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Identifying Coercion to Prevent Human Trafficking of At-Risk Youth in Duval County, Florida

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COUN 6785: Social Change in Action:
Prevention, Consultation, and Advocacy

Social Change Portfolio:

**Identifying Coercion to Prevent Human Trafficking
of At-Risk Youth in Duval County, Florida**

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OVERVIEW

Keywords: Coercion, Prevention, Human Trafficking, At-Risk, Youth, Teens, Adolescents, Duval County, Florida

[Identifying Coercion to Prevent Human Trafficking of At-Risk Youth in Duval County, Florida]

Goal Statement: Preventing at-risk youth, adolescents, and teenagers from human trafficking victimization.

Significant Findings:

Duval County faces the ongoing public health issue of human trafficking at-risk youth. At risk youth can be identified based on risk and protective factors identified through the social-ecological model. Individual risk factors may include child maltreatment, sexual abuse, and exposure to antisocial behaviors throughout childhood. Children with increased exposure to child abuse and maltreatment will escape their homes and engage in endangering behaviors with peers and adults exhibiting antisocial and coercive behaviors. Institutional, Community and Public Policy in Duval County has made advances in treating youth trafficking victims; however, barriers continue to emerge. Child victims of human trafficking receive treatment after victimization is inflicted, therefore, prevention interventions are to be implemented to decrease child abuse and maltreatment within the family system. Promoting prevention of human trafficking victimization with research-based family child maltreatment prevention programs and adolescent social skills training can increase proactive behaviors and improve social skills to identify behaviors of coercion, reducing risk of human trafficking victimization.

Objectives/Strategies/Interventions/Next Steps: Increasing at-risk youth's awareness of coercive behaviors utilizing Social Skills Training with the TPB Model. Educating families about child development and parenting strategies through Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs. Enforcing human trafficking training and prevention interventions to institutional personnel. Promoting public awareness of human trafficking in Duval County through community outreaches and public organizations. Passing strict public policies to identify and apprehend traffickers through technological platforms.

INTRODUCTION

[Identifying Coercion to Prevent Human Trafficking of At-Risk Youth in Duval County, Florida]

On Wednesday, June 18, 2025, the National Child Protection Task Force announced the success of their first-ever Northeast Florida missing and endangered children's rescue operation (Yauger, 2025). After three days of investigation and collaboration, local and federal agencies were praised for their hard work locating 23 children across Putnum, Clay, Nassau, St. Johns, Flagler, and Duval County (Heatherdark, 2025). Duval County, or Jacksonville, Florida, is the largest geographic county in Northeast Florida, with a land area of over 840 square miles and a population of 1.9 million residents in over 200 neighborhoods (*About Jacksonville, 2025; Demographics, 2025*).

Located along 25 miles of the St. Johns River and the Atlantic Coast, the city of Jacksonville is known for its cultural diversity, southern climate, and affordable housing (*About Jacksonville, 2025*). Although Duval County has above average community conditions, Jacksonville has a below average rating in public health (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2018). One major public health issue Duval County face is human trafficking, a hidden slave-

trading industry where victims [adults and minors] are abducted and exploited for profit (*The Florida Senate BILL ANALYSIS and FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT*, n.d).

Human trafficking consists of two categories: sex trafficking and labor trafficking (*The Florida Senate BILL ANALYSIS and FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT*, n.d). Sex trafficking is the coercion of a victim to perform sexual acts, labor trafficking is the coercion of a victim to perform acts of slave labor; both are conducted by a trafficker or abuser of the victim (*The Florida Senate BILL ANALYSIS and FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT*, n.d). Unfortunately, victims of human trafficking receive treatment after the traumatic experience occurred to prevent revictimization (*2024 the University of South Florida Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Risk to Resilience Research Lab Program Budget Management and Support Funding Sources Legislative Support Technology Support*, 2025).

The goal for this Social Change Portfolio is to prevent individuals from victimization of human trafficking by identifying behaviors of coercion, therefore, treatment and intervention should be implemented before targets are victimized, increasing awareness of perpetrators and strengthening community support (*The Florida Senate BILL ANALYSIS and FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT*, n.d). As Kevin Brazetti, CEO of the National Child Protection Task Force, states “we believe real change happens through collaboration, kindness, and relentless determination...we built trust, strengthened systems, and showed what’s possible when people put purpose over ego. The momentum we created here doesn’t end—it becomes a model for what every community can do.” (Heatherdark, 2025).

PART 1: SCOPE AND CONSEQUENCES

[Identifying Coercion to Prevent Human Trafficking of At-Risk Youth in Duval County, Florida]

Scope

According to the Continuum of Care Model, preventions are interventions are designed to be administered before the presence of a medical or mental health condition, treatments are interventions provided to individuals with presenting medical or mental health conditions (Parents Lead, n.d.). Trafficking prevention starts with educating individuals about their rights, collaboration within the community, and providing support to vulnerable populations, decreasing risk of vulnerability to traffickers (Polaris, 2025).

