

## **Human Trafficking as a National Security Issue**

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### **Abstract**

Human trafficking is an issue in almost every country across the world and yet it is often overlooked by those in the national security field. Funds from human trafficking are directly used to fund illicit activities like terrorism or organized crime syndicates while trafficking threatens human security by stealing the rights of individuals to their freedom. Furthermore, in the age of social media, the threat of human trafficking has spread online to vulnerable groups who normally would never have been exposed to this danger. Sadly, rather than tackle the threat head on, media companies have avoided taking precautions against human trafficking and opted to take no responsibility for the crimes committed on their sites. This, in combination with the overlooking of human trafficking as an issue of national security by those in power, has led to a network of over 25 million people being trafficked each year. In order to stop the cycle of trafficking, social media companies, government officials, and the general public must work together to raise awareness of the issues and to help rescue people from trafficking networks.

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Human trafficking is modern day slavery that has evolved at alarming rate in the age of technology. Globally, it is one of the largest organized crime operations that generates billions of dollars in revenue through the exploitation of others. The backgrounds of those who are trafficked and the fields to which they are forced into are varied, making it difficult for the international community to combat. In recent years, the rise of social media has generated new ways for traffickers to find and communicate with potential victims. Therefore, by understanding the issue of human trafficking and the role social media has played within it, policy makers can create new legislation and prioritize trafficking as a national security issue.

Traditional scholars of national security have failed to adequately address human trafficking as a major security issue. According to the department of Homeland security, “Human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act.” When states ignore human trafficking as a national security issue in favor of other threats, they are overlooking a vital matter of human security. According to Roza Pati at the University of Miami, human security is, “people-centered and emphasizes the idea of shielding people from pervasive threats while empowering them to develop resilience to adversity” (Pati, 2014). Essentially, these are the issues that individuals are more likely to see as threats to their own security. They include: protection from hunger, crime, unemployment, disease, environmental hazards, and civil and political unrest. What the government and groups who study national security see as important to security, such as nuclear weapons or terrorism, are important, but are not something that people are likely to encounter in their daily lives. In most countries [terrorism accounts for less than 0.01% of deaths](#) and the last nuclear bomb ever dropped in combat was in 1945 (Ritchie, Hasell, Appel, & Roser, 2013). Overall, the likelihood of becoming victim to or interacting with someone being trafficked is much higher, yet these other threats are discussed more often by the news media and scholars. Therefore, human trafficking should be considered a major threat to national security because it is a more prevalent threat to human security and rights.

There are many different types of trafficking to which a diverse range of people can become victims to. According to estimates, nearly 25 million people globally are under some form of trafficking. Victims of human trafficking spend an average of 20 months in forced labor with nearly 74% of victims working outside of their home country (HumanrightsFirst.org, 2017). In total, trafficking is an estimated \$150 billion-dollar global business that encompasses about 25 different ways people can be trafficked (HumanrightsFirst.org, 2017). These include being trafficked into hospitality, construction, prostitution, food service, domestic work, manufacturing, or working in bars and strip clubs. Overall, these types of human trafficking can be broken up into two major sects which are labor trafficking and sex trafficking.

According to the United States’ Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 human 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, debt bondage, or slavery” (Human Trafficking Laws and Regulations, 2017). The Department of State estimates that over four million people annually are trafficked

for labor in the United States into industries like agriculture, carnival work, commercial cleaning services, construction, factory work and more. The most common way for people to be recruited into labor trafficking is by in-person recruitment (Anthony, 2018). However, in recent years, some traffickers have moved to gaining new victims by posting brazen photos or videos showing large amounts of cash or falsified adverts for jobs on social media. Once a vulnerable person looking for a job is located, a trafficker will usually offer this person work in a different state or country where they will be dependent on their trafficker for support. These victims are oftentimes forced to work for little or no money with no way of escaping their situation (Anthony, 2018).

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) reports that children are also major targets for the labor trafficking industry. A common way for this to happen is for teenagers to be recruited for street peddling. Most minors being trafficked have never worked before, so it is common for them to not understand the illegality of their “jobs.” Minors are often tricked into working long hours, receiving little pay, and having no access to basic provisions while they are forced to work alone in unsafe locations. If they do not sell what they were supposed to, their traffickers will often abandon them in these dangerous situations. According to the DHHS, “many parents are also unaware of these dangers and believe they are allowing their children to work for respected and legitimate companies” (Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Grace, 2017).

