



Human Trafficking in **AMERICA'S SCHOOLS**



Session 1: What Schools Can Look for and Need to Know About Human Trafficking

Transcript

Ruth Ryder:

Hello, and welcome to session one of this three-part online series devoted to addressing human trafficking in America schools. My name is Ruth Ryder. I serve as Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education at the US Department of Education. I will be moderating this session.

On behalf of all of us at the Department of Education, I want to personally thank you for taking time to participate in this series to learn more about how you can be a meaningful part of the efforts to end labor and sex trafficking of our students. As educators, you are uniquely qualified to notice warning signs of potential trafficking, and you regularly nurture the caring and committed relationships with students that provide them the safety to seek support. You serve an essential function in ensuring our students enjoy a safe, supportive school environment free from the fear of trafficking. Thank you for all you do.

Our team here at the department has been engaged on a variety of fronts to provide timely research-based and survivor-informed resources to those of you doing the great work of safeguarding students every day. Our webpage dedicated to supporting those efforts is shown on the screen now. On this site, you'll find links to recent webinars we have led; a brief addressing how positive behavioral interventions and supports can be used as a vehicle to intervene in sex trafficking; and our seminal guide, Human Trafficking in America's Schools: What Schools Can Do To Prevent, Respond, and Help Students to Recover From Human Trafficking, which the department released in January 2021.

The information contained in that guide informs the contents of this presentation, where we will discuss the risk factors and indicators of child

sex and labor trafficking. The guide continues to be a primary source of timely information on the topic of America's educators.

Though no one wants to believe that trafficking children for sex or labor is a serious problem, we now understand that it is. Trafficking of children takes place throughout the country in urban, suburban, and rural areas. No place is immune. Trafficking children for sex and labor is a particularly heinous crime that can have devastating consequences for children, including long-lasting physical and psychological trauma. Schools can and do play an extremely important role in preventing trafficking and interrupting it when it does occur.

In this session, we're talking about which students are particularly vulnerable to sex and labor trafficking, and the indicators or signs of trafficking that educators and other school personnel should be aware of. So that if a student shows these signs, the school can act to interrupt the abuse and help the student heal.

Joining us for this session is Dr. Deanna Walters from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, who will provide content expertise as a health scientist at the CDC. Dr. Walters is on the intimate partner violence prevention team and participates in a collaborative CDC work group addressing human trafficking. To provide lived experience, expertise, and perspective for this session, we will hear from Jennisue Jessen, a current member of US Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. Full bios for our speakers can be found on the webpage where you access this video link.

To frame our conversation, let's begin with a look at the legal definition of sex and labor trafficking.

Sex trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purposes of a commercial sex act, in which the 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. Note that children under 18 can never be complicit in their own sex trafficking, regardless of whether force, fraud, or coercion is used.

Labor trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services through the use of force, fraud, or coercion, for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.

Let's move now to a conversation with our panelists, starting with Deanna Walters. Let me begin with a few questions for you, Dr. Walters.

Now that we understand how these crimes are legally defined, describe for us how trafficking of children tends to look in the United States today? People may have some misconceptions.

Dr. Deanna Walters: Sure. Thank you, Ruth. I agree. Oftentimes people have misconceptions about what trafficking looks like and the danger in having those misconceptions is that they may be looking in the wrong place. We can be more effective in the way that we help and prevent trafficking if people are more aware of what it actually looks like. So trafficking in the US takes many different forms and does not always fit the narrative that people have in their minds or the stereotypes they often have in their minds.

Minors can become involved in sex trafficking in many different ways. The trafficker isn't necessarily that shadowy scary figure that we think is the person who typically begins the trafficking. It's not necessarily a stranger either. Sometimes it's a person that the student knows and has come to trust that can sometimes be an older boyfriend even. Sometimes it's an acquaintance that they just met who wants to help them somehow, particularly if they're in a position of lower income or any kind of situation where they might be marginalized in some way. The trafficker can also be a family member or someone the family trusts. Traffickers can be of any gender, which sometimes surprises people because they sometimes learn that the trusted woman who was a friend of the family had taken their child under their wing as a way to help their child, but the woman was actually grooming the child for exploitation. So it's important to remember that traffickers can look like anyone.

