In this module, we will be discussing the factors that make children and youth especially vulnerable to the methods of traffickers.

Objectives for this Module

- Understand the individual risk factors that make children/teens vulnerable
- Understand the social factors that make children/teens vulnerable
- Understand the impact of trauma on the child/teen who has been trafficked, which requires a trauma-informed approach
- Understand appropriate victim-centered ways system partners can respond to prevent and/or mitigate CST
- Recognize the human and legal rights of children/teens who have been trafficked

At the end of this module, you will better understand the specific individual, relationship, community and societal risk factors that make children and youth vulnerable to child sex trafficking.
Sex trafficking does not discriminate. Cases here in Wisconsin show that youth who are sex trafficked can come from any background. However, certain youth are at an increased risk due to some common characteristics that make them especially vulnerable targets for traffickers.

This graphic identifies the main categories of vulnerabilities that can influence the level of risk of a particular child or youth who is being targeted by a child sex trafficker. Specifically, there are individual risk factors, factors deriving from the child or youth’s family relationships, community influences that contribute to risk, and societal factors that can increase a child or youth’s level of risk. These influences often overlap with each other, as well. We will be exploring each of these areas in more detail. As we will see in subsequent modules, identification of these risk factors helps in developing both individualized and more generalized prevention efforts, identifying those children and
youth who have been trafficked, developing interventions to stop child sex trafficking, and assisting the youth in leaving sex trafficking.

There are a number of risk factors that could describe almost any child or youth. You could think of these as being “developmental” vulnerabilities of simply being young and inexperienced at life. However, while impulsivity, risk-taking, a desire for love and acceptance, and inexperience are characteristic for many children or youth, there are some youth who exhibit greater than average impulsive and risk-taking behaviors. Add in low self-esteem and/or self-worth, and the picture from the perspective of the trafficker is promising. Traffickers are aware of these developmental deficits, and they use tactics designed to take advantage of these vulnerabilities. Since the brains of youth are still developing, as are their emotions and ability to understand long-term consequences, one can see how these factors work to the trafficker’s advantage.
The next level of individual risks addresses a second layer of factors that increase the risks of child sex trafficking to children and youth. A child with mental health issues may be at a heightened risk for feelings of worthlessness or despair and thereby may be more easily seduced by the “understanding” trafficker. Children and youth with low self-esteem may similarly be seduced by positive attention from a trafficker.

The child or youth with a trauma history may have developed passive means of coping with the trauma, thus making it easier for a trafficker to gain their compliance. They also may unconsciously be drawn to individuals who are similar to others who have harmed them, as they unknowingly believe all relationships have a degree of fear, abuse, and violence or that this is all that they deserve in life.

Youth who have a substance abuse problem can be manipulated with provision of and/or promises of drugs or alcohol.

Children and youth with developmental disabilities may not recognize the danger, and may be more easily persuaded that the trafficker is a friend or boyfriend to them. In addition, these children and youth may be eager to make a friend or please others because they are receiving attention, making them easier targets for traffickers.

Children and youth who are truant from school are isolated from adults who could recognize and respond to threats posed to them. Truancy is also more likely for youth who run away or are homeless; these youth are already at greater risk of being trafficked.

A common trait for each of these risk factors is that they impact the perceived “credibility” of the individual, making them a good risk for the trafficker. Not only can the trafficker more easily lure children and youth who fall into one of these categories because of their added vulnerabilities, but she/he can more readily “count on” them being discounted should they reach out for assistance from an adult.

**Marginalized Youth**

- LGBTQ
- Native American Youth
- Homeless youth
- Runaway and Missing Youth
- System-involved youth
Child sex traffickers focus special attention on those children and youth who are marginalized, and therefore not protected by a strong social network. These children, who are misunderstood or invisible in the larger community, are often viewed with suspicion or contempt by society, and perhaps have been rejected or abused by family members. Children and youth in this group often have developed protective responses that work against them when it comes to the trafficker. Among those who are especially vulnerable are LGBTQ youth, Native American youth, youth who are homeless (including if they are homeless with their families---these children or youth may be trafficked as a means of getting shelter or food for other family members), runaway youth, children who are “missing”, and children or youth who have involvement with the child welfare system.

Studies have shown a significant connection between being lured into child sex trafficking and having a history in the child welfare system. Underlying any such involvement is the fact that the child or youth’s family situation is usually traumatic. Layer onto that the stress and trauma of having to live in a group or foster home, perhaps where the child feels unwanted or unloved. For many who are involved in the child welfare system, their lives are transient, involving many moves from placement to placement.
In New York City in 2007, 2250 children or youth were identified as being trafficked. 85% of them were found to have had some experience with the child welfare system, most in the context of abuse and neglect.