The other major type of human trafficking is sex trafficking, which is the most profitable form of trafficking. Sex trafficking is defined by US law as, “when a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion.” An estimate 4.8 million people are victims of sex trafficking, making up only 19% of the total amount of people trafficked, yet it accounts for 66% of the global profits (HumanRightsFirst.org, 2017). On average, a woman forced into the sex trade will make their trafficker about \$100,000 a year, which is six times more than the average labor trafficking victim (HumanrightsFirst.org, 2017). Additionally, information from Equality Now, a nongovernmental organization that works to help advance the rights of women, says that nearly 96% of sex trafficking victims are women. Sex trafficking is typically the most difficult for people to escape from because victims are usually extremely vulnerable and have a hard time getting support. The DHHS attempted to find the commonalties among those who become sex trafficked and found that many of them came from disadvantaged communities where there were few economic opportunities (Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Grace, 2017). A very common scenario for sex trafficking is that the victims are promised economic incentives that usually involve moving, sometimes internationally, to more developed areas or nations like the United States. Once they arrive, their traffickers work to keep them in the business by destroying their legal paperwork, threatening their families or keeping them bound by debt while isolating them from their past lives.

In addition, many people being trafficked in the sex industry are minors. With nearly one in six minors being trafficking under the age of twelve (Bouché, 2018). These individuals usually come from broken homes where other family members were sexually abusive, addicted to drugs, or separated due to loss of a parent in death, divorce, or abandonment (Clawson, Dutch,

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Solomon, & Grace, 2017). Another risk factor for minors becoming trafficked is if they are runaways. Minors who run away from their families, treatment centers, or foster homes are at a higher risk of being taken in by traffickers. Finally, people who are exploited in the sex trade are more likely to be people of color, especially those living below the poverty line (Lehman, 2017). For these reasons, it is important for policy makers to prioritize informing these high-risk groups about the dangers of human trafficking. People are much more likely to fall victim to a threat they do not see coming, so it is imperative that these groups are informed of the danger. Spreading awareness can be done through presentations in schools for young students as well as through media campaigns. In 2019, the Department of Homeland security added the Blue Campaign to its website, which has aimed to promote national awareness for human trafficking by working with law enforcement, the private sector and NGOs to teach people how to identify victims (Blue Campaign, 2019). The Blue Campaign, which started in 2010, has pushed for greater awareness and is working to help victims.

In recent years, the rise of social media has given traffickers new platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter to find and stalk potential victims. According to the Polaris study on how social media has affected human trafficking, “trafficking by an individual—generally a pimp or an intimate partner— often begins with the trafficker and potential victim building a relationship through social media” (Anthony, 2018). The trafficker is likely to start small by liking a person’s photos and commenting on their posts. As time goes on, they will progress to direct messaging their victims and eventually into what they call boyfriendting. In this phase, the trafficker will attempt to flatter their potential victim by faking a romantic attraction or offering them jobs in a field like modeling. Finally, they will offer to meet each other and that is when the person will often be taken and forced into labor or sex trafficking (Anthony, 2018).

This new way to find victims is making trafficking even more dangerous for human security. People who would never have encountered traffickers in their daily lives are unknowingly opening themselves up to becoming victims, which is especially worrisome when thought about in the context of minors. Lauren Hersh, an expert in sex trafficking, talked about the prevalence of targeting minors when trafficking via social media. “In pretty much every situation of trafficking I’ve seen unfold there’s some element of social media, whether it’s someone being recruited or advertised” (Lehman, 2017). She explains that young girls are more susceptible to trafficking because they are emotionally immature and are looking for someone to understand them. They are also more likely to allow people they do not know to follow them on social media because they want the validation and attention from a large following. Oftentimes, they will share online what is making them upset and traffickers will reach out to them to make an emotional connection that can lead to manipulation and eventually trafficking. Notably, some social media sites have features that include GPS (snapchat) or location sharing (Facebook & Instagram) that are supposed to be used to tell friends where they are (Anthony, 2018). However, if a child is followed by a trafficker then that predator can use this information to find and kidnap them.

Despite a popular belief that victims of trafficking are cut off from the internet and the

outside world, more than three quarters of survivors in Polaris's survey of victims of human trafficking stated they used internet platforms during their exploitation (Anthony, 2018). Platforms such as Snapchat or Wickr (a site that allows user to send encrypted text, audio, video or photo messages) can be used by victims because of their features that allow for messages to disappear. This can help those who are kept in captivity reach out to their families and try to escape, but traffickers are more likely to not allow their victims to use apps with disappearing message features.

