Root Causes of Human Trafficking in the US: An Investigative Study

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Introduction

Human trafficking is a modern form of slavery that affects millions worldwide and continues to evolve in both scope and method (U.S. Department of State, 2022). In the United States, adult sex trafficking is frequently misunderstood and often reduced to images of violent abduction or international smuggling rings (Jordan, Patel, & Rapp, 2013). In reality, most trafficking cases are far more insidious, involving coercion, manipulation, and psychological control rather than physical force (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Nichols, 2016). Despite growing public awareness, the root causes of trafficking—including poverty, childhood abuse, systemic inequality, and institutional neglect—remain underexamined in both scholarly research and policy development (Logan, Walker, & Hunt, 2009).

Sex trafficking thrives where there are gaps in social support systems and where vulnerable individuals fall through institutional cracks (Raphael & Ashley, 2008; National Network for Youth, 2019). Traffickers prey on those already marginalized by society—people who lack stable housing, suffer from untreated trauma, or face discrimination due to race, gender identity, or immigration status (Greenbaum, 2017; Smith, 2018). These root vulnerabilities are compounded by legal systems that often criminalize victims rather than protect them, as law enforcement and public services frequently lack the training and resources to act effectively (Nichols, 2016). This creates a recurring cycle in which victims are exploited and re-traumatized.

The human trafficking literature has grown exponentially over the last ten years, examining everything from recruitment tactics to survivor resilience (Clawson & Dutch, 2008; Polaris Project, 2020). However, much of the research remains heavily focused on statistics or filtered through third-party perspectives, which limits understanding of the lived experiences of

frontline service providers and advocates. This study seeks to address that gap by incorporating the professional insights of practitioners working directly with trafficking survivors. Their experiences illustrate not only the structural factors that enable trafficking, but also the systemic barriers that hinder prevention and intervention.

This research is guided by a central question: *What are the root causes and systemic challenges that contribute to adult sex trafficking in the United States, as identified by frontline professionals?* Through qualitative interviews, this study aims to uncover how trafficking operates in local communities, how victims are recruited and controlled, and what policy, legal, and social reforms are most urgently needed. In doing so, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of a national crisis that often remains hidden in plain sight.

Literature Review

Human trafficking, particularly sex trafficking of adults, is a complex and deeply rooted issue in the United States. While much of the public discourse focuses on international trafficking networks and abduction-style scenarios, the majority of cases in the U.S. involve domestic victims who are manipulated and coerced through non-violent means (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Polaris Project, 2020). Academic and policy research over the past two decades has increasingly recognized that trafficking operates within a nexus of systemic vulnerabilities—poverty, abuse, racism, inadequate social services, and legal gaps—all of which compound the risk for individuals already at the margins of society. This literature review synthesizes findings across multiple disciplines to provide a comprehensive understanding of the root causes and systemic failures that sustain adult sex trafficking in the United States.

Misconceptions and Stereotypes

One of the most persistent issues in addressing trafficking is the widespread misunderstanding of what trafficking actually looks like. While media depictions often show dramatic kidnappings or border-crossing operations, the reality in the U.S. involves psychological manipulation, "boyfriending," and exploitation of emotional needs (Jordan et al., 2013). According to the Polaris Project (2020), nearly 75% of trafficking victims in the U.S. are domestic citizens, and most are recruited through social engineering rather than force. These misunderstandings influence how the public thinks about domestic violence, often leading to victim blaming or failing to acknowledge survivors that do not fit into stereotypes (Nichols, 2016). Law enforcement officers and first responders may overlook victims based on preconceived notions influenced by stereotypes themselves or a lack of understanding, especially when the victim of abuse is an adult female experiencing prostitution.

Pathways to Vulnerability: Poverty, Abuse, and Homelessness

Numerous studies emphasize that economic desperation is one of the most common risk factors for adult sex trafficking. Raphael and Ashley (2008) describe how survival sex—exchanging sexual activity for basic necessities like food or shelter—is frequently a gateway to trafficking. Victims often lack access to employment, education, or social safety nets. Additionally, prior experiences of abuse—especially childhood sexual abuse—are highly correlated with victimization. Reid et al. (2017) found that over 60% of adult sex trafficking survivors they interviewed had suffered abuse in childhood, which traffickers later exploited by forming false romantic relationships or making promises of protection.

