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### COVID-19's Impact on Human Trafficking: The Invisible Industry in New Hampshire

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**COVID-19's Impact on Human Trafficking:  
The Invisible Industry in New Hampshire**

**Brittany Dunkle**

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**Honors Senior Thesis**

**University of New Hampshire**

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**Abstract:**

Human trafficking is a modern-day form of slavery that operates on the premise of exploitation, such as forced prostitution and labor, and organ trafficking. This is a global industry resulting in billions. Despite the current global pandemic, COVID-19, putting a halt to many livelihoods around the world, human trafficking will persist, but in conditions that are potentially more harmful for the victims. Victims of trafficking are in an increasingly vulnerable position, and it is important to establish possible mechanisms to protect as many victims and potential victims as possible. Typical risk factors (i.e., poverty, state's interest vs. individual interest, unemployment) are emphasized in the United States, leading to the possibility of higher rates of trafficking with the added risk of a pandemic. Across the country, rates of domestic violence (DV) and intimate partner violence (IPV) have drastically increased. Statistics regarding human trafficking are difficult to produce as it is still considered a new crime, prosecution is slim, legislation varies state-by-state, and the populations are hidden due to much of the work being done in the informal sector. Unlike DV and IPV, many traffickers prey for their victims on the internet. In situations where we feel vulnerable is where a trafficker thrives. With job loss, they will provide employment, shelter, food, among the various basic needs that are necessary for survival. The trafficker becomes the support system, and in many cases, the victim does not even see this as exploitative. Many victims of trafficking are unaware of their situations, as they have received some level of stability from their trafficker, noting the prominence of a trafficker's deception. The risks associated with the COVID-19 lockdown, such as isolation and unemployment, create a double-edged sword, where all people are more vulnerable to trafficking, yet many are still unaware of what trafficking is. As traffickers are so versed in

extrapolating vulnerability, and their tactics are so flexible, I pondered how the anti-trafficking industry adjusted to help victims during COVID-19.

Eight interviews were conducted with key players in the human trafficking industry, discussing the health and human rights of victims of trafficking during the COVID-19 pandemic. I also conducted observations at two webinars that were on the topic of human trafficking during COVID-19. Each interview was transcribed and thematically coded based on qualitative findings. My findings illustrated that victims of trafficking are at a disadvantage if attempting to escape their trafficker during COVID-19. The pandemic has created isolation, limiting the victim from accessing resources and being identified as a victim by others. Masks, as well as telehealth, has created a barrier to disclosure, as well as a sense of depersonalization between victim and advocate. Education efforts from non-governmental organizations have also slowed due to the increased emphasis on managing daily operations during the pandemic. Support is needed from the state of New Hampshire in order to better identify and assist victims of trafficking.

## **Introduction:**

*“A little old lady said, ‘I have a question. I have three granddaughters and a giant front yard with no backyard.’ So when the girls are together, she would let the girls play. But if there was only one granddaughter visiting, she would not let her play. And she didn’t know what to say, how do explain why it wasn’t safe for her. And she asked, ‘how do I handle this?’ And his [former police officer, guest speaker] response was, ‘have you watched the Disney Channel and seen how those girls dress?’ Then a little old lady over here said, ‘I heard that you need to make yourself hard to steal, so you should grab a bicycle and hang on to that bicycle for dear life. Because the guy in the van won’t want to take you if you’re hanging on to a bicycle.’ This is when I went, yeah, right. So I looked at her and I said, ‘How old are your grandchildren? How mature they are is how you know how to gauge what to say to them. And, bicycle thing, the odds of somebody stealing you from a van down by the river is like winning the mega bucks with the Powerball, right?’” (Participant 7)*

Human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery that is invisible, yet impacts the lives of millions of individuals globally. With a crime such as human trafficking, it is difficult to find reliable statistics on the number of victims. According to the International Labor Convention (ILO), in 2016, there were 24.9 million people forced into trafficking around the world. The Global Data Hub on Human Trafficking found that there were 108,613 individual cases of human trafficking in 164 countries, with victims of 175 nationalities thus far in 2021. In 2019, the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline identified 22,326 victims and survivors and 11,500 trafficking situations nationally. Of those trafficked, two-thirds are victims of sexual exploitation, 80% are female, and a third of victims are children (Global Data Hub on Human Trafficking 2021). Yet, in New Hampshire in 2020, there were five individuals charged with human trafficking, and in 2019, there were only 15 cases, and 17 victims identified (Polaris 2020). Some would claim that global and national estimates of human trafficking are underestimates – making room to consider New Hampshire’s identifications do not represent all

victims within the state. This lack of reliable quantitative data found within the anti-trafficking industry calls for the need for qualitative work, in order to humanize those involved in such a human-created and led phenomenon.

