



ALLIANCE TO END HUMAN TRAFFICKING

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Human Trafficking: Sex Trafficking of Men and Boys

Awareness

While most people think of women and girls as the victims of human trafficking, men and boys are also at risk. According to a report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (Feb. 2021), around 20 percent of human trafficking victims were adult men and 15 percent were young boys. The reported incidents of boys being victimized has increased 5-fold in the last 15 years.

Victim Stories

Joel Filmore, EdD, is a clinical counselor and was a victim of trafficking in Sycamore, Illinois. As a child who had endured years of racism and sexual abuse in his small-town community, he started drinking at 12.

Filmore's father was Black and largely not around. His mother was white and when she was murdered, he was sent to live with her family, in a home plagued with sexual abuse, incest and racism. "The color of my skin was the predominant variable in my childhood that led to the abuse — sexual, physical and otherwise," he said.

When he was 21, he got trapped in the sex trade. "I got caught up with a sex trafficker, a pimp who forced me out on the streets and got me hooked on crack and heroin," Filmore said. "You have to consider how I grew up. My family told me I was ugly and that I would never amount to anything."

After a vicious beating by his pimp, Filmore said it was he who was arrested — one of the dozens of times he was thrown behind bars. "When you're a street person in Chicago, you are treated less than human," he said.

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Jose Alfaro says he was perfect prey for a sex trafficker because of the color of his skin. The Mexican American youth was 16 years old and homeless after being kicked out of his home because

he was gay. He reached out for help on the internet. He joined a gay chat room and met an older man named Jason Gandy who offered him empathy and a place to stay.

"It seemed like a dream, and at the time, not having anywhere to go," Alfaro says now.

But the dream quickly became a grim reality. Gandy told Alfaro he would have to work in the older man's "massage" business, which was a euphemism for prostitution. Alfaro provided sexual massages to Gandy's clients in his Texas home in transactions that escalated to sexual assault.

Gandy would go on to become the centerpiece of one of the most notorious male sex trafficking cases to be tried in a U.S. federal courtroom. Three of his four documented victims, including Alfaro, were Latino. But at the beginning, Alfaro thought Gandy was just providing a place he could call home.

Many young men have traveled the same path to homelessness and then to sexual exploitation — and young Black and brown men are disproportionately at risk.

"Race plays a major role in human trafficking," said Alfaro, who is 29 and now works as a hair stylist on Boston's Newbury Street.

Why is this happening?

Boys and men who have been trafficked present with issues that are similar to many victims of complex trauma: poverty, sexual abuse, violence or living in a home where substance abuse takes place. Behaviors can include drug use, running away, depression, anxiety and oppositional behavior disorders. Psychologists and others say it's hard to overstate the stigma that surrounds the issue—for victims and for society. "When we think of men, we typically think of men as aggressors," says Joel Filmore. "So, we have the idea that we can't think of men as people who can be coerced."

Another obstacle in treatment is how exploitation and abuse compromises victims' sense of manhood, says Bonnie L. Martin, LPC, a clinical supervisor and consultant in Alexandria, Virginia. "My male clients often believe they should have been man enough to stop the trafficking and abuse from occurring [even if they were a child or teen at the time]," she says. As a result, she



focuses on resilience, helping clients “adjust to life without chaos,” including helping them get jobs and finding places to live—a particularly difficult issue for this population since the vast proportion of emergency beds available for victims of trafficking are for women and girls. To get more beds for men and boys, policymakers need to quantify the problem, yet the underground nature and reluctance of victims to divulge the problem leads to insufficient data to describe the scope of male trafficking, according to Irma Barron, PhD, a professor in marriage and family therapy and a coordinator in the master’s program at Albizu University in Miami.

In a research paper by ECPAT-USA, several informants said law enforcement had little understanding of commercially sexually exploited boys. For example, they believed boys are not pimped, and therefore not in need of services. See how damaging this line of thought can be?

One officer referred to a 15-year-old male found in a motel trafficking sting as a “sex addict” and to another as someone who was “just doing it for the money.” When filing human trafficking reports, they would often ask, “Why couldn’t he get away? He’s a boy.”

The stigma that males should be strong enough to fight off traffickers and thus they cannot be victims also inhibits these men and boys from speaking up when exploitation does happen. Thus, the abuse is highly underreported. This lack of awareness translates to a lack of responsible services available.

Sometimes people associate male prostitution with being gay, instead of being trafficked. Steve Procopio from Surviving Our Struggle—an aftercare center for young male trafficking victims—said this is incorrect. “It’s not an issue of sexual orientation... They think that the boys are in control of what they are doing. They don’t see them as victims.”

Homelessness, another factor in trafficking, leaves youth particularly vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation — more than a third of homeless youth in a 2016 national study conducted by the Federal Administration for Children and Families said they had traded sex for something of value, including money, shelter and food. Hundreds of thousands of young people are living without roofs over their heads or surfing from couch to couch in Massachusetts and across the United States, according to a 2017 study by the University of Chicago.

Many local advocates say they know there are more boys out there, even if they don’t show up in the data. Their stories run the gamut from teens controlled by traffickers including pimps and gang members, to an insidious form of commercial sexual exploitation known as “survival sex,” involving youth exchanging sex for food, shelter, or other goods. Under federal law any youth under the age of 18 involved in the sex trade is considered a trafficking victim.

Action

In recent years, there has been an increase of service providers concerned with the plight of male victims.

- Elisabeth Jackson, executive director of the Boston-based Bridge Over Troubled Waters that works with homeless youth, says too often boys don’t even understand they are being victimized.
- Shaplaie Brooks heads the program in Dorchester, MA called BUILD — Being United In Leading our Destiny. It is the state’s only program focused solely on helping boys, trans females and non-binary youth who are at risk or have been exploited in the sex trade. The program was founded by Steven Procopio in 2014.
- In Florida, a nonprofit has opened what it calls the first safe home for sexually exploited biologically-born males in the nation, The home, which opened in 2017, is run by the faith-based U.S. Institute Against Human Trafficking. The group says it has already cared for about 31 males under the age of 18, the youngest being 10 years old.
- In Texas, a nonprofit animal sanctuary and counseling center called Ranch Hands Rescue is a safe house for sexually exploited and trafficked males, ages 18 to 24. The innovative program connects trauma survivors to “animal assisted therapy” with abused and neglected farm animals who have been rehabilitated.

Resources

- [UN Office of Drugs and Crime 2021 article](#)
- [American Psychology Association: Unseen Victims of Sex Trafficking By Rebecca Fairley Raney](#)
- [Unseen: The Boy Victims Of The Sex Trade, Part I: By Jenifer B. McKim and Phillip Martin, GBH News Center For Investigative Reporting](#)
- [Unseen: The Boy Victims Of The Sex Trade, Part 2: By Jenifer B. McKim and Phillip Martin, GBH News Center For Investigative Reporting](#)
- [Did You Know Men And Boys Can Be Victims Of Sex Trafficking, Too?](#)

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