Housing instability is another key factor. The National Network for Youth (2019) reports that youth who experience homelessness are at high risk of being approached by traffickers within 48 hours of being on the street. The risk is even higher among LGBTQ+ youth, who are overrepresented among homeless populations due to familial rejection. Greenbaum (2017)

underscores that youth and adults without stable housing are forced to rely on others for survival, creating opportunities for predators to manipulate them into exploitative relationships.

Institutional Failures: Foster Care, Juvenile Justice, and Education Systems

Institutional systems intended to protect vulnerable populations often fall short, leaving individuals more exposed to trafficking. Children who grow up in the foster care system are disproportionately at risk. Research by Williamson and Prior (2009) found that nearly 70% of sex trafficking victims reported a history of involvement with foster care or child protective services. Changes to placement, limited emotional support, and aging out of the system without a safety net can produce feelings of isolation and desperation.

The juvenile justice system further complicates these issues as many victims are criminalized for survival behaviors (thefts or sex work) and are recognized as having behavior issues rather than being recognized as individuals that needed supportive resources. Barnert et al. (2016) argue that the overlap between trauma, exploitation, and incarceration requires trauma-informed reform, as current models often retraumatize youth and adults who should be receiving services, not sentences. Schools, too, are failing to detect early warning signs. Truancy, unexplained absences, and sudden behavioral changes often go uninvestigated, allowing traffickers to operate undetected.

Legal and Policy Shortcomings

Legal frameworks in the United States have progressed considerably in combating and recognizing trafficking, particularly under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 and subsequent reauthorizations. However, gaps remain, especially in how adult victims are treated. Nichols (2016) points out that many state laws are inconsistent, and some require proof of physical coercion, which many victims cannot provide due to the psychological nature of their

manipulation. Victims are frequently arrested for prostitution, and many do not identify themselves as victims until much later.

Maya, a legal advocate who was interviewed in this study, said that Virginia is lacking in Anti-Trafficking laws and that some anti-trafficking advocacy organizations give it an "F" grade. This is consistent with findings from the Human Trafficking Legal Center (2021) that show that a small number of states have survivor-oriented laws, permitting things like expungement, housing support, or victim restitution. The legal system's inability to differentiate between voluntary sex work and coerced trafficking further complicates service access and enforcement actions.

Role of Technology in Recruitment and Exploitation

Digital platforms have radically changed the trafficking landscape. Dank et al. (2015) point to the ways traffickers have turned to Instagram, TikTok, and online classified ads to identify, contact, and groom victims, especially adolescents. Grooming creates a trust bond, a type of emotional validation, and a promise of gifts or jobs. Martinez and Richer (2021) found that the anonymity and speed of digital recruitment created a disparity between those with the tools to recruit and those with the ability to track and respond, thereby changing the way trafficking can take place. With most law enforcement agencies underfunded, and law enforcement spread thin globally and divided by the rapidly evolving technology, it is clear that the digital context provides opportunities for traffickers that put victims at increased risk.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerabilities attributable to online space. School closures and increased screen time created new opportunities for traffickers to contact and manipulate youth (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2021). Research calls for updated law enforcement training and public awareness campaigns focused on digital safety.

Racial and Gendered Disparities

An intersectional approach reveals stark disparities in who becomes a victim and how they are treated. Studies show that Black women and girls are disproportionately represented among trafficking victims yet are often viewed by authorities as offenders rather than survivors (Smith, 2018). Similarly, transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals face high rates of exploitation and low rates of legal recognition as victims. Zimmerman et al. (2011) argue that systemic racism, xenophobia, and sexism shape how victims are identified and treated within institutions.