Between June of 2023 and July of 2024, the Florida Abuse Hotline received 2,137 reports; 80.67% of the reports identified female victims, 17.55% identified male victims, and 1.78% were unspecified (Harris, S. & Desantis, R. 2024). According to Harris and Desantis (2024), 1,965 of the reports were classified as Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) cases. A report from the *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: 2025* claims, out of the 379 CSEC victims, 91% were female, 49.6% were white, and 68.9% were aged 15 and over (2025). Harris and Desantis (2024) state that 349 of the 1,965 victims were from Northeast Florida; 21 were Duval County residents (2025).

Consequences

Although there is a profile for trafficking vulnerability and recruitment, victims' experiences vary depending on the grooming and trafficking process (Gezinski, 2021). Traffickers groom their victims to comply by utilizing multiple combinations of manipulation, including reward and punishments, acceptance and humiliation, and freedom and captivity, forming trauma bonds (Gezinski, 2021). Trauma bonds associate both trust and fear with the

trafficker, causing victims to believe their security, validation, love, and acceptance come from the individual who also threatens their life, safety, and autonomy if they do not comply (Gezinski, 2021). Traffickers will also use substances, intimidation, psychological and physical violence on the victim and others, forcing victims to become dependent on them for their primary needs (Giffords & Waters, 2019; Gezinski, 2021).

While a victim is experiencing abuse or being held captive, they can develop Stockholm Syndrome, a survival mechanism viewing their captor or abuser from a positive perspective (Giffords & Waters, 2019). Traffickers rely on the victims' Stockholm Syndrome to maintain control by enforcing psychological and physical torment (Giffords & Waters, 2019). Throughout their captivity, minor victims are called 'child prostitutes' or 'adolescent sex workers' by their abuser or trafficker, manipulating them to believe they deserve the treatment they receive (Abrams et al, 2020).

By the time victims are rescued, they're convinced they are responsible for their circumstances, viewing themselves as accomplices instead of victims of their abuser or trafficker (Giffords & Waters, 2019). According to Tomoda et al. (2024), child maltreatment and abuse increase cortisol levels, expanding a child's risk of abnormal brain growth, cognitive dysfunction, and delayed social-emotional development. Children with history of childhood abuse and maltreatment are also at risk of developing maladaptive behaviors and psychiatric disorders including antisocial behaviors, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, dissociative identity disorder, reactive attachment disorder, self-harm, suicidality, and cognitive impairment (Tomoda et al., 2024).

PART 2: SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

[Identifying Coercion to Prevent Human Trafficking of At-Risk Youth in Duval County, Florida]

There is no generalized profile of a human trafficking victim; however, there are social-ecological risk factors of human trafficking. Risk factors are traits that may increase chances of harmful or negative circumstances; protective factors may increase chances of beneficial or positive circumstances (SAMHSA, n.d). According to the Centers for Disease Control (2024), the social-ecological model helps practitioners understand and identify risks of adverse life experiences and which prevention-interventions are needed.

Learning which risk and protective factors of potential human trafficking victims can help identify and prevent individuals from victimization (SAMHSA, n.d.). Anyone with a knowledgeable understanding of the social-ecological model can prevent minors from human trafficking victimization by identifying their risk factors of adverse life experiences (Greenbaum et al., 2018). According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, an individual's risk and protective factors can derive from individual, relationship, community, and social-level influences (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Individual-Level

Individual-level factors identify personal characteristics and history, including age, education level, socioeconomic status, and history of substance use and abuse, as potential risk factors for adverse life experiences (CDC, 2024). A study conducted in the Florida Juvenile Justice System discovered children who experienced sexual abuse in childhood are at greater risk of human trafficking victimization (de Vries et al., 2024). According to de Vries et al. (2024), girls are 2.52 times at risk of victimization and boys are 8.21 times at risk; boys are at higher risk due to increased exposure to antisocial behaviors in childhood. Children who have experienced

sexual abuse and neglect are more likely to elope from their homes, increasing their risk of substance abuse, engaging in antisocial behaviors, and human trafficking victimization (de Vries et al., 2024).

Prevention at the individual level can promote proactive behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs, decreasing risk from adverse life experiences (CDC, 2024). Individual-level prevention tactics may include skills training and education programs to identify behaviors and implement problem-solving strategies in a target population (CDC, 2024). Understanding the individual-level risks can increase awareness of identifying potential signs of coercion behaviors, preventing risk of human trafficking (de Vries et al., 2024).

