



## Human Trafficking: Root Causes

### Awareness

Human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to control another person for purposes of exploitation. Human trafficking is a global problem—and one of the fastest growing criminal industries in the world, even though it is illegal in every country. Statistics vary widely from different sources. The Secretary General of the United Nations (July 23, 2012 report) stated that 20.9 million persons have been trafficked into forced labor, with 43% of those trafficked for sexual exploitation. The 2020 US Trafficking in Persons report uses the number of 25 million persons. Those figures indicated a presumptive level as actual detected cases are much lower.

As many more people are becoming aware of human trafficking, one of the common questions asked is: “What are some of the reasons that human trafficking is happening?” Broadening awareness and ever-increasing research have identified some common root causes. Human trafficking is ethnically diverse as well as happening to all socioeconomic classes. It strikes all genders and ages regardless of religious affiliations, sexual orientation, or country of origin.

### Why is this happening?

Trafficking has become the most lucrative crime business after drugs (US State Department), because the “merchandise” can be sold over and over again.

### What are the root causes of human trafficking?

What does root cause mean? *A root cause is the basis or reason that results in some action or behavior occurring, it triggers something to happen.*

In general, root causes of human trafficking world-wide include those which are economic, those which stem from social exclusion and gender discrimination, and those which are political, legal or result from conflict.

#### Economic causes may include:

- Systemic poverty
- Economic inequality
- Land reform – large-scale agriculture, resource grabbing, food security/sovereignty, mechanization of agriculture
- Wage and labor repression – migration, unemployment (especially youth), lack of decent jobs or jobs without dignity, supply chain abuse, labor binding agreements, child labor
- Climate change and environmental degradation – rising sea levels, drought, floods, deforestation, commercial overfishing, mining, commodification of nature

#### Social exclusion and gender discrimination causes may include:

- Gender inequality – feminization of poverty, unpaid care work, gender-based wage gaps
- Violence against women and girls – armed conflict, crisis and instability, natural disasters
- Denial of women’s rights to education, health, participation, credit, skills, land/property, and productive assets
- Multiple forms of discrimination – in public, in economic; political, and private spheres, in child marriage, caste systems, racism
- Weakness of social protection -
  - to pass and enforce protective legislation,



- to meaningfully punish perpetrators,
- to provide education or information for awareness, for willingness to report criminal action, for training of law enforcement,
- to form partnerships/coalitions to address the problem.

**Political, legal and conflict causes may include:**

- Corruption – organized crime, border controls
- Increased militarization – armed conflict, civil war, misuse/ineffective use of resources especially in extractives, refugees
- Legal – lack of access to justice, loss of the rule of law, statelessness

(Source: Human Trafficking and the SDG Reports, summarized by Devin Tellatin, Intern, Sisters of Mercy, Mercy International at the United Nations)

**More specifically, sex trafficking and labor trafficking share some common root causes. These include:**

- Poverty
- Lack of education and health care
- Lack of respect for persons
- Undocumented status of immigrants
- A lack of anti-trafficking legislation
- A lack of effective enforcement if such legislation exists
- Profit by those in control or with power

**More particular to sex trafficking, common root causes include:**

- Vulnerabilities from adolescence such as peer pressure or poor self-image
- Violent behavior witnessed in the home and on entertainment and social media
- Drug and alcohol addiction
- Being a runaway
- Disintegration of social protection networks

- A culture that accepts treating people, especially women and children, as objects
- Pornography, promoted and available globally

**Common root causes for labor trafficking include:**

- Ready markets and consumers' demand for cheap goods
- Increasing demand for cheap and exploitable laborers in the construction, agricultural and industrial sectors
- Expenses of providing required benefits to regularly employ workers

Further research, data collection, interviews with trafficked persons and experiences can surface other root causes. Addressing the root causes and finding solutions to them can lead to a reduced demand for trafficked persons, whether for sex or labor.

