

Youth Ministry is Vital to Ending Sex Trafficking of Minors

by Erin Johnson

Sex trafficking occurs when someone profits by using force, fraud, or coercion to trick another person into commercial sexual activity or when the victim is under 18. Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking involves tricking American teenagers on American soil, into commercial sex. Trafficking is a growing and rampant problem in Northern Virginia. Teenagers that you know are at risk.

Youth workers are on the front lines of protecting young people from sex traffickers because many survivors of sex trafficking are manipulated into sexual slavery as teenagers-- on average, between 12 and 14 years old. Adults who serve in youth ministry are called to raise awareness and inform teens and parents about prevention efforts. They are also responsible for timely reporting and other appropriate responses to warning signs.

The purpose of this article is to help youth workers protect young people. In fact anyone who has teens in their life should become aware of the dangers of human trafficking. Included here is some basic information on sex trafficking, resources for learning more, and some thoughts on prevention.

While every story of sex trafficking is as unique as each victim, there are commonalities that illustrate how young people can be caught up in the life. Below are a few common types of sex trafficking that are present in Northern Virginia namely, pimp- controlled trafficking, gang- controlled trafficking, and family-controlled trafficking.

Victims in Plain Sight

What may surprise many is that youth are often trafficked for a long time before anyone knows that something is wrong. Traffickers are experts at maintaining control over their victims, allowing for the trafficking to continue largely undetected and for profits to flow uninterrupted.

Trafficking is regularly hidden in plain sight of parents, teachers, and even friends. This can happen because they overlook or misinterpret the warning signs. Meanwhile, victims have been coached to keep up a façade of a “normal” teenage life by going to school, church events, part-time jobs, sport meets. They may even sleep in their own beds at night, and through it all are living a secret nightmare.

Who are the Traffickers?

There's no common profile of a trafficker. Northern Virginia has seen male and female traffickers, young and old traffickers, and traffickers from many ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Traffickers can be family members of the victims, or gang members, or pimps running large and small operations. The one thing that all traffickers have in common is their desire for money and power has motivated them to excel at the business of selling human beings through the commercial sex industry.

Who are the Victims?

Anyone can be a victim of sex trafficking. He or she needs only to have vulnerabilities that the trafficker believes can be exploited. Victimization is not distinguished by race, gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic status. While in Northern Virginia the majority of victims identified are female, it's important to note that boys and men are victimized here as well. Traffickers search for their victims on social media, at malls, bus stations, online gaming platforms, and youth activities. They are looking for young people who seem to have low self-esteem and lack emotional support. These two traits make any young person a very easy target for manipulation.

Types and Signs of Trafficking

Pimp-Controlled Trafficking

Pimp traffickers often target vulnerable young people who may be hurting or lonely and feign romantic interest in them. They may follow a young person, or several young people, for a long time both online and in person, investing in their relationships. They may buy the teen expensive gifts (cell phones, shoes, jewelry, clothing, etc.) and provide them with friendship, encouragement, and longed for emotional support. The pimp trafficker often has sex with their victim and pretends to dream about their future together.

Once the young person believes they are in love, the trafficker continues to masterfully manipulate them to obtain complete control. The pimp trafficker may become suddenly violent, unpredictable and threatening. Often to the victim's surprise, they may claim that the victim is indebted to them and may demand repayment for all of the material things provided. The pimp trafficker may also have taken secret pictures or videos of a sexual nature and hold them over the victim, threatening to show them to teachers, clergy, family members or others. Paying off the debts to the pimp trafficker or earning the pictures and videos back becomes the means of demanding the victim to service a certain number of customers or meets a quota in money to be earned through commercial sex.

The pimp trafficker plays a calculated game with the victim. Purposefully, the pimp trafficker moves back and forth between the roles of lover and abuser, friend and enemy, until the victim is entangled in an invisible web of trauma-bonding. At that point, leaving the pimp trafficker seems emotionally impossible.

Gang- Controlled Trafficking

Sex trafficking has become a lucrative enterprise for many street gangs. Northern Virginia has had many cases of young teenagers, particularly girls, who are being recruited into sex trafficking by gangs.

