Sex Trafficking in the United States

Vanessa Yee

“It’s like being an animal in a cage at the zoo and everybody comes and looks at you and does whatever they want to do with you and then you go back to your cage,” explained sex trafficking survivor, Melissa Woodward. “You are chained to a bed, not allowed to sit, and only given a sandwich and cup of water when your pimp allows it.” Every day is a nightmare of pure torture and agony. You are always at the mercy of your violent and unpredictable pimp or john (customer) who has the power to do whatever he pleases. Each night is different; sometimes you have 5 customers but other times it’s more like 30. Being tortured, burned, beat, starved, raped, and forced to do anything you are told is the norm. They try to cover the external wounds with layers of thick make-up but inside your soul is bleeding to death. You are lowered to the status of an animal or piece of property and you begin to lose hope that life will ever get better—that you’ll ever be rescued. Sometimes the pain is so excruciating that you want to cry but you can’t so you bite your lip so hard that blood begins to drip. Your customer gets grossed out about that and wants to deny that you are hurting so he duck tapes your mouth to prevent the blood and sounds of despair from spilling out. Sometimes you get extremely sadistic customers that find pleasure in pouring gasoline over your frail body intending to kill you. After you miraculously survive that atrocity, you return to your pimp who decides that you are now worthless and useless because you are so severely burned that no one would ever want to have sex with you again. Instead of feeling relieved, you feel scared because now you are a 14 year old girl who is homeless and has to learn to survive the streets alone. Supporting your alcohol and drug addiction to cope with traumatic memories and flashbacks that can arise at any time of the day is not easy. Thoughts of suicide are your closet companion and you find comfort in thinking about ending everything to escape the unbearable pain. Life can’t get any worse or better so why should you continue to live? This is Melissa Woodward’s story but her account of abuse and brokenness is very representative of the 27 million people trapped in bondage to human trafficking around the world. (Woodward, 2012).

Under Article 3 of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, human trafficking is defined as:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power, or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. (Clawson et al., 2009, p. 3).

The project I am developing here focuses initially on identifying the major risk factors that foster or contribute to sex trafficking practices. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 characterizes sex trafficking as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purposes of a commercial sex act, in which the 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” (Clawson et al., 2009, p. 1; 22 USC § 7102; 8 CFR § 214.11).

Every year, some 14,500-17,500 victims are trafficked into the United States; 82% of the human trafficking cases recorded by the U.S. Department of Justice are sex trafficking cases (Clawson, H., Dutch, N., Solomon, A., & Grace, L., 2009; Robinson, 2011). The majority of these victims are females (94%) and 87% are 25 years old or younger (Robinson, 2011). The average age for female sex trafficking victims is between 12-14 years old; surprisingly, for males it is even younger—between 11-13 years old (Clawson et al., 2009). Many assume these victims live or came from outside the borders of the United States; however, that is not the case at all. Around 83% of the victims are documented as US citizens; 26% of these are Caucasian and 40% are African American (Robinson, 2011).

We have allowed this abominable crime to drop too far off our radar. Sex trafficking has now become the second most prolific crime in America (Woodward, 2012). The purpose of this project is to determine effective intervention strategies for individuals who are victims of sex trafficking, or vulnerable to becoming a victim.

Assessing for Major Risk Factors
There are many reasons why individuals become easy prey for predators. The risk factors that will be discussed in this paper are the following: age, poverty, a corrupt and violent environment, a history of childhood sexual abuse, unemployment or dissatisfaction with a job, a dysfunctional family home, and mental health problems such as identity issues and learning disabilities. As alluded to in the paragraph above, age is one of the risk factors that can make individuals more vulnerable. The younger the individuals are, the more impressionable, and naïve they tend to be; and since girls can enter this trade as early as 12 and boys at 11, they are at the ideal age for predators to exploit them (Clawson et al., 2009). Most of these victims are also from low socioeconomic status, but contrary to stereotypical beliefs, not all of the victims live in poverty. Some are from upper and middle class families because interestingly enough, sex trafficking crosses all socioeconomic levels and also ethnic backgrounds (Clawson et al., 2009). In America, the victims are either Caucasian or African American with African American girls and women being the majority (Clawson et al., 2009).