Relationship-Level

Relationship-level factors are identified behaviors or experiences within an individual's interpersonal relationships including peers, family members, and partners, as risks for adverse life experiences (CDC, 2024). Children from families with a history of violence, substance abuse, incarceration, and antisocial behaviors can develop animosity against their parents, guardians, or caretakers, becoming vulnerable to coercion and manipulation from peers and adult perpetrators (de Vries et al., 2024). Children from dysfunctional family dynamics can develop relationships with groups or peers that participate in antisocial behaviors (de Vries et al., 2024). Children engaging in antisocial behaviors are at risk of endangering themselves, increasing their risks of being targets of sexual victimization and human trafficking (de Vries et al., 2024). Female human trafficking victims with a history of interpersonal violence have reported less access to prevention interventions (de Vries et al., 2024).

Relationship-level prevention may also include programs promoting proactive relationship skills and family dynamics, including communication skills, healthy boundaries, and

recognizing positive support systems (CDC, 2024). Through these programs and mentorships, family members and peer group members can identify their relationship-level risk factors and address them through prevention-based interventions (Greenbaum et al., 2018). Relationship-level human trafficking prevention interventions can be provided by practitioners during sessions or through promotional materials including community outreaches, brochures, flyers, and social media (Greenbaum et al., 2018).

Community-Level

Community-level identifiers are found within the environment of the individual, which may include neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces (CDC, 2024). Children who are most at risk of becoming victims of human trafficking come from communities of low socioeconomic status (Twis et al., 2025). Communities with a high population of families on welfare or unemployment, have low-level education, and live in rental properties with a high population density are more vulnerable to human trafficking victimization (Twis et al., 2025). Environments with high violent crime rates and social discourse have poor community support, few local crime reports, and low rates of human trafficking arrests (Twis et al., 2025).

Community-level prevention encourages community members to engage with each other, addressing district needs, and creating a safe environment to grow (CDC, 2024). Practitioners and community members should have local knowledge of public workers and networks they can refer to or collaborate with, providing sources to citizens at risk of human trafficking victimization (Greenbaum et al., 2018).

Societal-Level

Social-level identifiers of social and cultural factors, including public health, education, and health expectations and norms against adverse life experiences (CDC, 2024). A common

social-level risk factor of human trafficking is limited awareness (Greenbaum et al., 2018). Limited discussion regarding human trafficking awareness discourages communication across multiple social-ecological levels (Greenbaum et al., 2018). There is finite access to research-based prevention interventions against human trafficking, restricting knowledge and collaboration between practitioners and networks (Greenbaum et al, 2018).

Social-ecological prevention may include promoting normalizing discussions about human trafficking and prevention interventions (CDC, 2024). Prevention interventions include accumulating access to resources, providing environments safe for open discussion, sharing risk factor information and prevention services to areas in need (CDC, 2024). Social areas that can collaborate, promote prevention interventions, and resources may include; mental health services, schools, community centers, libraries, healthcare centers, and government organizations (Greenbaum et al., 2018).

PART 3: THEORIES OF PREVENTION

[Identifying Coercion to Prevent Human Trafficking of At-Risk Youth in Duval County, Florida]

Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs

Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs are shown to decrease new and ‘at-risk’ parents’ risk of child maltreatment, neglect, and abuse (Pinquart and Teubert 2010 as cited in *Practice Profile: Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs*, 2019). During the early stages of parenthood, new parents often experience symptoms of physical exhaustion and psychological distress, increasing risk of postpartum depression (*Practice Profile: Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs*, 2019). ‘At-risk’ parents are new parents with risk vulnerabilities which may include; teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, single-parenthood, intimate partner violence, poor mental

health, low socioeconomic status, low education, and history of child maltreatment, neglect, and abuse (Van der Put et al., 2017; CDC, 2019; Vlahovicova et al., 2017 as cited in *Practice Profile: Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs*, 2019). Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs educate new and ‘at-risk’ parents on early childhood development, coping skills, and parenting tactics supported by social learning theory, the coercion hypothesis, and attachment theory (Bandura, 1971; Patterson, 1982; Bowlby, 1969 as cited in *Practice Profile: Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs*, 2019).

Social learning theory claims that behaviors are learned through social interactions and observations; therefore, during their early stages of development children model the behaviors of their caregivers (*Practice Profile: Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs*, 2019). Based on Social Learning Theory, the coercion hypothesis claims children with prolonged exposure to abuse, and coercive behaviors will develop similar maladaptive and antisocial behaviors as their parents or caregivers (*Practice Profile: Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs*, 2019). Parents with abusive or coercive behaviors view their children as defiant and require severe disciplinary approaches to comply (*Practice Profile: Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs*, 2019). Therefore, children’s reacting against their parents and caregivers engage in an ongoing cycle of abuse and coercive behaviors, developing harmful attachment styles in the parent-child relationship (*Practice Profile: Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs*, 2019).

Attachment theory claims that children will develop an attachment style based on their upbringing during the early stages of childhood (*Practice Profile: Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs*, 2019). Attachment style is the security measure of the relationship between a child and their parent or caregiver (*Practice Profile: Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs*, 2019). There are three attachment styles, secure attachment, anxious-resistant

attachment, and avoidant attachment; children with history of maltreatment, neglect and abuse develop lifelong avoidant attachment styles (*Practice Profile: Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs*, 2019).

Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs include individual and/or group interventions that promote attachment security, progressive parenting skills, and child social development (DeWolff and van Ijzendoorn, 1997 as cited in *Practice Profile: Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs*, 2019). New and ‘at-risk’ parents that participated in Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs have shown increased security attachment styles with their children during the first six months (*Practice Profile: Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs*, 2019). Interventions can be sent to family homes or can be provided by healthcare practitioners or community workers (*Practice Profile: Preventive Child Maltreatment Programs*, 2019).

Social Skills Training for Preventing Antisocial Behaviors of Youth

Social Skills Training for Preventing Antisocial Behaviors of Youth promotes proactive social behaviors in children, adolescents, and teens (*Practice Profile: Social Skills Training for Preventing Antisocial Behavior of Youth*, 2021). Youths exhibiting aggression are more likely to participate in antisocial behaviors (*Practice Profile: Social Skills Training for Preventing Antisocial Behavior of Youth*, 2021). Social Skills Training for Preventing Antisocial Behaviors of Youth teaches children how to navigate their aggression and social stressors through self-control, perspective taking, and prosocial behaviors (*Practice Profile: Social Skills Training for Preventing Antisocial Behavior of Youth*, 2021). Social skills training programs can decrease dangerous, criminal, delinquent, oppositional, or aggressive behaviors in at-risk juveniles and adolescents (*Practice Profile: Social Skills Training for Preventing Antisocial Behavior of Youth*, 2021).

Social Skills trainings can be applied to individual and group sessions and in all settings including, at home, schools, and communities, and has shown to be effective in combined trainings (*Practice Profile: Social Skills Training for Preventing Antisocial Behavior of Youth*, 2021). Youths, parents, teachers, and community members can learn how to identify and prevent antisocial behaviors by implementing Social Skills Trainings with the Theory of Planned Behavior Model (TPB) (*Practice Profile: Social Skills Training for Preventing Antisocial Behavior of Youth*, 2021; National Cancer Institute, 2005). The TPB Model compares the individual's behavior with their attitudes, beliefs, and intentions, to perceive controllability (National Cancer Institute, 2005).

Combining TPB model with the social skills training shows that at-risk youths' behaviors are enforced through their attitudes (i.e.-aggression, animosity, resentment) and their belief that the behavior(s) meet the expectations of their audience (i.e. - peers, adult/trafficker) (National Cancer Institute, 2005; *Practice Profile: Social Skills Training for Preventing Antisocial Behavior of Youth*, 2021). Additionally, at-risk youths can gain 'perceived behavioral control' through this model, understanding their behaviors intentions are influenced by external factors (i.e.- antisocial behavior(s) gains peers/adults/traffickers' validation/approval) (National Cancer Institute, 2005; *Practice Profile: Social Skills Training for Preventing Antisocial Behavior of Youth*, 2021). Therefore, implementation of the Social Skills Training for Preventing Antisocial Behavior of Youth combined with the TPB Model can prevent at-risk youth from engaging in antisocial behaviors, reducing their risk of human trafficking (National Cancer Institute, 2005; *Practice Profile: Social Skills Training for Preventing Antisocial Behavior of Youth*, 2021).

PART 4: DIVERSITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

[Identifying Coercion to Prevent Human Trafficking of At-Risk Youth in Duval County, Florida]

Diversity and Public Health Data in Duval County

According to County Health Rankings and Roadmaps (2018), approximately 51% of Duval County residents identify as female, and approximately 22% are children, ages 18 and under. Between 2019 and 2023, approximately 34% of Duval County child residents lived in a single-parent household, and approximately 19% lived in poverty (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2018). Of the child residents living in poverty, 33% are Black, 24% are Hispanic, 18% are Native American, 12% are Asian, and 11% are White in Duval County (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2018). Approximately 10% of Duval County teens and young adult residents, ages 16 to 19, are not enrolled in school or employed (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2018).

Subgroup: Youth with Vulnerabilities

Youth and teens with ‘high-risk’ vulnerabilities are more likely to be targeted as potential human trafficking victims (Franchinco-Olsen, 2019). According to Franchinco-Olsen, vulnerabilities are factors that can decrease the mental, physical, social, and emotional security of an individual; increasing risk of human trafficking victimization (2019). High-risk vulnerabilities may include various severities of child abuse, domestic violence, peer violence, homelessness, education level, minority status, mental health disorders, substance abuse, child maltreatment, LGBTQ+ identity, hunger, poverty, criminal history, and child neglect, causing instability in the child’s environment and insecurity in their relationships with their primary caregivers (Franchinco-Olsen, 2019; Jaeckl & Laughon, 2021). This can lead to youth running

away or engage in antisocial behaviors, increasing their vulnerability factors and risk of human trafficking victimization (Franchinco-Olsen, 2019).