In labor trafficking, typical victims might be minors who are recent migrants to an area and who might be unaccompanied. So again, they are by themselves and possibly more vulnerable to something like trafficking. Young people who are for a variety of reasons needing to support themselves are also at risk. So people who are homeless, children who are homeless, or not necessarily even sleeping on the streets, but be staying from a friend's house to another friend's house. That's also considered being homeless. Also, children who have become indebted to someone and now feel they are responsible for paying them back or are responsible for paying them back based on what the arrangement was. We also see teenagers who get hired fraudulently onto work crews. So they might end up traveling from town to town selling items or doing things like raising funds for bogus charities that they've been led to believe are legitimate.

Ruth Ryder: Thanks, Deanna. Could you talk a little bit about what life circumstances might make students more vulnerable to being trafficked?

Dr. Deanna Walters: Sure. Over the last 20 years or so, many research studies have informed our knowledge of trafficking risk factors. As we can see, sex and labor trafficking have their own sets of risk factors. Risk factors for sex trafficking include things like: a history of childhood physical or sexual abuse, mental health issues or vulnerabilities, being academically off-track, running away from home, being rejected by family because of their status as an LGBTQ student, and even substance abuse either by the student or the student's parents make them at particular risk. Risk factors for labor trafficking include: recent migration to an area, or unaccompanied status so that the child would be on their own without a guardian or a parent.

But just as important are the risk factors that generally increase children's vulnerability to trafficking in general. Regardless of the type of trafficking, we know that students with a higher likelihood of victimization include things like having previously run away from home, are currently homeless, have been or are involved in the child welfare system or juvenile justice systems. They may have intellectual or developmental disabilities or differences. They may be LGBTQ and part of that community, whether they are out or not to the community. They may have dropped out of school. They may be unaccompanied migrants or are migrant or seasonal workers. Many of these students have faced forms of trauma and discrimination in their past or currently. Traffickers are often targeting them because they have those emotional, physical, or material needs that can be exploited.

Ruth Ryder: Thanks, Deanna. Could we talk a little bit more about trauma and how it can make students vulnerable to exploitation? What kind of trauma do we mean?

Dr. Deanna Walters: Sure. When we use the term trauma, it can mean a lot of different things. So when we're talking about specific risk factors for trafficking, trauma can look like things like poverty, family instability, histories of physical or sexual abuse that are all traumatic for children as we know.

One thing I wanted to mention here is that oftentimes when a child is trafficked, people want to know why they wouldn't just want to go back at home. And it's important to remember that sometimes home is not a safer place or a safe place for that child. So there are reasons why they may be exposed to other people who would exploit them.

One way to think about trauma is to consider what research tells us about the impact on children of ACEs or adverse childhood experiences. ACEs include things like childhood abuse or neglect, and the presence of domestic violence, addiction, or mental illness within the family. So this

doesn't necessarily mean that the child themselves was physically abused, but witnessing domestic or intimate partner violence is also a huge risk factor. There is a correlation between high ACE scores and many poor outcomes for children, including things like involvement in many kinds of violence, including trafficking. So if they tend to have more risk factors or ACEs that combine, it increases their risk of having poorer outcomes later on in life.

Ruth Ryder: Sounds like there's a lot here for school personnel to be aware of. Can major events in the life of the community or a nation make students more vulnerable to being trafficked, for instance, big sporting events, conventions, trade shows, or even the pandemic?

Dr. Deanna Walters: Sure. There are a lot of external risk factors that can raise the risks for trafficking of minors. Some of those external factors include living in a place with large influxes of people who have money to spend such as tourists or temporary workers. Other big events might be sporting events. Like we often hear in the news about how the Super Bowl brings traffickers to a place to explore children. And often what accompanies that as well is when people are going to conferences or big sporting events or something like that. They're leaving where they came from. And so there's sort of this level of they feel anonymity to exploit people in that community. So it's important to remember that there may be people coming in from outside the community that can spend that money and are looking for people to exploit.

Another external factor would be any event that creates stress for families or communities as a whole, such as the downturn of a local economy, loss of jobs, or increase in addiction, or access to alcohol and drugs. Also, anything like an event that tends to isolate students or break down their networks of support. So things like the pandemic can be important because students may not always be seeing each other and keeping in touch as they had been. And then additionally, they're spending a lot more time online and traffickers have gotten really smart about how to target students online by misrepresenting themselves and knowing that there may be times that those children are not accompanied or monitored.

Ruth Ryder: Thanks, Deanna. We've talked about the life circumstances that make certain students more vulnerable to trafficking. Now let's talk specifically about indicators of trafficking, the signs that educators and school personnel may notice about a student that should increase our cause for concern. What are some of the important indicators that school personnel should be watching for?

