

What is the Sexual Violence Justice Institute?

The [Sexual Violence Justice Institute](#) at the [Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault](#) (SVJI@MNCASA) is a national resource for expertise in the criminal justice response to sexual violence. The documents produced by SVJI for STOP Administrators in this three-part series examines key topics for developing an effective response to sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. Part One provides definitions and language necessary for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complexities of this issue.

Context

Developing an effective response to sex trafficking and sexual exploitation has emerged as a priority issue both nationally and at the state level, demonstrated by the enactment of new laws, increased funding, and enhanced collaborative efforts to better serve victims and support the investigation and prosecution of exploiters. No single agency has the capacity or ability to handle all aspects of a response, which requires multi-level, multidisciplinary, and multi-jurisdictional coordination of resources in order to comprehensively meet the needs of victims, and successfully prosecute both buyers and traffickers. By leveraging existing resources, enhancing and expanding existing partnerships between advocacy and other systems partners, and engaging victim/survivors in the design process, multidisciplinary teams can tailor a long-term, sustainable systems response that meets the specific needs of their community.

Expanding the Conversation

Sex trafficking and sexual exploitation do not exist in a vacuum. These harms are fueled – and often accompanied – by physical and sexual abuse, as well as societal harms, such as discrimination based on race, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, economic status, disability, among others. Additionally, cultural norms like the sexualization of minors, the prevalence of the commercial sex industry, and a

tolerance for homelessness intersect with these societal harms to create an environment in which being exploited, or exploiting others (buying or selling), is normalized.¹ An effective response to sex trafficking and sexual exploitation, therefore, goes beyond the basic law enforcement response, and in addition to advocacy and services for victims, prioritizes prevention and strategies for creating communities that are safer and more equitable for all.

Lessons Learned from Minnesota: Expanding the Narrative

Narratives around sex trafficking and sexual exploitation have a significant impact on victim identification, services eligibility, investigative methods, outreach and education, and the overall systems response.

Since the beginning of the global movement against human trafficking, narratives have evolved to reflect an understanding that trafficking is both an international and domestic problem. While the typical portrayal of domestic sex trafficking may be based on real cases, however, it often fails to address complexities and nuances of sex trafficking as it occurs in rural, suburban, and tribal communities compared with their urban/metro counterparts, and overlooks contributing factors such as sexism, racism, economic disparity, and other forms of systemic oppression. Reducing sex trafficking to a single narrative also inhibits the development of a comprehensive systems response to other frequently occurring forms of sexual exploitation, including survival sex; peer recruitment; cases involving adult, male, or transgender victims; and intersections with domestic and sexual violence. Victims who believe services are contingent on the alignment of their experiences with the traditional narrative may feel compelled to alter their own stories of exploitation in order to receive the services they need.

“If I was a cisgender woman, hetero woman gender conforming, I am sure I would get all sorts of assistance from the government but if I was just cisgender colored woman there are still resources for me, there would still be help for me, but I am a mixture, a trans woman of color, I am very limited as to what I can get. I’m seen as a criminal.”

Survivor, *Voices of Safe Harbor*²

Typical Narrative	Expanding the Narrative
<p>A sex trafficking victim finally escapes when one of her traffickers, a 35 year-old black man, beat her so severely she required medical attention. The trafficker and his accomplice, another black man, would approach women in an SUV, comment on their attractiveness, then recruit them with talk of starring in music videos and movies before bringing the women back to their apartment. At the apartment, the two traffickers would coerce the women into prostitution with enticements and physical violence.</p>	<p>A 66 year-old white, male, assistant county attorney recruited victims into prostitution and operated a website connecting wealthy buyers with victims.</p> <p>A homeless youth engages in “gay for pay” – a form of survival sex by which young heterosexual men have sex with older men in order to earn cash for food and other basic living expenses.</p>

STOP Administrators: Changing the Narrative, Changing the Paradigm

STOP Administrators play a critical role in expanding the conversation around sex trafficking and sexual exploitation, promoting a more accurate and comprehensive narrative, and effecting an important paradigm shift in their state’s response to this form of sexual violence.

“You have kids embellishing their stories because they think that’s what they have to do to get services. There’s something seriously wrong with a system that is set up to make victims feel like they have to lie to get help.”