Runaway youths may engage in risk-seeking behaviors to survive; this may include establishing relationships with peers or adults exhibiting antisocial behaviors (Franchinco-Olsen, 2019). Youths with exposure to antisocial behaviors may engage in criminal activity (i.e., peer violence or theft) or 'survival sex' (i.e., exchanging sex for food and goods) (Franchinco-Olsen, 2019; Jaeckl & Laughon, 2021). Youth and teens that have experienced sexual abuse develop increased sexually active behaviors to compensate for the trauma of the abuse and regain empowerment (Franchinco-Olsen, 2019). However, sexual abuse is a risk factor for minors to run away and engage in 'Survival Sex' to obtain their primary needs (Franchinco-Olsen, 2019).

'Survival Sex' is defined as, the exchange of sexual acts for foods, drugs, shelter, and goods (Franchinco-Olsen, 2019). However, since minors cannot legally give consent, they are categorized as commercial sexual exploited children (CSEC), exchanging sexual abuse for necessities and validation from their abusers or third-party members, thereby increasing their vulnerability for human trafficking victimization (Franchinco-Olsen, 2019). Vulnerable youths engaging in 'survival sex' are less likely to seek help because of the coercion and power dynamic from the abuser (Franchinco-Olsen, 2019).

Culturally Relevant Prevention

According to Reese and Vera (2007), cultural relevance is defined as alignment with the beliefs, values, and goals of a target population or culture. Preventive interventions are programs with treatments that target onset factors of potential mental or physical conditions (Reese & Vera, 2007). Preventive interventions with cultural relevance are programs that stall the development of mental and physical conditions associated with specific populations and cultures

(Reese & Vera, 2007). Some prevention interventions I have identified include: enforcing stronger child rights laws, regular family counseling and coaching on proactive behaviors and healthy family systems, increased screenings of children during intake, documenting onset patterns of child abuse, and allowing medical and legal officials to interfere during the early stage of abuse (Greydanus et al., 2025)

Ethical Considerations

According to the ACA Code of Ethics Section A.2.c, counselors are required to provide culturally appropriate treatment (2014). Although the population of ethical minority youth varies among studies, counselors should be knowledgeable about vulnerability factors among youth clients (ACA, 2014; Jaeckl & Laughon, 2019). Another ethical consideration is Section A.2.d., which requires counselors to obtain informed consent from the minor's parent or guardian. However, there is a chance that parents or guardians may refuse treatment unless mandated by a court of law (ACA, 2014). If a counselor confirms that the parents or guardians are a danger to the minor, Section B.2.a. states that if the counselor (and supervisor) confirms indication of abuse or potential harm to the identified client (minor), counselors are mandated to report to third-party organizations in their jurisdiction (i.e.- child protective services) (ACA, 2014).

A third ethical consideration would be Section A.7.a., counselors are to advocate for clients from vulnerable populations, children with vulnerabilities are significantly at risk or harm, and may require increased advocacy for preventative intervention from the counselor (ACA, 2014). A final ethical consideration would be Section A.1.d.; counselors may include the client support system with their consent; therefore, at-risk minors can include peers, family members, or groups of at-risk youth to build connections and gain insight throughout their treatment (ACA, 2014).

PART 5: ADVOCACY

[Identifying Coercion to Prevent Human Trafficking of At-Risk Youth in Duval County, Florida]

Advocacy against human trafficking is commonly enforced after victims are rescued and traffickers are apprehended; however, barriers among institutions, communities, and public policies can be identified and reformed to advocate prevention of human trafficking. According to the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (2015), institutions are organizations that provide support and services to community members. Institutional barriers restrict support to marginalized community members, forcing them to seek support from alternative organizations with limited resources and opportunities, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation (Carpenter, 2019). Institutions can create barriers for marginalized populations if they have limited funding, legislative restrictions, or inefficient identifiers for services influenced by their partnerships or third-party stakeholders' views (Gezinski, 2021; Carpenter, 2019).

Institutional Barriers

Law Enforcement Agencies

Institutions with partnerships across public, private, nonprofit, and community organizations can have conflicting views and knowledge regarding human trafficking prevention and interventions (Carpenter, 2019). Law enforcement agencies view human trafficking as a criminal organization and can mistake trafficking victims as co-perpetrators (Gezinski, 2021; Carpenter, 2019). According to Gezinski (2021), youth human trafficking victims are coached on how to respond to law enforcement officers, which can make identifying victims challenging. Law enforcement has reported viewing youth human trafficking victims with a criminal history

as ‘repeated offenders’ or ‘delinquents’ and views their arrests as necessary to protect the victim and obtain testimony against the trafficker (Gezinski, 2021).

Victims avoid law enforcement, convinced they are protecting themselves and their trafficker from apprehension (Gezinski, 2021). Although youth victims are protected in the United States, approximately 40 percent of apprehended youth victims are treated as criminal offenders by law enforcement, reducing their chances of receiving proper services (Gezinski, 2021). Survivors of human trafficking expressed feelings of shame and fear seeking help from law enforcement (Gezinski, 2021). Some survivors have experienced revictimization from law enforcement due to a history of maltreatment, disbelief, denial of services, lack of safety, humiliation, interrogation, and/or retaliation (Gezinski, 2021).