Individuals who come from an environment that promotes political and police corruption, high crimes, and gender inequality are also more susceptible to becoming victims (Clawson et al., 2009). Shockingly, some of the buyers driving the demand for this trade are law enforcement officers (Johnson, 2011). Because secretive bribes are exchanged between officers and traffickers, many of the victims continue to go undiscovered. This police corruption easily leads to high crime rates and violence that protect the traffickers and buyers from ever getting caught. Gender inequality, which is most prevalent in the more ethnically and culturally diverse regions—specifically California, New York, Texas, and Florida—clearly contributes to the fostering of environments conducive to sex trafficking (Johnston, 2013). Even though the gap between the rights of men and women has greatly diminished, male supremacy is still honored in regions where religious and cultural traditions and beliefs hold sway over the rights and privileges of women. Women do not always have the opportunity or permission to speak out against abuse or neglect for fear of being castrated in their religious circles or cultural activities. As absurd as it sounds, some religions or cultures permit violence against women and children and believe that the man/husband has the right to treat his wife and family however he sees fit.
Having a history of childhood sexual abuse is the most strongly determinant risk factor when it comes to predicting whether individuals will become sex trafficking victims (Clawson et al., 2009). The Huckleberry House Project in San Francisco estimated that about 90% of the women who are living at their shelter as recent victims of sexual exploitation had experienced some form of childhood sexual abuse (Clawson et al., 2009). Another study from a Boston prison reported that of the 106 adult women incarcerated for prostitution, 68% were sexually abused before age 10 and approximately half were raped before age 10 (Clawson et al., 2009). A third study of two sets of juvenile delinquents discovered that about 70-80% of the girls locked up for prostitution had been sexually molested or abused (Clawson et al., 2009). As mentioned in the beginning, the earlier a victim becomes sexually abused, the greater the psychological damage and the greater the likelihood that she will end up a victim of sexual exploitation (Clawson et al., 2009). In fact, girls who have experienced some form of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse are twenty-eight times more likely to be arrested for prostitution than someone without this abusive background (Clawson et al., 2009).

To avoid confusion or misunderstanding, I want to emphasize a distinction between prostitution and sex trafficking, because they differ in significant ways. Prostitution is voluntary and does not involve a pimp, whereas sex trafficking is involuntary and involves a pimp and the use of force, fraud, or coercion (Kaya, 2012). Because of ignorance, and sometimes indifference, law enforcement officers do not typically make a distinction between the two, so when victims of sex trafficking are arrested, they are immediately labeled as prostitutes, who voluntarily chose this lifestyle and should be held responsible for all of their actions (Okech, Morreau, & Benson, 2012). A vagueness is introduced into the statistics addressing the prevalence of sex trafficking whenever law enforcement officials fail to distinguish between prostitutes and victims of sex trafficking. We do not know how many of the girls and women labeled “prostitutes” actually represent victims of sex trafficking and how many were actively engaged on their own terms in prostitution. Nevertheless, the statistics still support my argument in an interesting way. The statistics show that although most people assume women choose prostitution, many prostitutes appear to be victims compelled into this lifestyle as a result of abusive backgrounds and traumatic experiences suffered in their past.

The victim’s unemployment or dissatisfaction with a current job is another major factor causing them to get caught up in this trade (Clawson et al., 2009). In America, traffickers, both male and female, recruit girls and boys at local high schools, malls, and shopping outlets (Kehe, 2013). Debbie Johnson, the founder of Without Permission, an organization fighting to end sex trafficking in the Stanislaus County, shared a true account of a girl who worked at a store in the Vintage Fair Mall (2011). One evening a deceptively smooth-talking woman approached this naïve girl and first made small talk with her. Then she proceeded to ask her if she enjoyed her job, her hours, her employer and co-workers, and most of all her paycheck. Once she got this girl to tell her how much she was making per hour, she told her, “I make twice, sometimes even triple what you make. My job has flexible hours and you will just love my boss. Come on; let me introduce you to him.” This is a true story and unfortunately the girl bought into these lies and is still entangled in this disaster.