Sex Trafficking Investigator

Key Considerations

Administrators should consider the following when designing grant requests, evaluating proposals, and approving training and awareness materials:

What to Avoid	What to Promote
Language and imagery depicting bound hands, chains, and other obvious forms of “captivity” and abuse, the “sympathetic” victim (young, white, female wanting to be rescued), and portrayals of traffickers that play to racial stereotypes	Awareness and outreach materials that depict the forms of sexual exploitation most likely to occur in a given community, call attention to the demand, and reflect all victims - whether adults or children; male, female, or transgender individuals; U.S. citizens or noncitizens
The use of terms such as “culturally-specific” or “culturally-responsive” without a demonstrated engagement of partners and experts from underserved populations	Intentional integration of cultural responsiveness into the work plan, including the engagement of tribal partners, the LGBTQ community, and communities of color
Limiting the role of survivors to sharing their stories (“tokenizing”)	Survivors are hired to provide expertise and consultation in the actual design of both victim-serving programming and the multidisciplinary response
The use of “sting” operations and other techniques that use the threat of criminal charges to coerce a victim’s cooperation in the investigation of traffickers	Investigative methods that are trauma-informed (e.g., Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview technique) and utilize emerging technologies to lessen the burden on victim testimony and target the demand
Limiting prevention efforts to sex trafficking presentations made to students	Prevention efforts that address demand culture and the systems of oppression that contribute to victim vulnerability

Terms and Definitions

“Commercial sexual exploitation” (more commonly used in the context of minor victims, but can also involve adult victims) is the exchange of any kind of sexual activity for money, drugs, or something else of value (i.e., prostitution), or in exchange for food, shelter, or other basic needs (i.e., survival sex). It also encompasses the use of minors in pornography, stripping, or a sexually explicit performance or photo. *A third person – such as a trafficker or pimp – need not be involved.*³

“Commercial sex act” refers to any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person. *Sex trafficking is a form of sexual exploitation, in which a third party (trafficker or pimp) is involved in the exploitation, whether by profiting from it or by recruiting, transporting, or advertising the victim.*

The term **“sex trafficking”** is generally used to describe the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act. While an individual may be a victim of “sex trafficking” under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, in some situations, eligibility for victim services is limited to victims of a **“severe form of trafficking in persons,”** in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age.⁴

“They only catch the black pimps because they keep using Backpage.com. If they start looking at other websites, they’ll catch the white pimps.”

Survivor/Advocate

Resources

- Federal Strategic Action Plan on Services for Victims of Human Trafficking in the United States 2013-2017, <http://www.ovc.gov/pubs/FederalHumanTraffickingStrategicPlan.pdf>
- A National Overview of Prostitution and Sex Trafficking Demand Reduction Efforts* Michael Shively, Kristina Kliorys, Kristin Wheeler, Dana Hunt, (Report to the Department of Justice) (June 2012) <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/238796.pdf>
- Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center, Human Trafficking Task Force e-Guide (last accessed August 11, 2016), <https://www.ovcttac.gov/taskforceguide/eguide/>
- Minnesota Department of Public Safety, “No Wrong Door: A Comprehensive Approach to Safe Harbor for Minnesota’s Sexually Exploited Youth” (2013) [https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/ojp/forms-documents/Documents/!2012%20Safe%20Harbor%20Report%20\(FINAL\).pdf](https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/ojp/forms-documents/Documents/!2012%20Safe%20Harbor%20Report%20(FINAL).pdf)

References

1. Lauren Martin and Alexandra Pierce, University of Minnesota’s Urban Research Outreach-Engagement Center and Othayonih Research in partnership with the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota, “Mapping the Market for Sex with Trafficked Minor Girls in Minneapolis: Structures, Functions and Patterns” (2014)
2. Hennepin County No Wrong Door Initiative, “Voices of Safe Harbor: Survivor & Youth Input for Minnesota’s Model Protocol on Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Youth” (2015) <http://www.hennepin.us/~media/hennepinus/your-government/projects-initiatives/documents/no-wrong%20door-voices.pdf?la=en>.
3. Ramsey County Attorney’s Office and the Sexual Violence Justice Institute (SVJI) at the Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MNCASA), “Safe Harbor Protocol Guidelines” (2016) www.mncasa.org
4. Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), 22 U.S.C. § 7102(13) (2007)

Contact us with questions or technical assistance requests

Sexual Violence Justice Institute @ Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault
161 St. Anthony Avenue, Suite 1001 | Saint Paul, MN 55103
651.209.9993 | svji@mncasa.org | svji.org