Nonetheless, in most modern cases of human trafficking, victims are still allowed to use their social media accounts. The trafficker may want it to look as though the victim is happy and safe despite their situation and will therefore let them continue to post and message their family and friends. In the case of minors being trafficked, the amount of internet use is even larger. According to Thorn, a non-profit organization that works to protect children from sexual exploitation, 74% of victims were allowed to have personal phones. Of those with phones, 75% had access to the internet during the time they were trafficked and 90% with access to the internet used social media (Bouché, 2018). The study found that most calls and messages to family and friends were highly monitored, but many victims had less restricted access to social media. The reason behind this more open access was because victims were often forced to use websites and apps to help sell themselves. 75% of participants in the study said they were advertised online and 52% of them wrote their ads themselves. These ads included a variety of keywords provided by their traffickers to signal that they were underage (Bouché, 2018). A very common site used to post these ads was called Backpage. Backpage was a classified advertising website that had become the largest marketplace for buying and selling sex. In April of 2018, Backpage was seized by the FBI and essentially shutdown (Jarrett, 2018). Despite a progressive step forward, many of the sellers moved from Backpage onto different platforms like Craigslist or Facebook.

The study conducted by Thorn also looked at which apps were being most commonly used by trafficked minors and found that 51% had a Facebook account and 23% had an Instagram (Bouché, 2018). Since these social media outlets are the top two most commonly used by victims, they could work with initiatives like the Blue Campaign to include features that would allow victims to signal to national hotlines that they need help. This kind of feature could pop up as an advertisement or be located on a Facebook page does not immediately signal to the trafficker that it is a hotline in order to protect the victim. From there, they could be directed to the Department of Homeland Security website or a non-profit anti-trafficking organization.

Even though technology and social media are making it easier for people to be trafficked, they can also be used to pinpoint traffickers and identify potential victims. The most innovative example of this is the development of PhotoDNA by Microsoft. This technology, "attempts to identify victims by scanning photos uploaded to the platform and to match them against a set of known child sex abuse images from illicit child pornography websites..." (Anthony, 2018). Thus, if victims can be identified, then the police can use the profiles on the websites that uploaded the material to track down the victims and help them escape. A recent example of

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modern technology being used to locate a victim was in New York City. A trafficking victim was photographed on top of 100-dollar bills and using image enhancement, the police were able to read the serial numbers on the money. Investigators were able to track where this money was used and arrest a man who had been trafficking minors for over 10 years (Sex Trafficking moves..., 2016). Using technology to locate human traffickers is an important way to address this security issue, but social media outlets can be doing more than what they currently are. These platforms have the capability to build algorithms that could flag adults who are following and communicating with minors or help produce content that is intended to teach minors about the dangers of trafficking or how to spot someone who may be a trafficker online.

Legally, media companies have no direct responsibility for the content that is produced on their platforms. According to Polaris, “Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act protected... all web companies from liability for anything on their sites that is created by others” (Anthony, 2018). This bill eventually went under some revision with the implementation of the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act and changed the ruling to say that companies can be sued civilly and prosecuted at the state level if they knowingly facilitate sex trafficking. The loophole here is that if sites choose not to actively prevent trafficking then they can reasonably say that they did not know what was happening. Moreover, victims of trafficking are unlikely to have much money, so their chances of winning a civil lawsuit against a large media corporation are quite small. Although it is difficult to say what the government should do in response to this, the public should encourage social networking companies to be more accountable for the material and activities on their site regarding sex trafficking.

Importantly, social media sites are not the only ones responsible for combatting human trafficking. Globally, policy towards human trafficking is very diverse and ranges in its effectiveness across various countries and cultures. Each nation has different types of trafficking that are more prevalent and different laws for how to combat it. In the United States, the first federal law against human trafficking, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) was passed in 2000. The law, which has provisions for reauthorization and new amendments nearly every four years, works to prevent labor and sex trafficking while punishing offenders. Additions to the law in recent years have included a provision for the Department of Labor to release a list of products produced by forced and child labor, measures to add liability to government contractors using trafficked labor, and stricter punishments for those traveling for sex tourism (Jesionka, 2013).