Gang recruitment is hard to detect because it often begins by the gang forcing teen girls who are already victims to scout for additional girls to be trafficked. This recruitment may happen at school, the mall, church, fast food places or anywhere that teens hang out. For any adult observer, it's hard to see because the dynamic looks like one teenager hanging out with another teenager.

Once the teen scout has gained the trust of the potential victim, she may invite her to hang out or to join her at a party as a means of trapping her. What the victim doesn't know is that there may be a room full of male gang members waiting for her where she expected to find an innocent and fun party of peers. Often the scout lures the victim into a private residence or hotel room under false pretenses, and by the time the victim realizes the danger it's too late to leave or get help. What happens next is usually gang rape or severe abuse by a stream of customers who threaten her not to tell.

From the point of this traumatic event forward, the victim is forced to service customers regularly for the gang and is controlled through manipulation, violence and threats of violence. She may be sent back home to go to school and sleep in her own bed so that the activity remains undetected, but she remains "on call" for the gang whenever they need her to work. They set up dates for her with customers, after school or at times when she should be somewhere, like sports practice. Victims are not likely to tell anyone, because they may believe that what has happened is their fault.

Gangs are currently making a lot of money from sex trafficking, because drugs or guns can only be sold once but a human being can be sold repeatedly. The rapid growth and changes in technology with smart

devices and social media, as well as rampant pornography addiction, are attributing to their successful exploitation of young people. Gangs use various marketing techniques over social media to attract all sorts of buyers.

Family-Controlled Trafficking

This type of trafficking is very difficult to identify because it can be intricately woven into the daily life of the family. However, youth workers who build relationships with young people and their families have a unique advantage to see indicators that others could easily miss.

From the outside, the family where trafficking is underway likely seems somewhat “too perfect.” However, on the inside, a nefarious process is underway as the young person, or several young people, are forced into commercial sexual activity by a family member, i.e., parent, grandparent, sibling, cousin, aunt or uncle. The abuse in this type of trafficking often starts when the child is very young, even as young as infants, so that it has been normalized and continues unquestioned, a regular part of family life.

Familial traffickers tend to seek places of importance or power in their community. The family members who are enabling the trafficking usually make a focused effort to maintain a good image before the outside world. Young people who are trafficked by family members rarely, if ever, tell or report their abuse. These young people don’t have a reference point for comparison. They do not usually know a healthy family, and they may not think anything is abnormal in the dysfunction of their home. They are often too fearful of the trafficker, too, who wields great power in their lives and families. Worse, if they reveal what is happening or seek help, they are breaking away from what they see as their only support system, however flawed it may be.

Young people trafficked by family members tend to like and do well in school. This may be surprising to teachers and other service providers. It contributes to the difficulty in spotting the signs of abuse. School, church, youth groups, sports teams or other extracurricular activities provide a safe place away from the home, away from abuse. Survivors of familial trafficking often report that they loved spending time in these environments because the rules and boundaries were clear and they could excel. Home life for victims is usually a place of confusion, darkness, secrets, and ever-changing expectations.

Troubling Signs

Victims of sex trafficking rarely, if ever, self-identify or seek help. This is in part due to the serious nature of the trauma bond often formed between the victim and trafficker. Victims simply do not see themselves as victims. Surprisingly, victims often believe that they have chosen, caused or consented to their situation and, therefore, do not consider the possibility that help and relief are available. This mindset of the victim makes it incredibly difficult for law enforcement to identify victims and to encourage them to receive assistance.

In review, a situation where a **minor is involved in commercial sex** is human trafficking, a felony and requires immediate reporting! Youth workers who are well-informed and vigilant may be able to prevent years of abuse for a victim of trafficking. Since it is difficult to identify that trafficking is taking place, below is a list of possible red flags for trafficking or recruitment for trafficking that all youth workers need to know. In isolation, they may not indicate trafficking; however, if several of these factors are present, there are good reasons to be concerned.

Knowledge of the commercial sex industry- If a minor uses language of the commercial sex industry and carries hotel key cards or escort service cards, or expresses significant knowledge of commercial sex, there is a telling level of exposure to the trafficking world. If a minor discloses that they are involved in the production or sales of pornographic materials, or engaged in sexual activity for money or goods, an immediate report needs to be made.

