

## **Communities Are Important to End Human Trafficking**

### **By Carolyn DeFord**

You have probably witnessed human trafficking, maybe even know of establishments where prostitution most likely occurs. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. Human trafficking happens not only in casinos and hotels. It also happens in schools and at events like concerts, sporting events, powwows, and car shows. Although human trafficking is a violent crime against individuals, it also affects entire communities.

One reason it is so rampant is human trafficking remains largely hidden. Predators rely on the “blindness” of their community and the shame of their victims. The stigma of being prostituted comes largely from unrealistic Hollywood stereotypes that portray them as complicit criminals. This stigma often prevents victims from seeking help, effectively cutting them off from many available services and further hiding them from community awareness.

Combatting human trafficking starts in the community. It begins with the community learning what it is and how to recognize it. Simply put, human trafficking is controlling another using force, fraud, or coercion to compel that individual to work, provide services, or perform sex acts in exchange for something of value. This might be money, shelter, food, protection, acceptance, trendy clothes, or drugs. Children compelled to engage in commercial sex acts are victims regardless of the presence of force, fraud or coercion.

Traffickers may be the victims’ family members, peers, romantic partners, or potential employers. They control their victims with various methods such as physical or sexual assault, making them dependent on drugs, or taking advantage of their victims’ need for love, safety, and acceptance. They may manipulate them with humiliation, shame, false promises, and threats of harm to them or their family members.

Another factor traffickers exploit is the prevalence of Historical Trauma among minority groups, especially Indigenous people. Historical Trauma has created vulnerabilities at the individual, family, and community levels. Traffickers exploit the weaknesses of people already suffering as victims of Historical Trauma often by playing on their basic needs for housing and food or their emotional needs for love and belonging.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention reports that the average age children are lured into sex trafficking is between 12 and 14. Thus traffickers target the most vulnerable among us: our children, runaways, and youth in foster care. Other vulnerable groups targeted by traffickers are LGBTQ two-spirit people, individuals with low support systems, those with gang affiliations and drug addictions, or those living in poverty.

The good news is this is preventable. Through providing informed services that educate our youth and community members, we can remove the stigma, prevent further victimization, and build safer communities for our future generations.

The language we use is important. It influences our perceptions and changes the way we look at things. Looking at human trafficking through a victim-centered lens allows us to see prostitutes for what they are, victims who have been forced into sex trafficking by violence, lies, and manipulation.

We are a close-knit community with strong natural protective factors ingrained into our way of life. These tools and resources are available to protect our people. We just have to take off the blinders that prevent us from seeing the whole picture. Through primary prevention, like in the “Babies Up the River” story, we need as a community to start upstream in protecting our children instead of waiting until they’ve already been tossed into the river of sex trafficking.

Community events that create safe spaces to build relationships and strengthen social supports reduces victimization and re-enforces the resilience of our young people. Youth programs teach young people to recognize and respond to signs of potential exploitation. These programs can be implemented in schools, youth centers, after school activities, camps and other peer groups. Additionally, government agencies and Tribal Councils are creating legislation and codes to equip communities with the tools they need to respond.

However, for these tools to be effective, vigilant community action is required. Traffickers make it their job to know how and where to operate undetected. They understand our policies, laws, social customs, and who is who, so they can target our weaknesses and exploit our most vulnerable.

This is our home. No one loves our community and people more than us. And no one has more at stake, considering the threat to the safety and wellbeing of our community posed by human trafficking, than our children.

If you believe you are the victim of a trafficking situation or have information about a potential trafficking situation, call the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) at 1-888-373-7888. NHTRC is a national, toll-free hotline, with specialists available to answer calls from anywhere in the country, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.