Other countries have also taken a more active approaches to the threat of trafficking by passing more progressive legislation. In Sweden, Denmark, France, Iceland, and Ireland it is illegal to buy sex but not to sell it. Sweden, which was the first nation to adopt these laws, found sex trafficking decreased because, according to Equality Now, “criminalization of women and girls in the sex trade leaves them more vulnerable, while the possession of a criminal record can make it even harder to exit the trade” (The Equality Approach..., 2018). Sweden saw a nearly 50% decrease in men looking to purchase sex once these laws were enacted. Because of this, Sweden has become an undesirable place for sex traffickers to work and the instances of sex

trafficking have decreased significantly (The Equality Approach..., 2018).

However, these countries are in the minority, and human trafficking is still neglected as a national security issue in most places. In the most recent global reports, only 9,071 cases of human trafficking were tried and convicted in 2016, with the vast majority being in Southeast and Central Asia (HumanrightsFirst.org, 2017). Relative to the amount of trafficking victims each year, nearly 25 million, these numbers demonstrate a clear failure on the part of the international community to address human trafficking as a priority.

Still, many scholars are skeptical about labeling a human security threat as a national security problem. National security is a difficult concept to define and is what constitutes a part of security is largely determined by the government in power. In general, national security encompasses defense of [citizens](#), [economy](#), and institutions, which is regarded as a duty of [government](#). In terms of defense of citizens, human trafficking is a clear violation of the human rights. Yet, the problem extends even further into the economic and institutional security. According to Roza Pati, “human trafficking is now a business of choice for well-organized and versatile crime syndicates” (Pati, 2014). Due to increased border security and tougher immigration laws, operations looking to smuggle people and drugs had to become more effective and organized. Many of these criminal organizations have learned how to evade international law enforcement, judicial systems and tax systems, in order to launder money and people. These large-scale crime operations use this knowledge to procure victims for labor or sex trafficking and use the money to fund more illicit activity.

Similarly, studies have shown that the profits made from human trafficking are also used to fund terrorism. The Salafi Network (Global Salafi Jihad) uses money from human trafficking as well as the notorious narcoterrorism group Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) (Pati, 2014). According to studies done in the United States, nearly 46% of respondents said they were worried about becoming a victim of terrorism and 10-20% were very worried about it (Ritchie, Hasell, Appel, & Roser, 2013). With a citizenry that is this concerned about terrorism, the government must work to prevent human trafficking which helps to fund it. If governments are unable to stop major crime networks working within their own borders, then they are not adequately protecting their citizens. Therefore, because human trafficking is so intertwined with organized crime it threatens economies and institutions, and because it is a violation of human rights, it should be considered a major national security concern.

In general, there are three main paths that can be taken to stop trafficking by policymakers. The first is to decriminalize prostitution so more women can leave trafficking without being punished. Many trafficking victims are currently unwilling to cooperate out of fear of law enforcement and deportation, which makes identification and rehabilitation efforts difficult (Schoeberl & Nivens, 2018). This also leads to a gap in knowledge for scholars who have a hard time finding victims to study because of the fear of prosecution. As a result, few large-scale human trafficking prevalence studies have been able to be conducted, so the problem may be way worse than predicted. Like in Sweden, making punishments harsher for people looking to buy sex will raise the stakes for the purchaser, which can help decrease the market

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within that country. The second path is to make social media sites more accountable and work closer with anti-trafficking initiatives. Requiring media companies to monitor adults who follow kids or who pretend to be children while implementing ways for victims to reach out through social media will help prevent human trafficking online. Finally, the third path is to increase awareness by having trafficking issues be taught in schools, especially low performing ones where kids are more likely to be victims. Educating people on the dangers of trafficking through initiatives like the Blue Campaign, will help minors understand the dangers and avoid becoming victims.

Overall, technology is a huge part of how human traffickers find their victims and customers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a new generation of minors grow up in the age of social media it is important that policy makers and the general public push to educate young people on the dangers of trafficking. With that being said, there is not one simple answer to how human trafficking can be stopped and no matter what laws are passed individuals need to educate themselves of the warning signs of trafficking. People can work to help prevent trafficking by being informed about the types of trafficking and knowing the warning signs, while national governments can work harder to make trafficking more difficult and less appealing within their borders. If policy makers choose to make human trafficking a priority to national security, they will be able to better protect their citizens from the threat of modern-day slavery.



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