A dysfunctional family environment is another major risk factor causing girls and boys to run away from home and get caught up in risky behaviors that could lead them to the wrong crowds (Clawson et al., 2009).
Several key factors are the use of substances by family members; physical, emotional, and sexual abuse within the home; the loss of a parent/caregiver; being characterized as a throwaway or unwanted; and the lack of a strong support system (Clawson et al., 2009). Carissa Phelps’s story is a close-to-perfect example of how these dysfunctional family dynamics played a role in forcing her onto the streets, where she became a victim of sex trafficking (Sauvage, 2009). In her documentary called From Juvie to Justice, Carissa describes life at home with eleven other siblings as unbearable because of the lack of food, care, and parental attention, as well as physical and sexual violence that her stepdad was able to get away with (Sauvage, 2009). By the time she was twelve, Carissa had dropped out of school and was frequently running away from home (Sauvage, 2009). After she returned home one day, her mom drove her to the juvenile hall center and abandoned her there (Sauvage, 2009). She didn’t last long there but instead ran back onto the streets where she encountered Icely, her future pimp, and Natara, a crack addict and prostitute, both of whom instigated unimaginable brutalities and incessant sexual abuse upon her (Sauvage, 2009). Carissa attributes her reasons for becoming vulnerable to choosing life on the streets because she didn’t receive any positive support from anyone, which lead her to feel isolated, hopeless, and desperate (Sauvage, 2009). In fact women and girls incarcerated for prostitution say that “their isolation, lack of connectedness, and feelings of separation [are] the single most important factors in making them vulnerable to prostitution…” (Clawson et al., 2009, p.10). Living in a dysfunctional family also means that the possibility of one of your parents or siblings selling you to a pimp increases. About 25% of all sex trafficking victims in America are sold to a pimp by an immediate family member (Woodward, 2012). Melissa Woodward is one example of this sobering fact because one of her family members sold her into sex slavery when she was only 12 years old (2012). Children who don’t feel safe and protected in their own home tend to believe that life on the streets is better. Unfortunately about 90% of child runaways are approached by a trafficker within the first 48 hours and over 50% become a victim of sex trafficking (Woodward, 2012).

A couple other risk factors are girls and boys with mental health problems, sexual identity issues, and learning disabilities (Clawson et al., 2009). The sexual identity issues seems to be more of a factor among boys who run away from home because they are transgender, gay, or bisexual and their families do not accept them (Clawson et al., 2009). At first-glance, the solutions to decreasing some of these risk factors seem obvious. For example, if a girl seems at-risk for becoming a victim of sex trafficking, she would simply need to be given an education and a secure job to be financially stable, have transportation, relocate to a safer and structured environment, receive counseling and therapy for her history of childhood sexual abuse and dysfunctional family life, receive medical care, and have list of short term and long terms goals to keep her focused and motivated. However, there are many barriers for both the front-line responders and the victims that prevent victims from receiving these resources and help. The solutions to this problem seem to be educating front-line responders to be aware of the risk factors, recognize the indicators of a potential victim or trafficking case, and be equipped to assist the survivor in receiving the most effective treatments and resources. Another solution is formalizing a standard national definition and check-list that defines victimization so that victims will not be treated as criminals, which only deepens the tender scars that they are already suffering.
Effective coordination of adequate services and culturally adept providers is another part of this solution. The solution for victims seems to be in the prevention aspect by educating them on what sex trafficking is, the tricks that pimps use to lure them, the detrimental consequences of life as a prostitute, and most importantly—all the alternative and beneficial paths that they can choose instead.