During my freshman year of college, I stumbled across a volunteering opportunity on campus pertaining to anti-trafficking. My role at this organization was a barista, but I also served as a point-of-education, which I always felt I could not successfully fulfill. I embarked on independent research with one of my professors on the economics of human trafficking in Southeast Asia, ultimately leading me to decide to study sex work and human trafficking abroad in Copenhagen, Denmark. When I researched programs pertaining to the subject of human trafficking, very few existed, but I found a way to learn about human trafficking through a more globalized perspective at this program. Once I arrived back to the United States, life was normal for three months until the COVID-19 pandemic forced many of us into quarantine and lockdown. My college education became completely virtual, and I still had my learned experience abroad on my mind.

This thesis came to fruition due to a global pandemic that has impacted nearly every American – COVID-19 – and my passion for educating the public on a modern-day phenomenon that can impact any vulnerable, stressed individual. Americans are facing unemployment, the opiate epidemic, homelessness, stress, isolation, on top of many other factors that have been caused or are increasingly strained by COVID-19. Traffickers thrive off of the vulnerability of others, finding ways to support and stabilize their victims, making the victim become dependent on them. Many victims do not identify themselves as such, possibly decreasing the possibility for third-party identification during times of isolation.

Common risk factors of being trafficked include: extreme poverty, unemployment, lack of education, gender based/domestic violence, patriarchal structures and discrimination, lack of appropriate response, and state interests versus the fundamental rights of the individual (Harris and Powell 2020). Those marginalized by race, income, gender identity, sexual orientation and immigration status are more likely to be exploited through human trafficking (Polaris 2020). According to the UNODC (2020), there is a growing body of research claiming that LGBTQIA+ are more vulnerable to human trafficking, distinctly due to a lack of understanding by policymakers. According to this report, young queer folks are the most vulnerable, partly due to their immaturity, but also due to the ostracism that many of these folks face. 20-40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQIA+, while only 5% of the general population does. These factors, among others that come with poverty, make this population a perfect target for traffickers.

Documentation is another major concern and risk factor for trafficking, especially during the pandemic. Those who are needing employment may take more exploitative jobs, or trap those without documentation further into labor trafficking (Polaris 2020). Victims with temporary immigration documents have limited amount of access to healthcare, and when the borders shut down, they were unable to repatriate, even if their documentation expired. Renewal of this documentation is not easy, and many of the services needed to renew these documents have been shut down or are overbooked. Many of these victims were isolated and trapped in the United States when the pandemic hit, and turned to human trafficking in order to survive. Victims are less likely to receive protection or alert law enforcement as they are afraid of the legal ramifications tied to their immigration status (Observation 1). This concern is echoed by the UNODC (2020), as the renewal process for time-limited and immigration documents is difficult, and the healthcare and social benefits linked to these residence permits expire. Some states have

automatically extended all visas, while others have suspended fines or extended medical coverages to all afflicted by these expirations, and is awaiting a decision on their extended stay. It is unclear whether New Hampshire has taken any of these measures. Still, those who do not qualify for these programs, or those who are unwilling to identify themselves to qualify, may find safety and stability with a trafficker who provides them work and a false sense of protection.