Marginalized immigrants, especially undocumented women, are often exploited through threats of deportation or withheld immigration paperwork. These groups are less likely to report exploitation due to fear of law enforcement, language barriers, or lack of awareness of their rights under U.S. law.

Prevention, Intervention, and Long-Term Support

The literature is growing in consensus that successful anti-trafficking efforts must combine prevention, intervention, and long-term recovery support. Prevention includes early education about consent, healthy relationships, and red flags. Programs like "Not a Number" and "My Life My Choice" have shown promise in helping youth recognize and avoid grooming behaviors (Love146, 2022).

Intervention strategies must focus on trauma-informed care and survivor-led services. Survivors are increasingly involved in shaping programs and policies, leading to better outcomes and more authentic support systems (Clawson & Dutch, 2008). Finally, long-term recovery requires housing, healthcare, job training, and mental health services, yet many programs lack the funding or capacity to provide sustained assistance. Survivors face high rates of re-victimization when left unsupported post-rescue (Polaris Project, 2020).

Methods

A qualitative research design was employed in this study to acquire rich descriptive data in the form of semistructured interviews from professionals in the anti-trafficking sector. Qualitative research was selected because it is suitable to explore complex and socially embedded issues such as sex trafficking. A qualitative design can illuminate exactly how individuals make sense of their experiences and the systemic obstacles they encounter when they are working. The primary task of the interviews was to solicit both personal and organizational perspectives on adult sex trafficking, the root causes of adult sex trafficking, and gaps in intervention frameworks.

A semi-structured format was deemed the most appropriate as interviews usually vary in prescriptiveness from interview to interview, a semi-structured format allowed for maximized coherency and consistency when possible, while allowing for the follow-up of interviews if any particularly interesting or emergent questions arose. The interview questions were open-ended and asked about various axes of things such as perceptions of victim recruitment, matters of law enforcement action, availability of services, and prevention. This method allowed participants to speak in-depth and from personal experience, often adding information not directly prompted by a question.

Participants and Sampling

Five professionals were recruited through purposive sampling, chosen for their direct involvement in anti-trafficking efforts in Virginia. Each participant was employed by an organization that either provides services to survivors, engages in public education, or works on legal and policy advocacy related to sex trafficking. The inclusion criteria required that

participants have at least one year of professional experience in this field and are currently working in a role that involves direct or indirect contact with trafficking survivors.

The following pseudonyms were used to protect participant confidentiality:

- Holly is a case manager at a nonprofit organization that offers housing assistance and crisis support for vulnerable individuals.
- Sam is an outreach coordinator at an organization focused on anti-trafficking education and global prevention initiatives.
- Jordan is a social services specialist involved in child welfare and trafficking intervention programs.
- Maya is a legal advocate who provides pro bono legal services and engages in policy reform efforts for trafficking survivors.
- Alex is a survivor support director at a national nonprofit offering trauma-informed care and transitional housing services.

Each participant brought a different professional lens, ensuring diversity in perspectives across legal, social work, advocacy, and survivor-centered support roles.

Interview Process

Participants were contacted via email and provided with an overview of the research project, including its goals, voluntary nature, and confidentiality safeguards. Interviews were conducted over Zoom between February and April 2025 and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes each. All participants gave verbal consent to be recorded, and pseudonyms were used during transcription to protect identities.

The interviews followed a 15-question guide (Appendix A), structured to explore core themes such as:

- Patterns of victim recruitment and control
- Public misconceptions
- Law enforcement and legal system challenges
- Victim services
- Prevention strategies and policy gaps

Although the same question set was used for each interview, the semi-structured design allowed for follow-up questions tailored to participants' specific roles or anecdotes. Transcripts were coded thematically by hand, and emergent themes were identified and grouped according to the frequency and depth of responses.

Although the small sample size is a limitation, the richness of qualitative data and the diversity of participant roles offer meaningful insights into the realities of anti-trafficking work.