The most daunting barrier for front-line responders (law enforcement officers, social service providers, medical providers, and educational providers) is ignorance about the reality of sex trafficking and being unaware of the indicators of a potential sex trafficking case which are very extensive and depend on whether the victim is from within or outside the United States (Macy & Graham, 2012). Some general indicators are the following: lacks control over his/her schedule and/or money, has health concerns (HIV/AIDS, pain, pregnancy), has signs of physical abuse (bruises/scars) that he/she doesn’t want to discuss or tells an inconsistent stories about, has signs of addictions/substance abuse, has no personal belongings, has poor living and working conditions (restrictions), does not have family support, has been previously victimized physically and/or sexually, is living in a brothel, is living with extensive security and/or restricted public areas, is monitored while at appointments with service providers, has moved residences often, fears police and/or authorities, lives with employer, appears to have been coached how to speak, is paid in a way that is not comparable to the work being done, is unable to leave a job or place of residence, has an inconsistent life story, comes to the office with different individuals each time, can’t speak for his/herself, and reports exceptionally high numbers of sexual partners much older than he/she (Macy & Graham, 2012).

The situation is even more complex for international victims. Some more specific indicators include being controlled (not being able to speak for herself, needing a translator or third party); being new to the country; not having any educational opportunities; being from countries with considerable corruption, crime, and poverty; being unable to speak English; lacking knowledge about where she lives and how to live with her community; not possessing travel documents or any form of identification; having a large debt and not being able to pay it off; or claiming that she is “just visiting” (Macy & Graham, 2012).

Researchers Gozdziaik and MacDonnell give an example of a typical case study where front-line responders failed a girl named Analis multiple times (2007). Although Analis was victim of labor trafficking instead of sex trafficking, her story still supports the fact that front-line responders are ignorant of the red flags (identification factors) and are not equip to assist victims of trafficking. When Analis was illegally brought over to America from Honduras, immigration officials failed to realize that her documents were fraudulent. When a neighbor noticed that Analis was not attending elementary school and reported this to this police, the police did not do a thorough investigation of the situation and simply demanded that Analis be taken to school. Analis barely attended school before the school required Carmen, her stepsister, to send in Analis’s birth certificate and immunization records. Carmen didn’t have those documents so Analis quit school a couple days later and was forced to continue working for her stepsister. Unfortunately, the educational providers failed to further investigate who was taking care of Analis and why she didn’t have these basic medical records. Fearing the police’s potential interrogations, Carmen moved Analis from the West coast to the South. When Carmen was arrested for fraud, Child Protection Services (CPS) took Analis into custody. Again the system failed and CPS didn’t ask the right questions or recognize any unusual
characteristics about this situation that would have lead them to discover that Analis was a victim of labor trafficking. Analis continued to remain undiscovered even when she was placed in a detention center for eight months and in foster care for one year all while continuing to come into contact with the FBI, law enforcement, immigration officials, and counselors. Analis’s case is an accurate reflection of the majority of these instances and proves that front-line receivers need to work on tightening up the numerous gaps in the system that are allowing sex and labor victims to stay under the radar (Gozdziak & MacDonnell, 2007).

Another barrier for front-line responders in identifying and assisting victims of sex trafficking is that there is no standard definition of a victim so many officers overlook, dismiss, or incorrectly define the individual as a criminal (Clawson et al., 2009). To illustrate this point further, a study reported that from 241 juvenile prostitution arrests, 229 were convicted as offenders and only 61 were treated as victims (Clawson et al., 2009). Even when the officers do arrest victims for prostitution, the officers have sometimes disregarded the prostitution offense and recorded a different or more minor offense out of sympathy for the victim. The lack of unification among the front-line responders means that there is no effective way to coordinate the many services the victims will need. Successful treatment only follows when a team of providers collaborates throughout the entire process of a victim’s recovery. Front-line responders are not the only ones contributing to this problem.