In February 2020, the Global Protection Cluster, headed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), led the first globally coordinated conversation about human trafficking after the emergence of COVID-19 (Redfern 2020). This meeting was held due to the ongoing concern for the protection of victims of trafficking. Many of the leading humanitarian organizations lack specialized training for human trafficking and 75% of their offices are closed with the onset of COVID-19, restricting access to thousands of victims. Since the onset of COVID-19, 50% of the World Food Program's fund was cut, ending food distribution in many of the trafficking hotspots globally. According to the Polaris Project (2020), criminal activity has decreased worldwide, but due to the nature of sex trafficking, it is impossible to quantitatively analyze the scope of the crime with, or prior to, the onset of COVID-19. Polaris (2020) suspects that victims of sex trafficking are facing more abuse, yet less help is available due to the number of closures associated with lockdowns. Furthermore, human trafficking is often an invisible crime, making the identification of victims challenging. Many are trafficked into unregulated sectors that are not easily accessible, and organized crime can often "hide its operations in plain sight" (UNODC 2020). Victims often are unwilling or unable to report their exploitation and law enforcement often lack the training to detect crimes such as human trafficking.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2020) responded to the pandemic by implementing seven resources to anti-trafficking organizations: (1) development of tools to



evaluate the pandemic's impact on essential services for victims, (2) grant funding to NGOs to offer services to victims who need support, (3) facilitating cross-border cooperation, (4) supporting anti-trafficking units to procure PPE, (5) researching the impact of the pandemic on victims of trafficking and the operations of organized crime groups, (6) establishing a Women's Leaders Network that will look at the vulnerabilities of women to trafficking during COVID-19, and (7) offering courses against trafficking, free of charge, in different languages. Although these resources are impactful, many will go to established anti-trafficking mechanisms that already provide shelter and direct services to victims of trafficking. The UNODC also provided recommendations for anti-trafficking agents. This included continuous monitoring of COVID-19 responses, the guarantee of human rights-based response to trafficking of human beings including access to healthcare and social support, protected access to justice, appropriate law enforcement response, continued economic support to anti-trafficking organizations, service provider flexibility, and the need for systematic data collection and analysis.

Polaris describes the new tactics under which traffickers operate under with the onset of COVID-19: landlords pressuring sexual services in exchange for housing, switching to remote, web-based sexual services, and obtaining riskier, high-priced buyers for in-person solicitation. Through their service's analysis of sex buyers, they found many of the most prolific are still buying, seeing it as an "opportunity" as prices are low. This raises a concern, though, as those in the sex trade have less agency to bargain or negotiate, leaving them more vulnerable to violent and risky buyers and behaviors. Redfern (2020) noted that disasters, like COVID-19, signal traffickers for prey, ultimately exploiting vulnerability from those in need of stability.

The United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (2020) notes that most human trafficking cases uncovered during COVID-19 began with an economic need to supply basic necessities.

The policy that is meant to combat trafficking does not include the ways in which one comes to be trafficked, and the ways in which to combat the “root causes” of trafficking: poverty, vulnerability, substance abuse, instability in civil society, among many root issues that we cannot legalize away. The following sections introduces a brief history of the legal framework of human trafficking, and the lack of many of these policies to protect the rights of a victim or human being.

### **Legal Framework of Trafficking of Human Beings**

In 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This declaration, therefore, claims the basic rights and freedoms that all humans are entitled to. These include, but are not limited to:

Article 4: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms..

Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 13: (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state. (2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 14: (1) Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution. (2) This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 23: (1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment. (2) Everyone,

without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work. (3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family and existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection. (4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

Article 24: Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

The articles detailed above show the clear violations of human rights that victims of trafficking are subjected to. When dealing with human trafficking, and especially victims, it is necessary to put an emphasis on the restoration of human rights that were stolen from them. Successful policies that address human trafficking must place the trafficked person at the center stage, creating policies that are assessed to ensure these rights. The anti-trafficking legal protheses that follow show how the United Nation's Palermo Protocol has influenced many of the anti-trafficking legislation that followed its adoption, despite criticism for its lack of focus on the human rights of victims. Each legal document will be explained and then analyzed through the level of support or human rights it upholds for victims.

In 2000, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol), introducing the first internationally agreed upon definition of human trafficking. This definition is as follows:

"Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability

or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.

This definition can be seen as the three measures states were then looking for to prosecute: the acts, means, and purpose. The “act” is what the trafficker did to traffic them (recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons). The “means” is how the trafficker coerced the victim (of the threat or use of force...). Finally, the purpose of human trafficking for a trafficker will always be for exploitation. The Palermo Protocol is the first movement towards a global solution and state coordination against human trafficking. This protocol is focused on human trafficking as a law enforcement problem, outlining a state’s obligation to eradicate human trafficking, by: preventing, protecting, and prosecuting. As such, a state must criminalize trafficking, prosecute traffickers, and undertake border control measures. A state also now has an obligation to protect and assist victims of trafficking, while also creating harsher punishment for traffickers.