Dr. Deanna Walters: Some of the indicators specific to sex trafficking include being involved with people engaged in trafficking, which can be hard to tell what that is sometimes. But frequent travel to hotels or motels and or other cities, a sudden decline in their academic performance if historically they had been great students and then suddenly something has changed in the way that they're performing, it can be indicative of a lot of different kinds of traumas, but trafficking is one of them. Also, if it's someone who is exploiting the child that may not have a lot of income, the child doesn't have a lot of income, the trafficker may be providing things like expensive new clothing or other belongings. There may be sudden new hairstyles, nails done. Those kinds of things that the child may not have normally have had before, and suddenly there's a huge change in their appearance. Also, uncharacteristic references to sex or sexual situations, particularly for the child's age if it doesn't seem appropriate, or if previously the student had not engaged in those kinds of references or discussions.

Indicators specific to labor trafficking include things like working for free or for very little money, working long hours that are inappropriate or possibly illegal for people who are under 18. Maybe also when a child accrues debt to an employer while they're working, they may be recruited for a job with the promise of easy money or being responsible for paying for their rent or food or other family expenses. Something that I think happens a lot in the US for sex or labor trafficking is that particularly young women are offered opportunities for things like modeling contracts, or acting, or things that you would assume an adolescent would be interested in having. Things that seem really appealing to them and are promised to them, but when they get involved in the situation, it's completely different.

Some of the most powerful indicators are also overlapping. They include things like exhaustion, depression, or symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, also known as PTSD. They may have poor physical health or malnourishment. They may have physical trauma such as scars or bruises, but not always because the traffickers are typically pretty smart about how to hide those things. So they may not be visible scars or bruises, but they could still be underneath their clothing. If they indicate that they're in pain in some way, it's a good idea to monitor that. Untreated medical issues, such as sexually transmitted infections or occupational injuries or exposure are often common as well. They may have a lack of control over for their money or their personal identification, passports, travel documents, or their personal schedule even.

Another indicator is self-destructive behavior. This is something that can commonly be seen in students who are depressed for other reasons or

experiencing trauma for other reasons. But self-destructive behavior is also really important for students who are experiencing trafficking.

Also, students that are being trafficked are often coached about what to say. They have rehearsed responses to questions that people may ask about their bruises or their work, why they aren't are being paid directly or why they have a debt. So they feel comfortable responding to those very easily. Children who are being trafficked, and even adults who are being trafficked don't tend to recognize that they themselves are being trafficked and often are defensive of their trafficker and are willing to go above and beyond to make their situation sound normal.

It's important to remember that some students who are being trafficked will display none of these indicators. Sometimes students seem to be doing very well often because school is a safe haven for them, and they work hard to fit in and succeed academically. So it's not always as easy to spot as we think it might be. The indicators that I mentioned are just things to keep an eye out for, and that might tip off someone to a situation, but also keep in mind that it can really happen to anyone.

Ruth Ryder: Thank you, Dr. Walters, especially for these helpful indicators that school personnel should be watching for. Jennisue, I'd like to turn to you now.

Jennisue Jessen: Hello. It's nice to be with you today.

Ruth Ryder: Thank you. I'd like to seek your insights and perspective on the content we've covered so far. What's resonated with you about the information we discussed based on your own experiences?

Jennisue Jessen: Thank you. I love the opportunity to enter into this discussion and it is so important to recognize the risk factors and indicators of trafficking. I think one of the things that really impacted me in listening was the emphasis on trafficking doesn't necessarily fit in a box. The child might have all these indicators. They might be depressed, they might be performing in school, or they might be a straight A student. They might come from an unstable background. They might be in a normal middle class, suburban home that appears stable from the outside. And that's what makes identifying trafficking so tricky.

Personally, I was victimized in familial trafficking and came from a well-respected family. So much of the indicators that were discussed weren't necessarily obvious in my situation. My father was an alcoholic. So addiction certainly played a role in my vulnerability, but it was because of that that I spent a lot of time with my grandparents, and my grandfather was my primary trafficker.

Another indicator in my case, wouldn't be that I performed poorly in school. Instead I was the teacher's pet. Like Dr. Walters said, school was my safe haven. That's where I thrived. It was the place that everything was possible and none of the darkness existed. And I loved that. I loved that school can be a place for those that have been traumatized or victimized to find safety, to find refuge, and to work towards a different type of life.

One of the indicators that teachers might have picked up in my case was the expensive clothes. In kindergarten, I got a fur coat for Christmas. And in third grade, I had a diamond ring and I don't know currently any other third graders or kindergartners wearing fur coats or with diamond rings. And those were the direct benefit or rewards from complying with my exploiter, my trafficker.