Residential Care Systems

According to Giffords and Waters (2024), youth in the foster care, group homes, and welfare systems have high exposure to adverse childhood experiences, increasing their vulnerability to human trafficking. Youth in residential care systems have experienced sexual abuse and dysfunctional family systems, developing behavioral challenges caused by exposure to trauma (Giffords & Waters, 2024). Youth not receiving treatment by trained or experienced staff reduce their chances of improving their social-emotional regulation skills, increasing their risk of seeking caregivers or peers with similar adverse behaviors or experiences (Giffords & Waters, 2024).

Giffords and Waters (2024) claim that many caregivers have become traffickers, sexually abusing or exploiting the youth under their care, avoiding detection from the residential care system. Unfortunately, youth victims of human trafficking under the residential care system will

run away from their residential homes and continue engaging in survival sex until adulthood, limiting their access to educational support and occupational care (Gezinski, 2021).

Social Service Organizations

According to Gezinski (2021), youth victims of human trafficking are less likely to seek out social services because prior victims have reported negative experiences with staff. Recent studies have shown that victims of human trafficking who social service organizations contacted were threatened with criminal action against peers and adults within their interpersonal support system, discouraging them from receiving further aid (Gezinski, 2021). Social service organizations across different jurisdictions cannot collaborate when addressing human trafficking cases (Carpenter, 2019).

Most social service workers, including law enforcement, attorneys, judges, and Child Protective Services, view youth trafficking victims as ‘criminals’ or ‘delinquents’ (Gezinski, 2021). Based on their views, agency workers will miscommunicate the status of the victim, labeling them as ‘child prostitutes’, ‘delinquents’, or ‘sex trafficking victims’, interfering with collaboration between agencies (Gezinski, 2021). Child Protective Service employees have reported limited awareness and knowledge of trafficking laws or an inability to refer victims to proper services (Gezinski, 2021).

Although most victims express a desire to leave the trafficking, victims require proper support, including education, employment, and housing (Gezinski, 2021). Youth victims who have received services are often revictimized in the system by mandated in-person testimony statements at their traffickers' trial, causing re-traumatization and treatment regression (Gezinski, 2021).

Community Barriers

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Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies define community as the standards and expectations of a society with shared beliefs, values, and norms (2015).

Community barriers are regulations within a society that oppress others from growth and development (Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, 2015). Human trafficking depends on divided communities built on poverty, racism, classism, sexism, inequality, crime, and violence (Carpenter, 2019). Gezinski (2021) identifies public awareness, denial of victimization from youth targets, and covert recruitment and victim identification tactics by traffickers as community barriers to human trafficking prevention.

Public Awareness

In the late 20th century, society believed that human trafficking victims were identified as virgin Caucasian girls targeted by immigrants trading their chastity for profit; however, recent studies have shown there is limited public awareness of human trafficking victims and intersectionality (Abrams et al., 2020). Intersectionality is the combination of marginalized identities, including race, gender, ethnicity, sexual identity, and more (Abrams et al., 2020). Intersectionality increases an individual's risk of vulnerability to be targeted for human trafficking (Abrams et al., 2020). Although public awareness of human trafficking was increasing, society's ideology of human trafficking victims was based on racism and sexism, claiming girls of privileged backgrounds should be protected from early sexual experiences by marginalized groups (Abrams et al., 2020). This public narrative derived focus away from intersectional communities, including LGBT minors and girls of Black, Latin, and Native heritage, increasing their vulnerability to traffickers and prejudice from society (Gezinski, 2021; Abrams et al., 2020).

Despite research supporting the link between intersectionality and human trafficking, public awareness continues to focus on cisgender women as identified victims (Abram et al., 2020). Intersectional populations with trauma and adverse childhood experiences, including child abuse, child maltreatment, neglect, sexual abuse, homelessness, racism, sexism, substance abuse, rejection, and interpersonal homophobia, have an exponential risk of running away and engaging in survival sex for primary needs and goods (Gezinski, 2021; Abrams et al., 2020). According to Gezinski (2021), minors of LGBTQ and ethnic minority youths are two times more likely to have a story of survival sex than heterosexual youths, and transgender youths are six times more likely to engage in survival sex than cisgender youths. Minority youths with diverse stressors and LGBT adolescents facing familial rejection and interpersonal homophobia are more likely to voluntarily engage in survival sex than be recruited by third-party traffickers (Gezinski, 2021). This can be due to lack of access to resources, poor quality services, limited knowledge of survival skills, criminal history, and exposure to violence (Gezinski, 2021).