Victims are clearly defined as only women and children, minimizing the number of men and other folks who represent a large population of trafficked persons. This definition was also debated, as many member-states wanted to include all sex work as a form of trafficking.

Although this protocol is revolutionary for what human trafficking means today, the human rights of the victim were seemingly ignored and only women and children became protected as “trafficked”.

In 2005, the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (CoEC) was adopted, adding an important provision for the human rights of trafficked persons, the non-punishment provision. This emphasized the importance that victims should not be punished for crimes that they were forced to commit. Later, in 2011, the EU Anti-trafficking Directive adopted additional human rights provisions that are globally recognized. First, it notes that all legal persons will be held accountable, including those that are hidden beneath a company or corporation that is implicit in the trafficking. This means that law enforcement has the ability to charge all members of a corporation individually with a crime for trafficking instead of a corporation as a whole. The EU Directive also allowed for investigation and prosecution in a trafficking case, even without a victim's statement.

In 2000, the United States adopted the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), which has been amended nine times since its initial ratification. This act is focused primarily on the decreasing of demand, especially in regards to sex work and sex trafficking, while echoing the prevent, protect, and prosecute approach of other models. In its core, it is multidisciplinary and collaborative among federal, state and community members combatting human trafficking. This approach looks at human trafficking primarily through an economic lens, noting it's problem as simple "supply and demand". One way of approaching this is by investigating business owners who "profit" off of trafficking. Sex workers are often entangled in this principle as well. Landlords can be arrested for profiting off of a sex worker by allowing them to rent from them, especially if sex work is occurring on that property. On the other hand, there is a strong criminal justice lens, focused on prosecuting traffickers. In the United States, sex work (or, commonly known as prostitution) is illegal, making all forms of sex work considered "human trafficking" under the support sex workers in the United States. When policymakers make human

trafficking and sex work synonymous, the human rights of each group cannot possibly be upheld when they are so starkly different. Like the EU Directive, there is also an emphasis on not prosecuting victims for their forced crimes. Under the TVPA, there is also mandatory restitution for all victims of sexual exploitation.

In 2014, New Hampshire passed its first law on trafficking in persons, defining it as “to knowingly compel a person against his or her will to perform a service or labor including a commercial sex act or a sexually-explicit performance, for the benefit of another, where the compulsion is accomplished by any of the following means:..”. Later, it clarifies that a person can be performing a service or labor against their will even if they initially agreed upon it, and a payment is not indicative of performing a service or labor against one’s will. This act also criminalizes all acts of maintaining and providing those under 18 for sexual purposes, excluding consent, as no child can consent to their exploitation or these activities. Further, it is a class B offense for anyone who solicits a minor with an agreement for payment.

Under this law, there is also an outline of the victim’s protections. The identity of a victim and their family will remain confidential except if needed for the investigation or under court order. Victims who are minors will not be subject to juvenile delinquency given the offense was committed as a direct result of being trafficked, but may be if the offense was violent. Further, all individuals convicted of offenses that were committed as a direct result of being trafficked may file a motion to vacate the conviction, and may be granted the request provided “clear and convincing evidence”. This evidence, however, does not need to be in the form of “official” documentation indicating they were trafficked, but if they were able to, it would be of benefit for the court.

Polaris collects data state-by-state on the level of record relief available to victims. Currently, New Hampshire has an 'F' score, as according to their current legislation, only juvenile victims of trafficking are able to petition to vacate their crimes committed during their exploitation. This provision needs to be expanded to adult victims. Relief is only available to very few victims for very select crimes, and victims must present "official documentation" of their exploitation in order to get their charges vacated. All victims of trafficking in New Hampshire also must appear during all court proceedings, which has the potential of re-traumatizing victims. Other methods must be explored in order to ensure the human rights of victims.