In 2012 Connecticut reported 88 victims of child sex trafficking—86 of those 88 were involved with their CPS system. Sadly, most reported abuse while they were in foster care or residential placement. In Alameda County (California) in 2012, 41% of child sex trafficking victims had prior foster care placement.
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In 2013, after a nationwide FBI raid, 60% of the child sex trafficking victims recovered from more than 70 cities were from foster care or group homes.
The results of a study in Florida, published in December 2016 in the American Journal of Public Health, found that “sexual abuse was the strongest predictor of human trafficking: the odds of human trafficking was 2.52 times greater for girls who experienced sexual abuse, and there was a 8.21 times greater risk for boys who had histories of sexual abuse”.

Runaway and homeless youth are particularly vulnerable to trafficking. Children and youth who are running away are not running TO child sex trafficking, but are running AWAY from a situation that makes what is being offered to them look appealing. A study in Chicago found that 56% of adult female sex workers were initially runaway youth, and similar numbers have been identified for male populations. Runaway and homeless youth lack a strong supportive network, and runaways to unfamiliar environments are particularly at risk of trafficking. Runaway youth are often approached by traffickers at transportation hubs, shelters, or other public spaces. These traffickers pretend to be a boyfriend or significant other, using feigned affection and
manipulation to elicit commercial sex services from vulnerable youth. (National Human Trafficking Resource Center, 2015).

National data show that native youth are 5 times more likely than their non-native counterparts to be trafficked.

This is Dr. Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. His *Theory of Human Motivation and Hierarchy of Needs* has been widely applied for decades in the social sciences to explain and understand human behavior. Essentially, the idea is that humans have a scale or hierarchy of needs. Individuals seek to have their basic level needs met, such as access to food, water, shelter, and safety. It is harder to focus on other higher-level emotional needs, such as self-esteem and caring, functional relationships, when these basic necessities are limited or absent. When any set of needs are unfulfilled, individuals may do whatever they need to do in order to have them met. In the field of child sex
trafficking, this model is extremely helpful in thinking about how the needs of vulnerable children and youth can be used by the trafficker. Traffickers may lure vulnerable children and youth into trafficking by offering to meet their basic needs, such as giving them a “free” meal or bed to sleep on. Eventually, the trafficker will demand “repayment” of these “favors”. Other times, a youth may have their basic needs already fulfilled, but are seeking love, affection, and/or caring relationships. The trafficker will exploit this vulnerability by seemingly offering them the love or caring they are seeking and then using that trust to manipulate the youth into trafficking.

In addition to the individual factors we have discussed, there are also factors present in certain relationships of children and youth which further contribute to increasing their vulnerability to being preyed upon by child sex traffickers. These family or relationship factors include being abused or neglected at home. Abuse or neglect affects the child or youth’s view of themselves, puts them at risk of running away, and suggests a lack of a support system and/or a poor parent-child relationship. Thinking back to the Hierarchy of Needs, consider the unmet needs that exist for children who are being abused at home, or who are being “kicked out” by family members who are the abusers or who are choosing the abuser over the child. Other families may be under so much stress that they are unable to see that their child is at risk of being preyed upon by traffickers looking for vulnerable youth. This stress can come in many forms, including poverty or a sick or absent family member.
Another risk factor is living in a home where a family member has mental health or substance abuse issues. Children and youth living in these circumstances often find themselves invisible which impacts their self-perception and their stress levels.

Some times children and youth are living in a family where one of their family members is either a trafficker or is being trafficked. Children or youth who are trafficked by a family member may come to see trafficking as a normal part of development and believe it defines their place in the world.
Another set of circumstances applies to children or youth who are socially marginalized in some other way. Perhaps they are socially awkward, or don’t fit into the established social groups at their school or in their neighborhood. Consider how a child feels who is an outcast or has few friends, and how easy it would be for a trafficker to notice this and manipulate them--- very much the way that maltreaters groom children in similar situations. When any one of these relationship risk factors exists, that child is at a higher risk for being a trafficking victim.