Findings

This section presents the major themes from five semi-structured interviews with professionals working in anti-trafficking roles across Virginia. Each participant brought unique insights based on their field—ranging from case management to legal advocacy. Thematic analysis revealed five dominant areas: (1) vulnerability and recruitment tactics, (2) public misconceptions and media narratives, (3) systemic challenges in legal and law enforcement responses, (4) barriers to victim services, and (5) prevention and community education.

1. Victim Vulnerability and Recruitment Strategies

Victims' experiences, again consistent with previous studies, showed that traffickers took advantage of consistent vulnerabilities, including homeless, previous trauma, poverty and disengagement with social relationships. Their first person accounts provided deeper understanding of these patterns, illustrating and showing how multiple vulnerabilities sometimes intersect each other.

- "Many of the people we serve came from situations where they were couch surfing, had been kicked out of the house, or were fleeing abuse," said Holly, a case manager at housing-focused nonprofit.

Participants also reinforced the literature's identification of "boyfriending" as a dominant recruitment strategy. Sam, an outreach coordinator at a trafficking prevention organization, explained:

- "It usually starts with someone offering them love or support—telling them they are special. Then it escalates into dependency."

These emotional manipulation tactics were described as gradual but deliberate—blurring the lines between consent and coercion. Maya, a legal advocate working in survivor legal support and advocacy,, sharing how traffickers increasingly leverage online platforms:

- "It is not back alleys anymore. It is Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok."

This understanding coincides with recent scholarly pursuits on the rapid rise of technology-facilitated grooming, but adds immediacy and context by demonstrating the challenges that actual organizations face in keeping up.

2. Public Misconceptions and Media Narratives

As the trafficking literature indicated, participants pointed out that sensationalized representations—typically involving foreign nationals or dramatic abductions—still skewed public perceptions. Yet, their interviews suggested that these misconceptions had real-life

implications: misconceptions around awareness, lack of empathy, and misclassification by authorities.

- "People think it is always some girl chained in a basement. That is so far from what we see," said Jordan, a social worker in public social services. "Most of our clients are domestic. They have never left the state, let alone the country."

Alex, a survivor support director at a national nonprofit, emphasized the challenge of undoing misinformation during outreach:

- "We have to re-educate every time we give a presentation. People just don't see the girl at the bus stop or working at the club as someone who might be trafficked."

Rather than reinforcing previous findings, participants deepened them by showing how stereotypes impact not just policy or discourse but also advocates' everyday ability to reach and support victims.

3. Legal Challenges and Law Enforcement Limitations

Participants unanimously agreed that the legal system is ill-equipped to address the complexity of trafficking cases. While laws exist on paper, their enforcement is often inconsistent, and frontline personnel are undertrained.

Maya reported that Virginia "gets an F" in terms of enforcement:

- "We do not even have a decent safe harbor law for adults. If a survivor gets picked up for prostitution, there is still a real chance they are going to jail."

Alex described how even well-meaning officers struggle to identify victims:

- "Even police who mean well do not always know what to look for. Victims are criminalized or dismissed unless they say the magic words, 'I am being trafficked.' However, that is not how trauma works."

Jurisdictional challenges also complicate efforts. Local agencies often lack the resources to build trafficking cases, while federal authorities prioritize large-scale operations over individual recovery. The result is a legal system that frequently fails to provide protection—or worse, punishes survivors for their own exploitation.

4. Access to Services and Barriers to Support

Contributors talked about the significant barriers that the survivors contend with to gain access to much needed services, when they are ready to leave. These obstacles include limited long-term housing, overwhelmed mental health systems, and reliance on providers that are not trauma-informed.

- "You cannot just rescue someone and send them back into poverty," said Holly. "Without housing, counseling, and a support network, they will just end up in another exploitative relationship."

Jordan noted the deep distrust survivors often feel toward institutions:

- "Many systems have failed them—foster care, CPS, the courts. They will not call a hotline or walk into a police station."

Several participants discussed trauma bonds, where victims form emotional attachments to their traffickers. These bonds make it difficult for them to leave or even recognize their abuse. As Sam explained:

- "They do not think they are being trafficked—they think they are in love or that this person is protecting them."

