

Sex Trafficking: Myths vs. Facts

In the past decade, sex trafficking has received increased recognition in the media. From public awareness campaigns to news stories, media outlets are drawing attention to trafficking in our communities. As we educate ourselves about sex trafficking, it is important to identify and correct stereotypes and misconceptions and to highlight the realities of trafficking. The following are common misconceptions about human trafficking.

1) Survivors of sex trafficking are physically bound or trapped.

While there are cases where survivors are locked in a room or otherwise physically bound, the majority of trafficking survivors face non-physical methods of force and coercion. For instance, traffickers use controlled substances as reward and punishment. They frequently target individuals who struggle with addiction and withhold the substance until the individual complies with the request for a commercial sex act. In other cases, traffickers use intimidation and emotional abuse to make the victim feel worthless, powerless, and unable to leave. The common misconception that victims are always physically restrained contributes to a deeper misunderstanding that victims need to be “saved” or “rescued.” Survivors of trafficking endure serious trauma and develop strong resiliency. By characterizing them as individuals who need saving, we fail to recognize their strength and autonomy.

2) Human trafficking occurs when someone crosses a state or national border.

Border crossing is not a required element of trafficking. Trafficking can occur without leaving one's town, neighborhood, or even one's house. Trafficking occurs when someone is induced to engage in sex or labor by force, fraud, or coercion. For instance, in intimate partner trafficking, an abusive partner may threaten to kick the partner out of the family home if he/she/they refuse to engage in commercial sex.

Note: Smuggling is not human trafficking. Smuggling occurs when an individual consents to an unauthorized border crossing. One may consent to crossing a U.S. border without official authorization. One cannot consent to being trafficked because by definition, trafficking occurs when one is induced by force, fraud, or coercion to engage in sex or labor against their will.

In addition, trafficking is not limited to immigrant populations. U.S. citizens account for a large majority of individuals identified as either traffickers or survivors of trafficking, and marginalized communities, especially African American and Latin American populations, are disproportionately victimized through sex trafficking.

3) Survivors of sex trafficking are “prostituted out” by pimps.

Prostitution is the legal term used when someone is criminally charged with exchanging sex for money. Outside of the legal context, the term “prostitute” is disfavored as it implies that the individual is morally bankrupt or dishonorable. Moreover, the language “prostituted out” dehumanizes and objectifies the survivor as if they are a commodity to be bought and sold, whereas it is actually the sex act itself that is being purchased.

Pimps are only one form of traffickers. Traffickers come in all shapes and sizes. They can be parents, siblings, gang members, employers, boyfriends/girlfriends, or anyone else in the community. It is important to understand that there is not one “stereotypical” trafficking situation. If we, as a community, only recognize pimp-based trafficking, we will not be able to identify survivors who are trafficked by their parents or their employers.

Similarly, a commonly held belief is that survivors of trafficking are female. However, trafficking is not limited to women and girls. Traffickers target people of all genders and sexual orientations.

The task force encourages you to think critically about how trafficking is portrayed in the media. While we work together to raise awareness about trafficking in our communities, we want to carefully assess cultural stereotypes and recognize all forms of trafficking.