \$150 billion in annual profits globally, of which two-thirds is estimated to be made from forced sexual exploitation, making it one of the world's most profitable crimes after drug trafficking.²⁹ In conflict settings, human trafficking "supports terrorist and armed groups, bankrolls criminal groups and transnational crime syndicates, supports abusive regimes, [and] fosters instability."³⁰ The industry is extremely profitable, and there will always be an incentive to keep the business of human trafficking lucrative and functioning, and, consequently, trafficking remains a constant threat. Victims are usually targeted based on their vulnerability, and once they reintegrate into society, they often return to the same unsafe circumstances that led to their initial victimization, raising concerns for revictimization.

The lure of a better life has been attractive to many trafficked persons,

whether it be through false promises of jobs or other financial incentives in exchange for labor. In search of better economic opportunities, many victims enter the US with a lawful visa and are trafficked for labor exploitation after their arrival.³¹ One researcher found that "sustained unemployment, unpaid debt, and desperation to provide for themselves and their children" contributed to victims' exploitation.³² Trafficked persons may experience monitoring and surveillance, denial of food and water, restricted communication, substandard living conditions, threats of harm to their families, and deception about the consequences if they attempt to leave.³³

Of the clients served at the Asian Association of Utah Trafficking in Persons Program, 68% were female, 81% adults, and 51% foreign nationals.

The biological, psychological, and social burdens of human trafficking do not end once a victim/survivor has been identified and assisted. There are continued costs that come with any prolonged trauma that can affect victims'/survivors' ability to heal and move forward towards a better life free from their exploiters. Human trafficking thrives on poverty and vulnerability, both of which have grown exponentially during the COVID-19 crisis.³⁴ Consequences of human trafficking may include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicide attempts, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unintended pregnancies, physical injuries, shame, and stigma.³⁵ Victims/survivors of human trafficking experience stigma in health care and criminal justice systems, and they can encounter societal stigma upon returning to their communities of origin.³⁶

Even when human trafficking victims/survivors are able to cope with the immediate mental and emotional effects of their trauma, there remain obstacles that can impede long-term recovery, including roadblocks to stable employment, delayed progress at school (more specifically for victims/survivors under 18 years of age), and issues with training to secure good employment after escaping abuse.³⁷ Other long-term needs include life skills training, permanent housing, and resolution of immigration status.³⁸ Not only do victims/survivors need help obtaining the necessary skills for job placement, but their employers need to be equipped to handle any triggers or flashbacks that may occur in the workplace.³⁹

In Utah, both human trafficking for labor and for sexual exploitation are second-degree felonies,⁴⁰ whereas sex or labor trafficking of a child constitutes a first-degree felony.⁴¹ As a Safe Harbor state, Utah police are required to refer any minors engaged in commercial sex to the Division of Child and Family Services regardless of the presence of force, fraud, or coercion.⁴² However, victims of human trafficking may not recognize that what is happening to them is human trafficking; they are unlikely to self-identify due to concerns of retribution from or trauma bonds with traffickers,⁴³ and they are also likely to distrust law enforcement and to fear deportation.⁴⁴ In Utah, victims/survivors have a variety of needs, including basic needs (e.g., food, clothing), medical care, housing, legal services, and mental health care.⁴⁵

What Utahns Can Do

Overall, acting on policy, community, organizational, and individual levels is necessary to combat human trafficking in Utah and beyond. Thus, a multi-pronged approach includes public policy, social welfare, healthcare, schools, and criminal legal systems. Among others, we offer three recommendations: prevention, identification, and intervention.

First, prevention measures, including community- and school-based education, are needed to curtail human trafficking before it happens. Adopted in 2019, the Utah Core State Standards for Health Education include recognizing “harassment, abuse, discrimination, and relationship violence prevention and reporting strategies.”⁴⁶ Core curriculum designed to teach concepts of healthy relationships, consent, and violence prevention should also include human trafficking education. Students should be able to recognize the signs of human trafficking, including grooming for the purpose of exploitation, and they should know how and where to get help. In addition, prevention should target structural conditions that contribute to vulnerability, including the lack of affordable housing, income inequality, workers’ rights, demand for cheap labor, harmful labor migration policies, difficult paths to legal immigration, and bias and discrimination against vulnerable populations.⁴⁷

Second, identification is required to recognize the signs of trafficking and provide support to trafficked persons. Namely, screening tools may be used in social service, educational, medical, immigration, and criminal legal settings to identify and assist victims/survivors. For example, researchers have advocated for universal screening of system-involved youth,⁴⁸ such as those who encounter the juvenile justice and child welfare systems.⁴⁹ Various human trafficking screening instruments have been validated, including the [Trafficking Victim Identification Tool](#).⁵⁰ In addition, agency protocols are needed to respond properly once a victim/survivor is identified. Ideally, the victim/survivor would be linked to a human trafficking advocate who is able to coordinate victim-centered and empowerment-based wraparound services, which may include case management, safety planning, immigration support, crisis management, therapy, housing, and other services.⁵¹ Identification requires a coordinated community response with agencies working in partnership and collaboration. It is important to educate Utahns about the Human Trafficking National Hotline 24/7 at 1-888-373-7888 or that they can text “HELP” at 233733 (BEFREE).

Finally, intervention is crucial in eliminating the threats of human trafficking so survivors can receive the immediate and long-term help and assistance they need to rebuild their lives and avoid revictimization. Depending on individual needs, services such as immediate and long-term shelter, medical and dental services, legal and immigration assistance (e.g., T visas), mental health treatment, job and life skills training, and help reconnecting with family can make the difference in a survivor’s recovery and rehabilitation.⁵² The Gender-Based Violence Consortium at the University of Utah recently conducted a state-wide needs assessment of domestic violence, sexual violence, and human trafficking resources in Utah. Recommendations from the study include increasing resources for organizations serving marginalized communities, system-

wide data collection, trauma and culturally-informed staff and practices, more flexible funding, and paying trauma-informed and trained multi-lingual advocates.⁵³ The general public can intervene through volunteering locally with community organizations, educating legislators, engaging in conscious consumption to prevent the demand for cheap labor, and advocating for living wages.

Conclusion

It is important that key stakeholders do more to end human trafficking in Utah, including addressing the micro- and macro-level issues that contribute to the problem. While anyone can be trafficked, certain populations are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and should be centered in anti-trafficking efforts. A multi-pronged approach that targets prevention, identification, and intervention in a variety of settings and utilizes a coordinated community response is necessary to eliminate human trafficking in Utah. With coordinated community responses and partnerships between government and organizations, Utahns can help save lives and change victims' futures. As Utah works to decrease human trafficking through and within the state, our communities will become safer, and we can strengthen the impact of more Utah girls and women.

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