

napped, however it can come from family members enticing the child due to many different stressors, such as financial means. With the rise of social media, law enforcement has seen an increase in online solicitation (Bellatorre & Crisp, 2024).

Previous research has highlighted possible risk factors that can increase the threat of child sex trafficking are homelessness, runaways, and those that have been involved within the justice system (Prakash et al., 2024).

A 2024 study looked into developing a model that would help identify risks of sexual exploitation among children. The study looked at female children in the welfare system since they are a high-risk population. Information was collected from the Florida Department of Children and Families database. The researchers obtained 3,917 female youth cases between 2013 and 2017 where the females were removed from their homes. The researchers found that female youth were more likely to experience sexual exploitation if they had run away from home, if English was not their first language, or if their first placement was in a group home (Prakash et al., 2024). It is important to understand the potential risk factors that youths can face surrounding sex trafficking to find ways to prevent the numbers from increasing.

In addition, social media has become a pathway into sexual grooming. Texas lawmakers have weighed in on the decision to ban the use of social media for youth. One solution proposed by Rep. Jared Patterson was to require new users to submit age verification as well as removing minors' abilities to create new accounts. Texas lawmakers listened to stories of how one girl was groomed in high school to engage in sex work after her pictures were posted online (Simpson, 2024).



The Impact on Youth

Child sex trafficking can have long term effects on youth. Some of these include mental health issues, physical health problems, and sometimes even death. Individuals within the commercial sex industry are broken down and emotionally abused to think that no one else cares for them except for their trafficker. They begin to feel isolated and alone and can begin to forget what their life was like before. The mental and physical problems can lead to trauma that can last for long periods of time (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, n.d.).

A study conducted in 2020 aimed to study mental health diagnosis in youth that were identified as being sex trafficked. The identification of being sex trafficked came from confirmation from law enforcement or the participant self-disclosed that they were sex trafficked. The study was conducted on 143 youths from the ages of 12-17, both male and female. Once the participant was confirmed to have been involved in sex trafficking they were evaluated by three clinics in Wisconsin. Participants' mental health records were obtained by reviewing medical records. The researchers found that 45.5% of participants were diagnosed with depression, 26.6% were diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and 19.6% had been diagnosed with PTSD and/or anxiety. The researchers also found that there was an average diagnosis of 2 mental health disorders per participant. This study shows the significance of mental health disorders among youth who have been sex trafficked and how experiencing a traumatic event can have a lasting impact (Palines et al., 2020).

Not only are youth affected emotionally and physically, but they also are affected by the court of public opinion. Society has placed a negative stigma on individuals that have engaged in commercial sex acts, however people typically do not they are not in the situation of their own free will. A 2023 study looked into how jurors perceive victims based on their gender, as well as the defendant based on their age, gender, and socioeconomic status. They created sixteen transcripts of a case changing the victim's gender, and the multiple variables of defendants. The transcript went through the whole case from opening statements to closing. They were then asked to come up with what they thought of the defendant, guilty or not guilty. They also had to rate their confidence in this decision on a 1-10 scale. Next, they used a Likert Scale to assess the participants' perception of the defendant and victim ranging from 1 (not at all) to 6 (very much so). They were also assessed on their knowledge of sex trafficking using a 33-item questionnaire known as the Sex Trafficking Attitude Scale, which assessed participants agreement with each statement rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) , and an assessment of Human Trafficking Myth Scale (HTMS) to measure their beliefs on the topic of sex trafficking, the scale had 17 items and was rated on a Likert scale from 1(definitely false) to 6 (definitely true). The researchers found that with the mock cases the defendant's gender did not play a part in delivering a guilty verdict for child sex trafficking, and the victim's gender did not influence the decision either. The researchers looked at this data and hypothesized that the participants were looking more at the fact that the victim was a child rather than gender. Focusing just on the perceptions and beliefs of the myths, the results found that participants were more favorable to the male victim, female trafficker scenario, and the victim when the trafficker had a high social status and were 25 years of age rather than 55 years of age. Based on the HTMS, participants reported an average score of 5.22. Based on these results, the researchers came to the conclusion that participants mostly believed in the myths of trafficking. Based on these results, the researchers wanted to see if these myths would cause participants to find a defendant not guilty. What the results did show is that the more a participant believed the myths, the less guilty they found the defendant (Pica et al., 2023).



What Can Be Done?

The government has made child sex trafficking prohibited under 18 U.S.C. § 1591. With this law, it is a federal crime to engage in the exploitation of child sex trafficking and there is federal sentencing limitations based on the age of the victim. A 10- year minimum sentence is required if the victim was between the ages of 14-17, and if the victim was under 14 the minimum sentence is 15 years (U.S. Department of Justice, 2023).

Many people do not realize that social media is used to establish an emotional connection with a vulnerable person. Adults can pose online as youths to create relationships with children and gain their trust. When children are not taught the dangers of social media, they often partake in online messages with people they do not know. It is important for parents to understand how prevalent this issue is so they can make sure their children are safe when they have access to the internet.

Conclusion

Child sex trafficking is a topic that needs to be talked about more within the media. There is the pos-

sibility that children that are missing within the United States right now may have become victims of this terrible crime. Taking preventative measures such as monitoring children's use of social media and explaining the dangers of talking to strangers can be a step in the right direction. Also raising awareness of the risk factors can increase conversion in order to assist and protect high risk youth from becoming trafficked.



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