Victims have many barriers to receiving and accepting help from front-line responders. First of all, perpetrators have most likely taught their victims to fear law enforcement and social service providers by telling them that officers and social workers are only going to arrest or deport them from the country (Johnson, 2013). Unfortunately, many victims believe this lie because of their negative experiences with officers in the past and reject legal/law enforcement help. Secondly, because of the psychological abuse they have undergone, many victims have a distorted mindset preventing them from realizing that they are indeed victims being abused (Johnson, 2013). They tend to believe that their pimp really does love them because he always tells them how beautiful and special they are and only starves, beats, or rapes them once a week compared to every day. They are very emotionally dependent on their pimp for all their needs that he provides and therefore, they feel that they owe it to their pimp to protect him no matter what.

In the grooming stage of sex trafficking, pimps repeatedly engrain rules of domination and submission into each of their victims. Here are some examples reported by one victim: “never disrespect your pimp, never let anyone [else] disrespect your pimp, trust your pimp, stay loyal...[and] honest with your pimp, never let black people see your face or eyes..., respond and talk to your pimp with manners and respect at all times using ‘daddy’ in each sentence, be down and dirty and side or die for your pimp even if it involves sacrificing yourself. Your pimp is your priority...[so] you are to see to his every need, when in doubt ask your pimp, and always obey your pimp” (Johnson, 2011).

Thirdly, language and cultural barriers inhibit victims, especially victims who are trafficked from outside of the United States, from receiving proper help (Clawson et al., 2009). This barrier particularly applies to individual and group therapy and having culturally appropriate curriculum and discussions. Fourthly, victims experience an enormous load of shame and guilt from this lifestyle and eventually believe that they are worthless, helpless, and only good for sex (Johnson, 2011). This destructive mindset disables them from hoping that life can and should be better than this and that they were
made for a much richer and satisfying life. Fifthly, some victims, when they do get rescued, refuse to accept help for fear of the medical ramifications of being diagnosed with a mental health disorder or substance abuse problem (Clawson et al., 2009). Many of them do not have the financial or emotional support to drive to and pay for services to help them cope in healthy and safe ways with their stressful lives. They need a strong, consistent, and patient support system—one that stays with them whether they move forward or fall a few steps back; more often than not, they will not receive this level of support, for many providers have overloaded caseloads and do not have the capacity to invest the necessary amount of time and energy into each starving and emotionally needy survivor. As a result, relapse is an unfortunate and undeniable result.

Because these barriers affect both front-line responders and survivors, the initial steps in solving the problem of sex trafficking seem to require efforts to educate front-line responders to become aware of the risk factors, to recognize the indicators of a possible victim or trafficking case, and be equipped to assist the survivor in receiving the most effective treatments and resources. The solution also calls for formalizing a standard definition and check-list of indicators pointing to a victim of sex trafficking so these victims will not be treated as criminals, which can only deepen the wounds and repress the tender scars they already suffer from. Effective coordination of adequate services and culturally adept providers is another part of the solution. The best angle of intervention lies in prevention, by educating potential victims about the ensnaring side of sex trafficking, the tricks used by pimps to lure them in, the detrimental consequences of living their life as a prostitute, and, most importantly, some perspective on the alternative and beneficial paths they can choose instead.

Methods Guiding the Study

To better understand these issues and identify possible interventions, I will select 150 male and 150 female survivors of sex trafficking between the ages of 11 to 50 and 18 front-line responders. I will choose 30 survivors from juvenile halls; the adult prisons; orphanages; child protective services; and anti-trafficking organizations such as Without Permission, Shared Hope International, and ForthecauseofOne. Front-line responders will include law enforcement officers, social service providers, educational providers, medical providers, child protective services, and founders of anti-trafficking organizations.

First, I will have each survivor complete a survey about which risk factors apply to them and to what degree, background information about their childhood and family life, how many intervention programs and resources they have utilized so far and how long they have utilized them, and how many years since they had been trafficked. Next, I will randomly choose 4 survivors, 2 females and 2 males, with whom to conduct an in-depth case study. If they consent, they will go through a process of 3, 1 hour 30 min interviews where they answer a series of questions that will help them tell their story. Then, I will have all of the front-line responders answer a questionnaire gauging their knowledge about the nature of human trafficking, risk factors, identification factors, and the most effective solutions to a variety of cases involving minors, children, and other complications. Finally, I will randomly choose half of the front-line responders to interview. They will answer a series of questions to help them tell me about their experiences with victims of sex trafficking.