Even if the child or youth is not the focus of abuse within the home, family violence between parents increases the vulnerability of the child or youth in that home. Reflecting back on the Hierarchy of Needs, consider what needs of the child or youth in a violent home might be unmet, and therefore exploitable by the maltreater.
Family violence, whether towards the child or another family member, is an example of an adverse childhood experience. Adverse childhood experiences are potentially traumatic events that can have lasting effects on the health and well-being of the child or youth who experiences them, including susceptibility to sex traffickers. Other adverse childhood experiences include physical, sexual, or emotional abuse of the child or youth, parental divorce, living with household members who have substance abuse issues, are mentally ill or suicidal, incarceration of a parent or guardian, and neglect or poor supervision of the child or youth.

All of these are indicative of childhood experiences of trauma generated by family or household dysfunction, which can create additional vulnerability for the child or youth who has these sorts of life events. Often these situations are hidden or invisible unless we are looking for them. Sometimes we underestimate the significance, and minimize their potential impact on the child or youth.

There are also factors in some communities that help to “set up” children to be more vulnerable to the lure of the sex trafficker. When there are pockets of poverty, exacerbated by a lack of jobs, you will find child sex traffickers who are offering a “better life”. They may entice youth with a promise of money, expensive goods, or services such as hair and nail appointments. Often this is done in tandem with popular songs, TV shows, or other celebrity-driven status symbols.

In certain communities and neighborhoods, criminal gangs wield power. Children and youth are actively recruited to be part of those gangs, either by the enticement of belonging or by threat of harm if they do not join. Sometimes gang initiation involves submitting to being trafficked, and sometimes it is the culture of the gang to require of its more vulnerable members that they participate in sex trafficking, either by selling sexually explicit conduct or by recruiting others to be sold.

In some communities, there are no outlets or resources for children and youth, or the only social outlets are those provided by the child sex trafficker, who can exploit the lack
of community investment in youth. When alcohol or drugs are prevalent in the community, the risks to children and youth of sex trafficking is heightened, as well.

Communities that have fewer resources, especially in rural areas, also offer fewer options to families that may be in crisis or experiencing a difficult period. These types of situations may place further strains on the family, which then increase the likelihood of youth not having their needs met and engaging in risky behaviors that we have already discussed on previous slides.

Lastly, our culture has become increasingly sexualized and violent. Violence in the media, particularly that which promotes norms that make aggression against women acceptable, contribute to child sex trafficking. In this sexualized culture, which makes sex trafficking seem glamorous or fun, traffickers are at an advantage, since the message is that what the trafficker is offering is good, fun, exciting and glamorous.
As we mentioned when we began looking at the factors that increase the vulnerability of children and youth to become individuals who are being sex trafficked, when there are multiple factors at play, the level of vulnerability increases exponentially. For instance, when the child or youth is living in a dysfunctional household with family violence, in a community and family where poverty is present, and where there are no healthy relationships in the child’s life, the scene is set for success for a child sex trafficker connecting with that child. This is the perfect storm for child sex trafficking to flourish.

Let’s bring this full circle. We have identified a host of ways in which children and youth can be vulnerable. Child sex traffickers are masterful at identifying those vulnerabilities and targeting the children and youth who will be most likely to fall prey to his/her seductive methods to lure the youth into the sex trafficking world—a world that is hard to escape once a child has become trapped within it. Notice how the words of this trafficker fit nicely into the Hierarchy of Needs: My job is to make sure she has what she NEEDS, personal, hygiene, get her nails done, take her to buy an outfit, take her out to eat, make her feel wanted...but I keep the money.” By meeting needs, the trafficker manipulates the child or youth into believing that he is interested in her welfare, that it is better for her than it was at home, that she is complicit in the trafficking, that she is “choosing” the life of trafficking. Clearly, to combat the trafficker’s methods, we will have to start by addressing needs and minimizing the vulnerabilities that we can control.
Widespread lack of awareness and understanding of trafficking leads to low levels of victim identification by the people who most often encounter them. Trafficking victims have been identified in urban, suburban and rural areas in all 50 states and in Washington DC and the US Territories.

While it is the case that trafficking crosses all demographics, as we have discussed in this module, certain factors and circumstances increase risk and vulnerability to victimization and sex trafficking. Those categories of individuals who are at greater risk than average of sex trafficking include: homeless and runaway children and youth; children and youth in out-of-home placement; LGBTQ youth; and Native youth. Also, refugees/unaccompanied minors also should not be overlooked as they are at a greater risk of being sex trafficked. Child welfare workers often come into contact with the children and youth who are most vulnerable and need to pay attention to the signs that children and youth may be victims of trafficking. The next two modules will look in more detail at the recruitment process and the signs that children and youth may be trafficked.

Next Steps

1. Close this window to return to the module page, then...
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