**Referral Mechanism:** The Council of Europe Convention (CoEC) implemented a monitoring mechanism, the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), which operates to ensure all member-states are combatting trafficking in accordance to their national action plan. A national action plan is a comprehensive trafficking response that covers a nation's strategy to combat trafficking and on an operational level, how this strategy will be implemented. Within this plan is a national referral mechanism. A referral mechanism is a cooperative framework through which state actors can: protect and promote human rights of trafficked persons and coordinate their efforts in partnership with civil society and non-governmental organizations. This framework, then, fulfills a state's obligation under a nation's law (in this case, the United States' TVPA) on human rights and the trafficking of human beings. There are four key elements of a referral mechanism, including: (1) guidance on how to identify and appropriately treat a victim of trafficking to ensure their can receive assistance, protect their human rights and give empowerment, (2) ensure a system to refer victims of trafficking to specialized agencies, (3) establish a binding mechanism to harmonize victim assistance with

investigation and crime, and (4) create and/or connect multidisciplinary and cross-sector participation in the response of trafficking of human beings.

According to the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, referral mechanisms have become increasingly challenging to maintain with COVID-19. Victims are less likely to be identified, which makes their referral to protection less likely. In-person services are limited or are offered with a waitlist, limiting a victim's ability to access these services. Furthermore, when services are provided primarily online, many may not have the means necessary to access the internet or have access to a computer.

As COVID-19 continues to plague our nation, we are all looking at life with a new sense of uncertainty, as the risk that presented itself to us stunted our sense of normalcy. Potential uncertainty is “the actualities that can come from the event rather than the lack of knowledge about each possibility” where there is no known outcome able to combat it (Simimian-Darah et al., 2013: 1-3). A pandemic is constantly existing in a space between “what has occurred and what is about to occur”, which makes past knowledge, calculation and evaluation of the actual/virtual event essential to combatting it. In a grand picture, we can see this through the creation and implementation of vaccinations which were created to combat the virus. When looking at the human trafficking industry, the question is then raised to where these organizations would look to in times of crisis and uncertainty, as the quantitative “knowledge” is virtually impossible to collect. To better assist victims of trafficking during the pandemic, there must be an archival collection of past strategies to combat trafficking within times of pandemic or similar global health crises, as well as a system of ongoing evaluation of the programs in place to assess the level of assistance being provided to victims.



The State of New Hampshire, I would argue, does not have a coordinated referral mechanism for victims of trafficking. The lack of direct and specialized services for victims of human trafficking prior to COVID-19 undermined the potential for victims to be identified within the state, and to access services needed to escape their trafficker. There is also a lack of general knowledge of human trafficking within the state of New Hampshire, based on the idea that “trafficking doesn’t happen here”. Many victims may not even know they are being trafficked, and the lockdowns associated with COVID-19 made an invisible population even more difficult to reach. This paper will analyze the human trafficking industry during COVID-19, through the lens of service providers and actors who provide care and safety to victims of trafficking.

## **Methods**

Prior to the beginning of this project, I had a loose network of allies and current activists within the anti-trafficking industry, primarily in Denmark, and the United States in Florida and New Hampshire that I felt would be a helpful starting point when recruiting participants. As I began recruiting participants for my project, there was a notable excitement for participating, yet the schedules faced by those working in the anti-trafficking industry were booming. COVID-19 also became a barrier in my research project. Instead of typical ethnography, which involves long-term participant-observation in a community, I adjusted to find a way to approach this level of qualitative research through the confinements of a computer screen. Each of my participants represents an individual fighting for the end of human trafficking in New England, each working for a period of time in COVID-19, where masks became a barrier between victim and advocate. Each participant also represents a member program within the New Hampshire Coalition

Against Domestic and Sexual Violence (NHCADSV) or a non-governmental agency outside of those providing direct services to victims.

There is not a field site for this research. Marcus (1995: 95-117) challenged the traditional single-sited field site in ethnography, noting the emergence and significance of multi-sited phenomena conditioned by globalization. The majority of my participants are located and work in New Hampshire, but as human trafficking is a global, moving phenomenon, I recruited participants from outside of the state, as well. The participants represent the perspectives of researchers, behavioral and mental health specialists, law enforcement officials, non-governmental organizations, and social workers within the field. My research proposal did not cover victims of trafficking, due to the emphasized risk for their participation. Once initial contact was made with participants through email, a private Zoom meeting was set up for the interview session. Each participant was told that their participation in the study was voluntary and their responses to interview questions would be kept confidential. All participants information was de-identified.