Running away and frequent truancy- While victims may still be coming home most nights, they may also disappear for periods of time. They may skip school with excuses or stories that don't seem to add up. Young people who run away become significantly more likely to be recruited for commercial sex.

Frequent and lengthy overnights with friends- Victims may take up a sudden interest in staying over with friends or couch surfing. Parents should always confirm that their teen stays where they said, not using one friend's name to cover up for staying somewhere else where they may be engaging in dangerous activities.

Possessing new and expensive items- Traffickers may buy their victims high-end clothing, shoes, jewelry or lingerie. It's important to question how a young person has come to own these items, particularly if the items are out of character or cost beyond their normal means.

Carrying multiple cell phones –Traffickers often supply their victims with multiple phones so that they can be constantly available. The phones may be used for various aspects of the business and for communicating with customers.

The presence of an older controlling female companion or boyfriend- Sex trafficking is a form of slavery. While many of the means of control are invisible threads of emotional manipulation, there are real people involved in the enslavement as well. Sometimes they are in the form of other victims whose job it is to keep younger or newer victims under control. Sometimes it's the pimp trafficker or a gang member posing as a boyfriend or family member. If someone new shows up in the life of a young person and seems to be in complete control, there's reason for concern.

New friend group- One troubling indicator may be a sudden change in a teen's group of friends, including older teens and older adults. Something may be wrong if a young teen girl regularly hangs out with a large group of older teen boys or men. It's important for parents to know who their teens are spending time with, in person and online.

Social media secrecy- Our current social media climate can be very dangerous for teenagers! Young people should not be allowed to have apps or online accounts that are left unmonitored by parents. Traffickers are known to friend teens through social media, messaging, and online games and then recruit them for commercial sex. A warning sign of dangerous online activity includes a teen who is caught sexting. Other red flags may be creating or possessing pornographic material or engaging in explicit exchanges with older teens and adults. Possession, production and distribution of sexually explicit images of minors are felonies and must be reported immediately!

Tired during the day from working during the night- Teenagers naturally sleep more and go through periods of staying up late and periods of being very tired. That's okay. However, traffickers may have their victims sneaking out at night to work through late hours and then sneaking back into their homes before school in the mornings. Over a prolonged period of time, the victim seems uncharacteristically tired and sleepy throughout the day.

Branding or carvings- Pimp traffickers and gangs often brand or tattoo their victims to mark their property. Adults should keep an eye out for names, dollar signs, bar codes, and gang symbols.

Fearful or unable to make basic decisions –As a result of being constantly controlled and enduring secret trauma, victims may show signs of significant fear. They may fear that they are being watched or followed. Victims may also be unable to make basic decisions on their own, i.e. what food to eat, where to sit, when to go to the bathroom.

Memory Loss-Another result of trauma and severe abuse can be significant memory loss. A young person may not remember where they are (city, state, town) or what they were doing for large blocks of time.

Owing a large debt- Traffickers may hold victims in bondage by forcing them to pay off a large debt. If there's a young person who seems to work a lot but never has any money, coupled with some of the above mentioned warning signs, there may be reason for concern.

How to Report

When one or multiple signs from this list are present, it may be reasonable to suspect that young person may be a victim of sex trafficking or otherwise involved in trafficking recruitment. It's important to make a prompt report. While taking such a step may feel drastic, the information could save one or several victims from a horrible life and even more years of severe abuse. Here are important numbers to have readily available.

It is the law to report suspicion of child abuse or neglect within 24 hours.

If a young person is believed to have been groomed or recruited within a program in the Diocese of Arlington, a report also needs to be made to the Pastor.

If someone is in immediate danger, call 911.

The National Human Trafficking Hotline can be reached at **1-888-373-7888**.

