

People with disabilities are more likely to experience human trafficking than their peers.



- ▶ **Traffickers deliberately target victims they think they will be able to isolate and control.** As a result of pervasive stigma and stereotypes surrounding individuals with disabilities, traffickers focus on individuals with disabilities as targets in this crime. Some risk factors that traffickers try to exploit may include gaps in education, societal isolation, and inadequate access to services and support.. (Human Trafficking: What It Is and How it Impacts the Disability Community Webinar; 1/15/2021 National Disability Rights Network)

Individuals with Disabilities Face Increased Risk of Human Trafficking



- ▶ According to several global reports, people with disabilities or mental illness are more likely to be targeted by traffickers than people without disabilities or mental illness. However, collecting data on trafficking victims is challenging and there is not yet a global or U.S. estimate for how many trafficking victims have disabilities or mental illness. (Trafficking in Persons Report, 2017. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/271339.pdf>).
- ▶ Multiple studies suggest sex trafficking is experienced at heightened rates by those with intellectual and physical disabilities (Reid et al., 2018; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2021).
- ▶ Researchers found girls with both physical and cognitive disabilities had a significantly higher prevalence of sex trafficking than peers without disabilities. The prevalence of sex trafficking was highest for those with severe physical disabilities, specifically 11.79% of those with severe physical disability compared to 2.4% of those without severe physical disability. (Franchino-Olsen et al., 2020).
- ▶ Having an individualized education plan (IEP) was significantly associated with a trafficking experience among homeless youth, which the authors delineated may be related to an intellectual disability as individualized education plans are more common among youth with intellectual disabilities or learning difficulties. (Reid et al., 2018; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2021).

Increased Vulnerability Due to Many Factors



- ▶ People with disabilities often rely on others to meet their basic needs. These caregivers have opportunities to traffic them as a result.
- ▶ People with disabilities may become submissive to their caregivers and comply with their caregivers' wishes because they are so dependent upon them. This learned response makes the unequal power dynamic in relationship with a trafficker, even if the trafficker is abusive, seem normal.
- ▶ People with disabilities may lead isolated lives and crave friendship and human connection. Because of this need, they may be persuaded to perform sexual acts if they are promised friendship or money as a reward. Isolation can also make it difficult or impossible for people with disabilities to make contact with people who could help them.
- ▶ Some people with disabilities cannot speak clearly or require communication devices or interpreters to make their needs known, so they, also, cannot ask for help.
- ▶ Because of the level of touching that accompanies intimate care and medical procedures, people with disabilities can become desensitized to touch and/or may be unsure about whether they have the right to object to and report unwanted touch, sexual abuse, and sexual acts. They lack information about and understanding of what constitutes a crime and what their rights are as victims of crimes. This is also true of trafficked workers.
- ▶ People with disabilities may not be believed if they report abuse and violence. If they are believed and their cases are prosecuted, their abusers may be given shorter sentences than abusers of able-bodied people. Task forces should promote awareness of these trends when training service providers, police, prosecutors, and judges.

There are societal and structural barriers that keep people with disabilities from contacting the justice system, so task forces should have access to sign language interpreters, plain language specialists, and assistive communication devices. They should also remove physical barriers to and within their offices.



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