I also attended two public webinars to conduct virtual observations, all connected to themes of human trafficking and COVID-19. These observations allowed access to groups of activists and experts who are in the field, determining what anti-trafficking will look like post-pandemic. These observations also provided background research into successful service provision models and recommendations when combatting COVID-19. Both webinars were focused on service provision models that were able to stay open, in-person during the pandemic.

Over the span of my research period, I conducted eight interviews with participants who work or have worked within the anti-trafficking industry during COVID-19. These interviews were conducted over Zoom for about a 30 minute period of time. Over the time of interview, I

asked participants eight primary questions pertaining to the health and human rights of victims of trafficking, including:

1. In your opinion, has there been a change in the human trafficking industry with COVID-19? If so, what are these changes?
2. What role do you play in the human trafficking industry? How was COVID-19 impacted that role?
3. In your opinion, do you agree with the U.S. policy on human trafficking? If so, what are its strengths? If not, what are its weaknesses?
4. If you could make a recommendation to help trafficked persons during the pandemic to the community/state/nation, what would your primary recommendations be?
5. What do you consider “risk factors” or “vulnerabilities” of potentially trafficked persons? Have these changed with COVID-19?
6. In August, President Trump announced a \$35 million grant to be awarded to anti-trafficking organizations to provide more safe houses to trafficked persons. Has this grant impacted your role? What are your thoughts on this grant?
7. What is the status of traffickers during COVID-19? What does the “means” of movement look like with the border restrictions/quarantine? Is likelihood of arrest more or less probable?
8. Can you recall an event that impacted human trafficking in a similar manner? How did human trafficking look like after this event?

After each interview, data was transcribed and coded thematically based on recurring terms or themes presented throughout data and secondary sources. Interviews were collated based on experiences of human trafficking within the context of New Hampshire, and then coded

based on risk factors that were found in each of the interviews. All participants have been given a number to differentiate between the quotes of each individual.

### **Findings: Trafficking in New Hampshire amid COVID-19**

Results are separated into two sections: trafficking in New Hampshire with COVID-19 and risk factors. The following data explores the human trafficking industry through the perspective of those who work to combat it.

**Demographics/Statistics:** In New Hampshire, there are two primary types of trafficking, for the purpose of labor and of sex. In 2019, there were 15 cases of human trafficking identified, 9 sex trafficking, 5 labor and sex trafficking, and one unspecified (Polaris 2019). From these 15 cases, 17 victims, 17 traffickers and two trafficking businesses were identified. The following year, the New Hampshire Human Trafficking Collaborative Task Force reported an increase of 53% in human trafficking cases from 2019. According to the Task Force's Annual Report, 5 individual were charged, and 53% of cases included sex trafficking, and 43% included labor trafficking. Most persons who are sex trafficked in New Hampshire are women, in their early to mid 20s, and from the state or the surrounding region. Although much of it is local, familial, community-based trafficking, the hotspots for sex trafficking are on highway quarters. According to Participant 1, many formerly trafficked persons are returning to their pimps or sex work during the pandemic. It serves as a mechanism for earning large amounts of cash quickly. Labor trafficking is typically more immigration intensive, but victims who receive treatment consist of U.S. citizens. The primary industries afflicted with labor trafficking are the hospitality and accommodation services and construction. Unlike many businesses that were forced to shut down during lockdown, these two industries stayed open. While many workers were able to afford to take time off during the pandemic, those trafficked were taking on increased hours.

The New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence is a network of 13 member programs that provide direct services to survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Out of these 13 member programs, only two remained open during the onset of COVID-19, both on opposite ends of the state. The state of New Hampshire lacks many of the services for victims of trafficking that many other states have successfully implemented. Currently, New Hampshire does not currently offer direct, specialized services or specialized housing to victims of trafficking. In September 2020, the grant funding one of these 13 member programs ended – halting service provision for 20 victims of human trafficking (NHHTCTF 2020). This grant provided Waypoint the ability to treat and provide case management to victims of trafficking while also financially supporting the NH Human Trafficking Task Force. Before the ending of this grant, Waypoint served 20 victims of trafficking, 19 of which were U.S. citizens, and 18 being female (NHHTCTF 2020). 66% of these clients were victims of sex trafficking, 15% labor trafficking, and 20% both labor and sex trafficking. According to the Task Force’s Annual Report, Waypoint provided ongoing case management, emotional/moral support, and protection/safety planning to victims of trafficking. Occasionally, social services, housing, and criminal justice system-based advocacy was provided to victims, along with personal items and access to the crisis hotline. According to the NCSL (2018), a successful service provider can provide immediate needs, health, legal services, housing, system-based services, among other life-skill based assistance to victims of trafficking. New Hampshire, even with the help of the grant, did not meet this minimum.