To make a report locally, call:

Alexandria: (703) 746-4444

Arlington: (703) 558-2222

Dumfries: (703) 221-1111

Fairfax County: (703) 691-2131

Loudoun County: (703) 777-1021

Manassas City: (703) 257-8000

Manassas Park: (703) 361-1136

Prince William County: (703) 792-6500

Some Thoughts about Prevention

Youth workers play a key role in trafficking prevention! The work done every day by countless caring adults who accompany and mentor teenagers is crucial to helping teens remain clear of recruitment by traffickers.

Evangelization- Youth workers, through evangelization, help young people fall into the loving arms of the Savior who protects them from falling into the manipulative arms of a trafficker. Traffickers prey on young people seeking love, affection and identity. The more young people know Jesus and His love for them, the more they are protected from seeking affection and their identity elsewhere.

Purity and formation- Everyday, youth workers help young people truly understand and embrace the Church's teaching on human sexuality which equips them to handle the temptations and struggles surrounding pornography. This formation arms teens against trafficking and commercial sexual activity. One of the most effective ways to end sex trafficking is to foster the growth of virtue among teens, and adults as role models, with the first impact being to curb the demand for commercial sex and pornography. The goal is to end the demand and thus end trafficking.

Vocation promotion- Helping young people find their identity in relationship to Jesus also means helping them find their life's purpose. Youth workers encourage them to focus on discerning their vocations, to enter into holy and virtuous marriages, the priesthood, and consecrated vocations. Looking forward to the future with a sense of purpose not only makes it harder for them to be vulnerable to those who traffic in despair, it also significantly reduces in our society at large demand for commercial sex and pornography, and as a result victimization through trafficking.

Adult mentor education- Youth workers are able to reach numerous adults and raise awareness about the dangers of sex trafficking. It's important to be intentional about informing parish staff members and volunteer teams who are uniquely positioned to support young people. In fact, every adult who knows teens in a parish should know about the warning signs and risks of sex trafficking and how to report those signs!

Parental education- Support parents in their role of protecting their kids is a key responsibility of youth workers. It's vital to inform parents about current issues and changing trends; to raise awareness about trafficking recruitment tactics, new advances in social media, and technology safety. Parental education is an important piece in the overall effort to prevent trafficking.

Youth education- Young people must also be informed about the risks, warning signs, and recruitment tactics of traffickers. Youth workers can help them to identify some adults such as their parents, mentors, clergy, school counselors, and teachers who will be able to help if they realize that they, or someone they know, is being recruited into trafficking. In the context of youth programs, youth workers can help young people to be proactive, not just reactive. It's important to involve young people in efforts to raise awareness! (Perhaps parish youth can organize an awareness campaign in January, Human Trafficking Awareness month or collect clothing or toiletries for trafficking survivors who are served by local victim service agencies. Or youth can be encouraged to pray for an end to sexual exploitation and offer rosaries and holy hours of Eucharistic adoration together for these intentions. The possibilities are endless!)

Learn More

Here are some excellent resources to learn more about human trafficking and the incredible work being done to help end modern day slavery.

Northern Virginia Human Trafficking Taskforce- www.nvhttf.com

A collaboration of governmental agencies, law enforcement, victim service providers, nonprofit organizations, and concerned citizens working together to end human trafficking.

Northern Virginia Human Trafficking Initiative- www.novahti.com

A faith-based nonprofit that strives to eradicate human trafficking and restore those impacted through awareness, prayer, partnerships, intervention, and victim services.

JustASK Prevention- www.justaskprevention.org

A fantastic prevention education organization that works to end trafficking before it begins.

Tricked: Inside the World of Teen Sex Trafficking- <https://www.fcps.edu/node/32026>

A video resource for youth and parents approved by the Arlington Diocese for Formation in Christian Chastity for high school students.

The Bakhita Foundation- www.thebakhitafoundation.org

A Catholic apostolate that focuses on identifying victims of sex trafficking and sexual exploitation and connecting them to resources for healing and restoration available within the Catholic Church and the local community.

The National Human Trafficking Hotline- www.humantraffickinghotline.org

National statistics on reports of suspected trafficking by state annually.

Erin is the Director of Youth Ministry at St. Veronica Catholic Church and the Coordinator of the Bakhita Foundation. She also serves as Co-chair of the Outreach and Awareness subcommittee of the Northern Virginia Human Trafficking Taskforce.