This insight suggests that adequate support must account for emotional entanglement, not just logistical needs.

5. Prevention and Community Education

All five participants acknowledged that community-level prevention strategies need to be in place for more durable change, and arguably need to be educationally based. Schools were identified to be the best possible setting for an early intervention.

- "Prevention starts in the school system," said Jordan. "We need to teach kids how to recognize manipulation before they are ever approached."

At the same time, participants warned against fear-based messaging. Alex emphasized that education must be survivor-informed and empowering, not retraumatizing:

- "We do not need more horror stories in the media. We need empowering public education."

Participants called for collaboration between schools, social workers, law enforcement, and survivor-led organizations to develop unified, culturally competent strategies. As Maya put it:

- "If we want to end trafficking, we have to address poverty, racism, family violence, and homelessness—not just the symptoms."

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce existing literature on the systemic causes of adult sex trafficking while also offering unique insights from professionals working directly with survivors. While prior research has established that trafficking often involves psychological manipulation rather than physical force (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Nichols, 2016), this study's interviews show how that distinction continues to confuse the public and even law enforcement. Respondents consistently explained how trafficking is mischaracterized because of antiquated views—which also affects the timing of intervention and influences failures in law and policy. A

primary contribution of the study was the ability to observe in real-time how systemic vulnerabilities intersect.

Rather than discussing poverty or housing insecurity in isolation, participants described how these factors layer to create a trap that traffickers can exploit. These firsthand accounts support Greenbaum's (2017) argument that trafficking is an extension of pre-existing trauma but go further by emphasizing the inadequacy of current support structures. The connection between institutional neglect—such as poor foster care transitions or ineffective CPS interventions—and later vulnerability was especially striking.

One of the most powerful emergent themes was the emotional complexity of trauma bonds, where victims remain attached to their traffickers out of fear, emotional dependency, or learned loyalty. While literature addresses this dynamic (Reid et al., 2017), participants emphasized this concept by stating those kinds of bonds often bind survivors and stop them from self-identifying or asking for assistance. This understanding goes against the traditional approaches to rescue and reinforces the importance of relational, and long-term recovery models.

There was also an increasing concern about the role of digital technology in trafficking or facilitating trafficking. While Dank et al. (2015) recognized early shifts toward online grooming, interviewees discussed how stealthy and sophisticated the behaviors of humans who traffick was and how difficult it was the identify.This evolution in recruitment tactics requires more than reactive policing—it demands investment in digital education, online safety campaigns, and cybercrime task forces.

Perhaps most urgently, the study reveals how legal systems continue to overlook adult survivors, who are often criminalized rather than protected. Current safe harbor laws and expungement policies, where they exist at all, tend to focus on minors. This creates a significant

gap for adults who were coerced, manipulated, or trafficked over more extended periods. As several participants noted, survivors are still being arrested and prosecuted, sometimes even while seeking help.

To move forward, anti-trafficking efforts must shift from fragmented, reactionary systems toward prevention-oriented, survivor-led, and trauma-informed practices. Policy recommendations emerging from this study include:

- Creating or expanding safe harbor laws for adults
- Standardizing law enforcement training with a focus on psychological coercion
- Funding long-term housing and mental health programs led by survivors
- Embedding trafficking prevention in school health curricula

These reforms require collaboration across sectors—legal, medical, educational, and community-based—to dismantle the systemic drivers of trafficking rather than just respond to its symptoms. The voices of survivors and frontline professionals should not be peripheral—they must guide the design and implementation of policy if we are to achieve meaningful, lasting change.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides meaningful insight into the root causes and systemic challenges of adult sex trafficking in the United States, it is not without limitations. The primary limitation is the small sample size of five participants. Although each was selected for their professional expertise and direct engagement with trafficking survivors, a larger pool would have allowed for broader thematic diversity and greater generalizability of the findings. Also, by restricting other aspects of this study to work in Virginia, geographic implications of the study were limited. Using a geographic lens is critical to this issue because the population of individuals

experiencing sex trafficking, as well as the network involved in responding, will act differently in part because the laws and services available vary geographically. In addition to geographic dimensions that present challenges and were limits of this study, demographic differences were not fully addressed in the research and reporting of findings.

