

Dispelling common misconceptions within the anti-trafficking movement.



Misconception

People experiencing human trafficking are always helpless and want to be rescued.

People experiencing human trafficking may not self-identify as victims. They will sometimes stay in dangerous or exploitative conditions because it is the best survival mechanism, economic opportunity, or logical option for them, or they may be unaware of their legal and civil rights.

Lack of trust, self-blame, and bad previous experiences with service providers and law enforcement may also contribute to survivors' choices not to disclose their experiences of trafficking.

The "savior mentality" can be very harmful to people who experience trafficking because it erases their power and autonomy. Individuals who experience trafficking face a variety of circumstances. While some may desire assistance from outside forces, others do not. All survivors must play an active role in their own escape or departure from trafficking conditions.

Misconception

Human trafficking and commercial sex, or prostitution, are the same thing.

According to the U.S. TVPA (Trafficking Victims Protection Act) sex trafficking is "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose 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 act has not attained 18 years of age"; and labor trafficking is 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."

According to U.S. law, adults who consent to participate in the commercial sex industry are not sex trafficking victims; however, any minor who participates in a commercial sex act is automatically considered a victim of human trafficking regardless of the presence of force, fraud, or coercion.

Misconception

Sex trafficking is the only form of human trafficking

Though sex trafficking is the type of trafficking that we hear about most often, labor trafficking is just as exploitative and deserving of attention.

According to IOM global counter-trafficking statistics, 17% of trafficking survivors in the world have been trafficked for sexual exploitation, while 74% have been trafficked for forced labor and services.

Forced labor, debt bondage, peonage, forced soldiering, force criminal activity, and domestic servitude are just a few examples of human trafficking. Anywhere that work happens, whether it's formal or informal, human trafficking can happen.



Unpacking the Numbers

Commonly shared statistics may be problematic, incorrect, or misleading.

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There are 100,000-300,000 sex trafficked children in the United States

This statistic is often cited without a source. There are currently no reliable estimates on the number of people trafficked for sex in the United States, let alone a number for how many of those people are under the age of 18.

The Dept. of Justice funded a study on youth involvement in the sex trade in 2016 and found that the number of youth in the sex trade (any youth under the age of 18 involved in the commercial sex trade are considered trafficking victims per the TVPA trafficking definition) is likely closer to 9,000-10,000. However, the study provides a large population estimate range, and recognizes the limitations of determining a hard number. The study states that by its estimates the number could be as low as 4,457 youth or as high as 20,994 youth, nowhere near the early mistaken estimates that continue to be shared.

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Youth who run away will be trafficked within 72 hours

This claim originated in a 1996 Christian Science Monitor article which stated that within 48 hours runaways would be lured into commercial sex, and the article did not list a source for the claim. Runaway and homeless youth are highly vulnerable to human trafficking. The Modern Slavery Research Project performed a study titled "Sex and Labor Trafficking Among Homeless Youth: A Ten City Study." Though the project found that there is ample evidence to be concerned about trafficking of homeless youth, there remains no evidence to substantiate sensational claims about the window within which youth may be exploited and other suspicious claims about trafficked youth.

Misconception

The average age of entry into human trafficking is 12-14 years old

This statistic has been attributed to a number of different sources. However, the original source has never been verified and also the statistic has been disproved in a number of ways. The first problem is that this statistic is based on the average age of entry into commercial sex among youth under age 25 and ignores recent estimates suggesting that older teens are at higher risk. It erases the risks faced by youth aging out of foster care and other vulnerable adults.

Furthermore, the statistic does not include people experiencing labor trafficking or acknowledge that people of any age can be trafficked multiple times in their lifetimes, for various amounts of time during each period of abuse.

People experiencing trafficking are a hidden population, meaning they are not easily identifiable to study or create a prevalence estimate, there is no way to accurately and precisely determine the average age of trafficking victimization.

"Why does all of this matter? The most immediate problem is that poor information, presented as fact, contributes to poor decision making and sometimes highly damaging, unintended outcomes."

-Anne Gallagher

For more information, visit:
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