My analysis of the survivor’s surveys will help me to revise the list of risk factors researchers have already produced and assess the number of resources they are currently using so as to have a base line to compare it to after five years of making improvements in
the system. I will use the information I learn from the interviews to figure out the short-term and long-term needs of the survivors and the resources that can most effectively fulfill those needs. I will create charts, tables, and graphs of the different community resources available and which resources pertain to which needs. For the questionnaires that the front-line responders will answer, I will use this information to put together training workshops and conferences that will equip them with the knowledge and skills to more effectively rescue and restore survivors. I will use the answers from the interviews to revise the list of barriers for front-line responders and create and implement a step-by-step plan of action to counter those barriers. I will also create a working document for the services that survivors at different stages in the recovery process would benefit from.

**Anticipated Results**

I anticipate that my results will reflect and support previously documented research showing that many victims of sex trafficking begin between the age of 11-14; that they are from all socioeconomic levels and all ethnicities/nationalities; that they live or once lived in environments that fuel political and police corruption, violence, and high crimes; and that they have a history of childhood sexual abuse, haven’t had a stable job sufficient to pay for their basic needs, come from a dysfunctional family home with hidden or explicit history of sexual violence, and perhaps have had other mental health problems. I also anticipate that front-line responders will know very little about the risk factors or identification factors to keep in mind when confronting a possible sex trafficking case, nor much about the most effective resources to offer victims, or potential victims, of sex trafficking. I anticipate finding very little awareness of the problem, the resources, or the feasible interventions that have been tested and shown to be effective.

The results are likely to show that although the solution seems easy enough to implement, the barriers involved undermine the effort. We can control the barriers with law enforcement and providers by training them on identification factors, but I don’t know if we would be successful countering the barriers regarding the victims unless we focused on prevention with at-risk girls and boys who look like they might be heading in that direction. But it might be too late by then.

But even if we were able to identify potential or at-risk girls and boys earlier and give them secure jobs, access to education, tutoring, counseling/therapy for trauma background, medical care, legal assistance, or other support services, this still might not be enough. The victims or potential victims might not want the help, might not be consistent in coming and doing their school work, might not believe they need counseling, or might be afraid of authority figures. In my volunteer work, I am working with girls who have been juvenile delinquents and can be characterized by many of the risk factors I have identified in this overview. I have discovered that even though we provide GED tutoring, job skills/character-building classes, community college programs to prepare them for success in college, and information about additional support services available to them, many have rejected our assistance, are not consistent in attending, or have low self-motivation. Sometimes I feel we want them to be successful more than they want to be successful. I can think of several girls who have rejected help despite our many attempts to reach out to them.

Girls who do get a job often can’t maintain the job because they don’t come on time, don’t talk appropriately, take their complaints/bitterness in personal life to work, gossip, steal, lie and cheat, are lazy, don’t ask questions when they don’t understand or need help, don’t dress appropriately because don’t have enough money to buy professional
clothes, don’t have dependable transportation, don’t have child care (most have kids)...and the list goes on. Many are so defeated, hopeless or beaten down emotionally and psychologically I think it is no longer about changing their environment/circumstances but about changing their way of thinking and their perceptions of themselves, their past, their present, and the people who want to help them.

**Conclusion**

Although serious efforts to raise awareness and target sex trafficking are relatively recent in origin, the reality of the practice is striking: sex trafficking and other forms of human trafficking have been spiraling out of control for so long that researchers recently estimated there are now 27 million enslaved people worldwide (Clawson et al., 2009). These slaves are thrown into and lost to a life of horror, where they are treated as mere animals and considered nothing more than a commodity or object. We have allowed this atrocious and appalling crime to flourish long enough; it is time that Americans and nations around the world unite in taking a bold stand to protect the honor and dignity of these vulnerable human beings.

**References**