Recruitment by Peers, Family Members, & Social Media

Human traffickers use coercion, manipulation and abuse tactics, to prevent victims from escaping and reporting and witnesses from interfering with the process (*The Florida Senate BILL ANALYSIS and FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT*, n.d) Victims can be recruited by traffickers within the family system or from peer members of trafficking groups (Gezinski, 2021). A study conducted by Dank et al states that most participants were recruited into trafficking rings by peers claiming to help them (2015; as cited in Gezinski, 2021). Victims have reported relying on their peers for support and protection, offering advice on survival sex and knowledge of the sex industry (Gezinski, 2021). Recruitment tactic traffickers use are social media applications or Dark Web platforms (Giffords & Waters, 2019). Traffickers will create fake social media

accounts and profiles to portray themselves as minors or peers to establish trust with their targets (Giffords & Waters, 2019). Once rapport is built with their targets, traffickers will use technology to control the victims by tracking their locations, arranging transportation, and coercing their victims to comply with their demands (Giffords & Waters, 2024).

Public Policy Barriers

According to the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (2015), public policies are laws enforced by the federal government, state, and local legislature to ensure the continuation of human civilization. Throughout history, public policies have focused on controlling and intervening with women's bodily autonomy and sexuality, and continue to do so (Abrams et al., 2020). Public policies on human trafficking are enforced at all levels; however, government and social workers continue to face barriers when addressing cases with commercially sexually explicit children (Abrams et al., 2020).

According to Abrams et al (2020), most of the former human trafficking policies maintained the ideology that primary victims are cisgender Caucasian girls, criminalizing marginalized and intersectional populations (Abrams et al., 2020). These policies also continue to enforce inhumane practices on minorities, including forced sterilization and/or institutionalization in reform schools for male victims (Abrams et al., 2020). Girl victims were charged with sex related crimes and sentenced to reform schools until they were of 'marriageable age' or 21 years old (Abrams et al., 2020). Other policy barriers include prosecuting victims aged 16 or older as adults instead of being given immunity (Sanborn et al, 2013; Weiss, 2013; Williams, 2017; as cited in Abrams et al., 2020). Young victims continue to be detained, arrested, and prosecuted for crimes associated with their trafficking exploitation as well as sex-related crimes (Abrams et al., 2020). Modern policy barriers continue to target marginalized and

intersectional groups, treating them as criminals instead of victims of commercial sexual exploitation (Abrams et al., 2020).

Institutional- Level Advocacy

According to the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, counselors should advocate for all clients, including marginalized and intersectional populations (2015).

Advocacy is defined as taking action to increase awareness of beliefs and values for marginalized populations (Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, 2015).

Advocacy for youth human trafficking prevention should address all barriers within the institutional, community, and public policy levels (Gezinski, 2021).

Law Enforcement Advocacy

According to Carpenter (2019), preventative action taken by law enforcement can reduce human trafficking cases. Law enforcement and criminal justice agencies are less likely to maltreat and criminally prosecute victims of human trafficking if they are residential youths with advocacy representation, cooperate with police officers, and have no criminal history (Gezinski, 2021). Collaboration between law enforcement and other institutional agencies can refer youth human trafficking victims from the justice system to community or social services (Abrams et al, 2020).

Social Services Advocacy

According to Griffords and Waters (2024), institutional workers and community members should understand how adverse childhood experiences can increase the risk of vulnerability to human trafficking among marginalized and intersectional youths. Advocates for youth human trafficking victims have influenced social service workers to view youths within the sex industry as victims in need of rescuing and rehabilitation (Wahab, 2002, as cited in

Abrams et al., 2020). Social service workers should focus on youth victims' futures, referring them to educational services, safe housing, and occupational opportunities rather than addressing their past sexual experiences (Gezinski, 2021). Youth advocates implore social service and residential care workers to obtain reliable research data on proper prevention and intervention techniques when addressing youth human trafficking cases (Griffords & Waters, 2024). Workers in Child Protective Services require further investigation when addressing youth human trafficking cases (Gezinski, 2021).

Residential Care Systems Advocacy

According to Griffords and Waters (2024), residential care workers should receive human trafficking training on how to identify signs of coercion or ongoing trafficking of youth victims. Workers can access training on the Child Welfare Information Gateway as well as attend outreaches to identify and understand procedures when addressing youth human trafficking cases within their care (Gezinski, 2021). Residential workers should also protect youths in their care by creating a safe environment to live their authentic selves, discuss their adverse childhood experiences, and gain access to safe housing, referrals to trauma-mental health professionals, and healthcare providers (Griffords & Waters, 2019). Health care providers can advocate by influencing policymakers with their shared experiences working with youth trafficking victims, increasing awareness (Thomas-Smith et al., 2020).