**Grant Funding:** The New Hampshire Human Trafficking Collaborative Task Force (NHHTCTF) has repeatedly attempted to apply for federal grants to improve this condition, but New Hampshire cannot afford to implement the basic services needed to receive these grants.

Unlike other forms of violence, human trafficking has minimal prosecutions, making the data limited to advocate to the State for more funding. Without the State's economic assistance, New Hampshire is not equipped to deal with victims of trafficking or provide the services needed for their recovery after identification. Participants noted that COVID-19 provided their organizations with the economic relief to implement basics such as telehealth platforms and e-sign platforms that allowed them to better approach the pandemic. Without these emergency federal grants, operations through COVID-19 would have been virtually impossible to access for all victims of exploitation and abuse. Participant 2 describes victims of trafficking as "the most traumatized individuals within the system and the ones with the least amount of resources available to them because of their complex traumas and their substance use disorders".

Participants commented on the difficulty obtaining grants due to the structure of the task force. Many organizations that receive federal grants are in urban, metropolitan areas, who are already providing direct services and transitional housing to victims of trafficking. These organizations focus on hotspots, instead of an entire state. New Hampshire employs this state-based approach. Human trafficking looks different in rural versus urban communities, which makes a state-based approach, in a hybrid state, difficult for implementing overall guidelines for human trafficking.

**Housing:** Housing is another major concern for both New Hampshire as a state, and for victims of trafficking within the state. New Hampshire does not currently have allocated housing for victims of human trafficking. Even though domestic violence shelters can take on trafficking victims, they are often full, as the state is facing its own housing crisis. Many organizations that can take on trafficking victims have policies in place that disallow being on any form of Medicaid, which would force victims to give up any medication or assisted treatment for shelter.

Others disallow victims to continue practicing sex work and they must be recovering, or recovered, from substance abuse. These limitations typically have to do with finances, the lack of resources, or an institution's set of beliefs. Those who escape trafficking during COVID-19 face a limited number of beds to retreat to, and those who are being trafficked lack the access to be referred to these shelters. In a rural-urban hybrid state where direct services are spread apart, transportation is sparse, COVID-19 making it even more so. Even if former trafficking victims get referred to these shelters, many are struggling with substance use disorders, mental health issues and poverty, and the treatments programs needed to help these individuals are not in place which makes their placement in housing less likely. Many homeless shelters and other housing services in New Hampshire lack privacy, and with COVID-19, lack the safety to house the large numbers of people that they previously did. Taking shelter in a homeless shelter is also considered high-risk for being trafficked, which places a victim into a similar level of vulnerability.

Brigid's House of Hope, an upcoming transitional long-term need housing program, will be the first service to provide specialized housing for victims of trafficking. Brigid's House of Hope is said to serve a long-term need for victims, as they do not have the services to provide for the initial need, which is usually riddled with substance abuse. The hospitals in New Hampshire can administer a medical detox, but this program is not mandated or "specialized" for victims of trafficking. Participant 3 noted the need for a specialized medicalized detox program for victims of trafficking. In many cases, drugs are used as a means of control by the trafficker, which settles the trafficker as the "provider", leaving their victim to keep returning to them. Breaking this cycle is not only important for the victim's physical recovery but stunts the victim's need for their trafficker for survival. This aligns with the UNODC's (2020) report which claims when

shelter is denied to victims of trafficking, they become more vulnerable to being re-trafficked, as well as to the COVID-19 infection.

### **Risk Factors**

Participants shared a collection of increased risk factors that those vulnerable to trafficking face during COVID-19, including: poverty, education, substance use, identification, disclosure, lack of access to resources, and isolation.

**Poverty:** Millions of Americans have been financially impacted by the lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, including those in New Hampshire. Poverty acts as a catalyst to increased stress, homelessness, and substance abuse, placating the act of being trafficked as a solemn attempt towards stability.