Another clear limitation for this study was excluding survivor responses. The individual professionals interviewed often spoke on behalf of survivors or reported on survivor experiences. While the survivor perspective is available in the literature, information on what those with lived experience would say was not obtained. For example, if we were to hear what survivors say, we would be able to dive deeper into finding nuance and authentic information on areas like trauma recovery, institutional distrust, or reentry, and use that in an expanded way. Future work should focus on survivor-led research designs, wherever possible, to not only listen to survivor voices but also to provide an ethical completeness and operational efficacy of practical insight.

Methodologically, semi-structured interviews offer flexibility and richness but also introduce the possibility of subjective bias. Themes were manually coded and interpreted by the researcher, and while care was taken to remain objective, personal framing inevitably shapes the final analysis. Future research may benefit from triangulation with other data sources, such as surveys, policy evaluations, or statistical data from national trafficking reports.

Additional research is needed to assess various intervention outcomes, such as the effectiveness of trauma-informed care models; school-based prevention programs; and changes in legislation, including safe harbor laws. Comparative studies between states with different legislative and policy approaches to supporting survivors and reducing human trafficking would better help establish which policies effectively help survivors and reduce trafficking. Longer-term studies that examine the outcomes of survivors over time would be valuable in

establishing recovery pathways and service gaps. As more research is developed in the anti-trafficking sector moving forward, the research must continue to be interdisciplinary, survivor-informed, and policy-relevant.

Conclusion

This study investigated the root causes and systemic challenges of adult sex trafficking in the United States through the perspectives of professionals working on the front lines. The findings confirm what much of the literature has asserted: trafficking is not an isolated crime but a symptom of deeper structural failures—including poverty, abuse, systemic racism, housing instability, and institutional neglect.

Participants shared that victims are often recruited through manipulation rather than force, and many never identify themselves as victims due to trauma bonds or fear of criminalization. Technology has expanded the reach of traffickers, while public misconceptions continue to distort how trafficking is understood and addressed. Law enforcement, although increasingly aware of trafficking, remains poorly trained and under-resourced, and victim services are fragmented and underfunded.

This study reinforces the need for multi-sectoral responses that are trauma-informed and survivor-led. Education and prevention must begin early—in schools and community spaces—and must involve public re-education to break away from dangerous stereotypes. Legal reform is essential, particularly around safe harbor laws, expungement for survivors, and consistency in enforcement across jurisdictions.

Although the sample size in this study was small, the depth of the interviews provided powerful, direct descriptions of challenges and possibilities across the anti-trafficking movement. Further studies should incorporate larger, more diverse participant pools (including survivors)

and assess the long-term impacts of specific interventions. Continued advocacy, education, and survivor-centered reform are essential in addressing the root causes of trafficking and providing meaningful paths to recovery.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. In your experience, what are the most common ways adults become victims of sex trafficking?
2. What patterns or trends have you noticed in how traffickers operate?
3. What are some misconceptions the public has about adult sex trafficking?
4. What risk factors make adults more vulnerable to being trafficked?
5. How do traffickers typically recruit and control their victims?
6. What role does technology (e.g., social media, online ads) play in trafficking cases?
7. What are the most significant challenges law enforcement faces in identifying and helping trafficking victims?
8. How effective are current laws and policies in addressing sex trafficking among adults?
9. What changes in law or policy do you think would improve the fight against sex trafficking?
10. What support services (e.g., housing, counseling, legal help) are most needed by survivors?
11. What barriers prevent victims from seeking help or escaping trafficking situations?
12. How can advocacy groups and law enforcement work better together to support survivors?
13. What prevention efforts have been most effective in reducing sex trafficking in your community?
14. How can the general public help in the fight against sex trafficking?
15. What steps should be taken to improve awareness and education about adult sex trafficking?