I love that this conversation is happening. I think what is most important, because it is so tricky to discern, is that educators have their eyes and their hearts open to perceiving what is happening with their students. And that way, they can start connecting the dots where risk factors intersect and make students more vulnerable or more likely to be experiencing abuse.

Ruth Ryder:

Thank you, Jennisue, for sharing your personal experiences. Is there anything else that you'd like to add regarding the risk factors or indicators of grooming and trafficking that would be helpful to schools as they work to respond to child trafficking?

Jennisue Jessen:

I think there's a couple of points that just go one step further than recognizing these risk factors that I would love to highlight just briefly. One would be for educators to set a high standard for respect within their classrooms and within their school. Because the way that you define and express respect impacts the student's self-image, it impacts their confidence and their opinions of future relationships. So if educators are treating their students the way that they hope future partners will treat them, it kind of sets this foundation to distinguish between real respect, real love, and empty promises.

Another thing that educators might do would be to talk freely with their students about sexual abuse. According to the US Department of Justice, someone in the US is sexually assaulted every two minutes, of which 29% are between the ages of 12 and 17. So we're talking middle school and high school kids. So if educators let their students know that if anyone has or ever does hurt them, they can come and talk freely. This is probably the most important thing I think an educator can say. Not assuming that the child or student has not ever been assaulted or

experienced sexual violence, but just leaving the door open for the student to come talk to them about any past or present experience.

The third thing would be to talk openly about sex trafficking within the classroom. Discuss ways that students are targeted for trafficking, letting them know that traffickers specifically try to woo and win the affection of young people through promises of great things. Promises of love, promises of attention, promises of nice things and trips. And we kind of carry this stereotype that traffickers are always men. While the majority of buyers are men, there's actually a growing surge that the traffickers in growing numbers are female. So traffickers can be male, female, and even classmates. Traffickers are now recruiting kids to recruit other kids into sexual exploitation.

And finally, the final point that I would like to emphasize is talking to students about the dangers of social media. The majority of luring into sexual exploitation right now is happening online. Traffickers are using a variety of social media platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and more, many, many more. And what's crucial here to know and understand is there's this growing surge of what we call self-generated child sex abuse material. And so if you don't take nothing else away from what I share right now, the current reports from 2020 are minors who report that they have shared their own nude or sexually explicit photos and videos. Among nine to 12-year-olds, 14% report that they have done that. And among 15 to 17-year-olds, 24% report sharing their own nude or sexually explicit photos and videos. Now that means one in four 15 to 17-year-olds have shared that material, and that is the entry point to further exploitation. Not just online, but in-person sexual exploitation.

I just want to bring that to the forefront of educators minds. Traffickers can be male, female. They're not hiding in the shadows. High school girls are now grooming and recruiting middle school or younger girls into the sex trade and it begins often with self-generated child sex abuse material. So those are the things that I would really like to emphasize for the educators today.

Ruth Ryder:

Thank you so much for those insightful comments, especially for bringing in the concerns around social media and cyber issues, cyber trafficking. I want to thank Deanna and Jennise for your expertise and participation. It's clear you have made and continue to make contributions to the field. And thank you to all of you who are viewing this content and for your interest in this vitally important topic. The US Department of Education is committed to supporting schools as they work to prevent and interrupt instances of human trafficking in schools.

Before we finish, we have a few final thoughts. Here are some of the resources we've identified as central to the information we've covered today. I encourage you to take sometime to explore them in more depth after viewing the content.

As a reminder, there are two other segments in this series. We encourage you to view these sessions as well, to help strengthen your understanding of human trafficking and the response educators can provide.

Finally, as we conclude this first session in our staff development series, I leave you with these reflection questions:

Which pieces of information just shared stand out as content to remember in the future?

As you listen to this session, did any specific students to mind that reflect indicators of potential grooming or trafficking? To whom can you appropriately report these concerns in your building, district, and community? More information about appropriate reporting is contained in session two of this series.

What changes, if any, can you make to incorporate the information presented in this session more fully into your daily practice as an educator?

Please take a few minutes, whether you are viewing this content individually or as a group, to consider each question and engage with colleagues in discussion as needed to process the information today more fully. You may want to pause the content once all questions are visible to allow ample time to reflect and discuss. Thank you once again, for your support of all students, particularly those who at risk of being groomed or trafficked. You can be part of the solution to ending child trafficking. Have a great rest of your day.