

A silhouette of a person is shown from the chest up, pressed against a glass surface. Their hands are pressed flat against the glass, with fingers spread. The background is a light, textured wall, and the overall lighting is dramatic, with the person's form in deep shadow against the lighter background.

**Who are
the **VICTIMS****

**of HUMAN
TRAFFICKING**

Who are the Victims of Human Trafficking?

It's easy to rely on stereotypes when we think of the global problem of human trafficking (click [here](#) for a definition). But the truth is that anyone, regardless of race, gender, nationality or economic status can become a victim of human trafficking. Age is about the only discriminating factor: almost all victims are under 30 years of age, and the vast majority are younger than 20.

Like much of the world's economy, human trafficking follows the laws of supply and demand. The *demand* for labor (most often for the sex trade) seeks victims of all kinds. Advertising, media—especially pornography—and stark economic inequalities drive demand, which is only limited by the insatiable, boundary-pushing imagination of man.

On the flip side, becoming a victim of human trafficking (the *supply* side of the economic equation) has much to do with *vulnerability* and *desperation*.

The Vulnerable

Here is a list of those most vulnerable to human traffickers:

1. **Children.** By nature, children can easily be overpowered or outwitted by adults desiring to exploit them. They are naturally trusting, and lack discernment. Children in developing nations are at greater risk because those governments typically lack the resources to enforce laws that may exist to protect them. Some cultures also persecute or devalue people of certain ethnic or religious groups, resulting in even less protection for some. Widespread corruption also makes children more vulnerable. But in Western nations like America, a runaway teen or one subjected to sexual or other form of abuse can also be vulnerable. Traffickers easily spot at-risk kids, often posing as “helpful” strangers to exploit their vulnerability. This frequently occurs through social media, where a child's defenses are lower.
2. **The ignorant.** Those without knowledge are also vulnerable because they do not understand the ways of the world (such as someone who grew up in a remote, isolated village with no electricity or phone), or because their formal education is limited or completely lacking. Traffickers live by the old adage, “A sucker's born every minute.”
3. **The lonely.** Traffickers prey on those who live in highly dysfunctional situations devoid of love. Rather than lacking education, however, these victims lack discernment and key developmental skills, making them more vulnerable to false promises of love and acceptance. A trafficker might pose as a doting boyfriend for a few weeks to win trust, then hand off their “score” to others to exploit for prostitution, pornography or other sexual servitude. Traffickers (and pedophiles) often use social media to make initial connections because it's easy to collect personal information to use against their victims. With this information they can pose online as the kind of person the victim would like, thus taking advantage of a teen's loneliness and emotional vulnerability.

4. **The mentally disabled.** This group is perhaps the most vulnerable of all, and for reasons similar to those that cause children and the ignorant to be at risk. This makes their exploitation by others particularly heinous.

The Desperate

Many people in our world live in or on the edge of desperation. Some individuals may simply *feel* desperate, apart from objective circumstances. Whatever the source, here is six reasons someone might experience desperation:

1. Poor families, often rural, have too many mouths to feed (or the breadwinning parent becomes ill, disabled or deceased). Their situation leads them to believe they must sacrifice the oldest—one who typically has no marketable skills and limited education—by sending her to a city to find work so she can fulfill her duty to help feed her younger siblings. This older child often belongs to the “ignorant” category of vulnerability. Experienced human traffickers easily spot such children, and approach them as a friendly stranger willing to help them find “a good job” (which always comes with a catch, which they learn about too late) so they can provide for their family.
2. Parents get divorced or one (or both) dies, leaving children alone with no one to care for them. In many cultures, if a widowed parent remarries, the step-parent wants nothing to do with the children from the deceased spouse, and will even force them out to fend for themselves.
3. Children become separated from their parents, or families lose their homes during natural disasters; others must flee advancing military forces. Desperation hits these people suddenly, tossing them into a daily struggle for survival.
4. Children who grow up in orphanages reach the maximum age (often 16 or 18 years), at which time they are turned out with little or no assistance to help them survive the transition. Many of these “orphans” have few marketable skills, and are ill-prepared to live on their own. (Side note: The word orphans is in quotes because the majority of children living in orphanages in the developing world are “poverty orphans.” This means one or both parents are living but they gave up their child to the institution because they considered themselves too poor to care for them, or were offered incentives such as money and/or the promise of their child receiving a good education. Incentives help orphanage directors bring in more children, which in turn increases sponsorship funds flowing from Western organizations, most of them faith-based. There’s no sugar-coating the truth: this is a form of child trafficking. Many do not want to acknowledge this fact, especially those who have built charitable organizations around sponsorships and leading Westerners on feel-good tours to orphanages. It is a “soft” form of trafficking that enables those involved [directors, helpers, supporters and visitors] to convince themselves it’s for the good of the child. Research, however, has conclusively shown that institutionalization causes long-term damage to children, and makes them at high risk of exploitation, abuse and trafficking.)

5. Young people in developing nations now have access to a vast world of entertainment for the first time via cheap smart phones, and they are not prepared to deal with the onslaught of materialism, perversion, hyper-sexuality, and adrenalin-inducing content at their fingertips. It shocks, confuses, and breaks down cultural barriers of modesty. For some, this can produce a perception of desperation similar to that of an addict, making some youth willing to do anything to acquire the fantasy world presented in the media—or at least the device that gives them access. (Case in point: one Asian teen was reported to have sold a kidney so he could purchase an iPhone.)
6. In Western cultures social outcasts and other lonely young people can reach a point where they feel intense desperation for love and acceptance. This makes them prime targets for traffickers who search social media for vulnerable individuals and then pose as caring friends and lovers. Initial defenses are down, as most assume the internet is “safe” from personal contact, but in fact social media has become one of the primary ways traffickers find and manipulate targets. Victims are typically “groomed” for an eventual meeting with a handler or trafficker, most often by someone they already know and trust. In some cases, predators falsify profile photos and personal information to deceive. Traffickers also target affluent youth in this way—even those who live seemingly normal lives with normal families, and who are popular among their peers. All it takes is for a savvy trafficker to study personal information on a prospect’s social media pages, create a fake persona to achieve the desired “Wow, you’re just like me!” response, and then build familiarity and trust to ensnare their victim.

Does someone you know fit any of these descriptions of vulnerability? It could be your own child who frequently isolates herself in her bedroom, or spends much of her time on Facebook, Instagram, etc. Maybe it’s the child of a friend that comes to mind. None of these signs means someone is about to be trafficked, so be careful not to jump to any conclusions. Use this information to help you be more alert to the dangers of trafficking for someone you know, and to educate others.

Or perhaps it’s you. Are you drowning in depression, willing to do almost anything to feel alive and wanted? Don’t let your feelings of desperation make you the next victim.

There is hope. We can do a lot to “traffic-proof” ourselves and those we love.

Links:

[What is the Definition of Human Trafficking?](#)

[10 Ways to Protect Your Child from Human Trafficking](#)