## Reflection

**What resources from our faith tradition reinforce and strengthen us in our work to end human trafficking?**

*Pope Francis:* "Human Trafficking is a crime against humanity: We must unite our efforts to free the victims and stop this increasingly aggressive crime." (December 12, 2013)

*Leviticus:25:39-43:* If any of your neighbors are reduced to such poverty that they sell themselves to you, you must not treat them as bonded workers. Their status is to be that of hired hands or resident laborers with you, and they will be subject to you only until the jubilee year. They may then leave your service with their children and return to their own ancestral property. You were all bonded workers in Egypt, and I freed you from your bondage. They must not be sold as bonded workers are sold. You are not to work them ruthlessly; you are to revere Yahweh.

Other Scripture passages: *Genesis 37:23-28, Lamentations 5:1, 11, 13, 15, Exodus 21:1-1*

## Faith-Based Resources

The trade in human persons constitutes a shocking offense against human dignity and a grave violation of fundamental human rights. ...Such situations are an affront to fundamental values which are shared by all cultures and peoples, values rooted in the very nature of the human person.

*-Pope John Paul II, Letter on the Occasion of the "Twenty-First Century Slavery-The Human Rights Dimension to Trafficking in Human Beings" International Conference, 2002*

The seventh commandment forbids acts of enterprises that for any reason – selfish or ideological, commercial, or totalitarian – lead to the enslavement of human beings, to their being bought, sold, and exchanged like merchandise, in disregard for their personal dignity. It is a sin against the dignity of persons and their fundamental rights to reduce them by violence to their productive value or to a source of profit.

*-Catechism of the Catholic Church, , paragraph 2414*

Addressing human trafficking remains an elusive goal if the courage to address the dark reality of consumerism feeding the exploitation of vulnerable human beings is lacking. In this regard, it is necessary to recognize that it is extreme poverty which often drives those desirous of a better future into the hands of those preying upon the vulnerability of the poor and the defenseless. These individuals, prompted by a genuine desire to provide for themselves and their needy families, too easily become unsuspecting victims of those who make false promises of a better future in another country or community. Our efforts to address human trafficking are inherently linked, therefore, to our determination to address poverty eradication and lack of equal economic opportunity.

*-Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, permanent observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/holy-see-to-un-on-human-trafficking> May 13, 2014*

## Actions

- LEARN about human trafficking—globally and locally.
- PRAY for victims of trafficking and for an end to this slavery.
- DEMAND slave-free products. Buy Fair Trade products when possible. Some sources for these products include: Ten Thousand Villages ([tenthousandvillages.com](http://tenthousandvillages.com)) and Made by Survivors ([MadebySurvivors.com](http://MadebySurvivors.com))
- ADVOCATE for state and federal legislation that protects victims.
- WORK to find solutions to the problems resulting from the root causes and reduce the demand for persons who are trafficked. Partner with others addressing this tragedy.
- REPORT suspicious activity to the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888 or to your local law enforcement.

## Resources

**Polaris Project**--[www.polarisproject.org](http://www.polarisproject.org). This organization works on eradicating all forms of human trafficking and serves victims. Polaris Project operates a 24/7 national hotline: 1-888-373-7888 or text “BeFree” (233733).

**Catholic Campaign for Human Development: Poverty Education**--<https://www.usccb.org/committees/catholic-campaign-human-development/poverty-education>

**End Child Prostitution and Trafficking**--[www.ecpatusa.org](http://www.ecpatusa.org). This website promotes the Code of Conduct which urges hospitality industry organizations to endorse it, and to train employees to recognize and safely report possible incidences of human trafficking. The Code can be found at <http://ecpatusa.org/wp/what-we-do/tourism-child-protection-code-of-conduct>.

**Mercy Investment Services**--<https://www.mercyinvestmentservices.org/search-results.aspx>. MIS actively works with corporations to improve their policies and identify human trafficking victims within their industries. The resources provided are intended to help you to take an active role in ending this global tragedy.

**Truckers Against Trafficking**--<https://truckersagainstafficking.org/>. Truckers Against Trafficking exists to educate, equip, empower, and mobilize members of the trucking, bus, and energy industries to combat human trafficking. Our goals are to

- Saturate trucking and related industries with TAT materials.
- Partner with law enforcement and government agencies to facilitate the investigation of human trafficking.
- Marshal the resources of our partners to combat this crime.

*In order to protect the identity of trafficking victims, models have been used in identifiable photos.*