Community Level Advocacy

Public Awareness Advocacy

Increasing public awareness on youth human trafficking prevention requires recognition of child adverse experiences and vulnerability factors (Griffords & Waters, 2024). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families'

Office on Trafficking in Persons, not recognizing adverse childhood experiences and intersectionality among youth victims leads to greater risk of trafficking (Griffords & Waters, 2024). Public access to research on adverse childhood experiences and intersectionality can increase public awareness of identifying victims of marginalized and intersectional identities, and prevention procedures can decrease the risk of human trafficking cases (Griffords & Waters, 2024). Since 1992, a study on free public access to trafficking education conducted by former sex workers in Ebonyi State, Nigeria, and Kolkata, India, has shown to decrease up to 90 percent of young girl human trafficking victims (Ezeibe et al, 2019; Jana et al, 2014, as cited in Gezinski, 2021).

Home-visitation Advocacy

According to Gezinski (2021), home-visitations have been shown to decrease sexual abuse of teenage girls with a history of elopement from their primary residence. Families of marginalized and intersectional communities that received one year of home-visitations have increased youths' attendance in school, referrals for mental health services and screening, participation in community events, access to health care providers, social skills training, attending parenting classes, stronger interpersonal bonds, and familial acceptance (Gezinski, 2021). These one-year home-visitation interventions have also decreased youths' frequency of running away, catching Sexually Transmitted Diseases and Infections, self-harm, and substance abuse (Gezinski, 2021). Policies providing marginalized and intersectional communities with access to prevention networks have been shown to decrease the risk of vulnerabilities and human trafficking victimization (Carpenter, 2019).

Public Policy Level Advocacy

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, criminal legislation against human trafficking has been passed in most countries (Gezinski, 2021). At the end of the 20th century, legislation addressing human trafficking was passed in the United States after multiple cases of immigrant trafficking victims were broadcast (Godoy et al, 2016; as cited in Abrams et al., 2020). In 2000, the federal Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA) was passed to declare human trafficking of minors as a federal crime, and commercially sexually exploited minors ages 18 and under are considered victims in the court of law (Abrams et al., 2020). The TVPA 2000 also enforces the prevention, protection, and prosecution approach, harsher sentences for traffickers, youth victim identification, and mandated aid to youth trafficking victims (Abrams et al., 2020).

In 2011, the Law Enforcement Assisted Division (LEAD) program was passed, allowing law enforcement to protect minor trafficking victims and substance users from apprehension and criminal charges (Clifasefi et al., 2017; as cited in Gezinski, 2021). Law enforcement agencies utilizing the LEAD program have reported decreased arrests and increased employment and housing among rescued victims (Clifasefi et al, 2017; Collins et al, 2017; as cited in Gazinski, 2021). In 2014, Florida practitioners, workers, and educators are required to receive training on identifying human trafficking behaviors and interventions (*2024 the University of South Florida Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Risk to Resilience Research Lab Program Budget Management and Support Funding Sources Legislative Support Technology Support*, 2025). Practitioners taking a client's history can identify maladaptive behaviors in children, including running away, sexual behaviors, and substance abuse, as indicators of probable risk of human trafficking (Greenbaum et al., 2018).

In 2014, the Florida State Legislature has passed Bill 7141, enforcing the Florida Department of Children and Families and the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice to work with local agencies responding to reports of human trafficking and utilize screenings to assess care for child victims (*2024 the University of South Florida Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Risk to Resilience Research Lab Program Budget Management and Support Funding Sources Legislative Support Technology Support*, 2025). In 2014 and 2015, the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act and the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act required residential agencies to collaborate with other institutional organizations as well as training in identifying, documenting, assessing, and intervening with at-risk youth or youth victims of human trafficking (Gezinski, 2021).

These acts identify runaways from residential care as at-risk youth for human trafficking, requiring mandated reporting to law enforcement (Gezinski, 2021). In 2018, the safe harbor legislation was passed in approximately 35 states, enforcing protection of at-risk youth or youth victims from criminal prosecution and referring them to social and/or residential services (Barnert et al., 2016; as cited in Abrams et al., 2020). In 2018, the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) were passed, allowing civil legal action against individuals deliberately participating in online trafficking (Griffords & Waters, 2019).

On May 22, 2025, Operation: Rescue Our Children, conducted by Duval County, state, and federal agencies, apprehended 24 men charged with online sexual exploitation of a minor and possession of paraphernalia (*Jacksonville Sherriff's Office*, 2025). For five days, trained detectives made profiles on online platforms including; chat rooms, dating sites, Minecraft, and Roblox (*Jacksonville Sherriff's Office*, 2025). Detectives contacted solicitors; disclosing they

are underaged while receiving explicit messages and pictures from the predator; confirming their intention to exploit a minor. Once detectives confirm contact, the perpetrator is located and arrested (*Jacksonville Sherriff's Office, 2025*). In a press conference, Sherriff T.K. Waters addressed the public *"If you're still outstanding, turn yourself in...If not, we're going to hunt you down. We do not tolerate, under any circumstances, you hurting our kids. We're always there. We're always listening. We're always paying attention. If you're doing it, we're going to catch you, and we're going to bring you to justice."* (*Jacksonville Sheriff's Office, 2025*).

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