“Illegal activities like human trafficking are really like grown issues of poverty. And if anything, COVID-19 has just exacerbated the concerns and issues of poverty. And when poverty meets unemployment, it is a concern. Poverty decreases this level of access to food and resources, and stress increases, all doing the opposite of protecting anyone physically in regards to their immunity against a virus.” (Participant 2)

Participant 2 emphasizes the notion that human trafficking can happen to anyone – especially in a pandemic where people are facing unexpected job and financial loss. Many of the participants emphasized the new levels of vulnerability and stress victims and all people faced with issues relating to poverty.

“There’s homelessness problems. People are out of work. And there’s a lot of protections in place to keep them from being evicted, but there’s still a lot of homeless out there. So if that’s the vulnerability and a trafficker can provide room, provide food, then I mean, the tactic is going to pretty much be the same, they’re still going to identify and fill that



need. And then they're going to use that need to control the actions of the victim.”

(Participant 3)

When those who are not trafficked are facing increased homelessness, and a lack of available housing, this creates an emphasized risk for victims of trafficking. Even if their safety may mean being identified, they risk the stability that their trafficker is able to provide them.

**Education:** Education is a major barrier to the anti-trafficking industry during the pandemic.

Although anti-trafficking programs are still hosting educational programs and trainings, they are happening at a decreased rate and through online platforms. Participant 8 spoke heavily about their organization's priority to build and maintain connection with the community, noting the importance for community folks to know of their existence. They also commented on educational trainings being offered through online platforms, stating how folks are “webinar-ed out”. As most social service work has transitioned to a computer screen, there may be a lack of willingness to commit to more screen-time. Participant 8 noted the importance of capturing the right audiences through these online trainings, as people are willing to take these trainings, but they also may feel like it is an added stressor. Targeting trainings towards specific service sectors, like the hospitality industry, focused on hotel staff, may be more promising for virtual attendance and increased identification.

A barrier to educating on human trafficking is the idea that trafficking does not occur in New Hampshire and how people perceive it to be the same as kidnapping. Some examples of these false perceptions on the nature of human trafficking include:

“I have found that the kidnapping seems to be like a drama that can draw people in and creates a lot of fear” (Participant 2)

“This is New Hampshire, it doesn't happen in New Hampshire?” (Participant 3)

“Human trafficking is what I saw in the movie Taken, right?” (Participant 3)

“I have spoken to thousands of people, educated, business people, all different ages over the last six year since I started the non-profit.. And what I hear about human trafficking the most is, is this a band of illegal immigrants from Russia, Mexico or Asia? Are there Asian massage strip mall locations that were really happy endings?” (Participant 7)

One of the major misconceptions regarding human trafficking is its similarity to smuggling. Many of those who are trafficked never leave the country or state they were originally trafficked, and especially in New Hampshire, many of the cases involve New England citizens. Although smuggling can turn into trafficking, most who are smuggled still possess an element of agency within that decision. Participants in New Hampshire are working to provide accurate education in attempt to dispel these perceptions, through larger trainings and through personal interaction:

“The media and how human trafficking is depicted in movies is often through kidnapping. And it’s not like that. So we kind of debunk those myths. And the human trafficking task force does a lot of the education for me. They have a training committee who are all trained and ready to go provide these trainings. But as I talk with people, I say, ‘People don’t think it happens in New Hampshire’. They think it only happens in other countries. Sure, it may look different in other countries. But regardless, it’s happening everywhere. So, the way it looks in New Hampshire is a lot of manipulation and grooming. So, it can look like domestic violence, it can look like substance use. And under this, it could look like prostitution. But under the surface, there is that force, fraud and, coercion happening, that you need some digging to find. And it’s not always just kidnapping or it doesn’t always happen in massage parlors. It is happening from even a

family level or friend level. And really, it can happen without substance use. But given the opiate epidemic, we are seeing a lot of substance use play a part in it” (Participant 5).

Participant 5 breaks down the misconceptions associated with the common references with human trafficking – prostitution, kidnapping, massage parlors, domestic violence, substance use – but equally emphasizes the notion that these events can also occur independently from human trafficking.

“And in a lot of cases, and I know a lot of cases that the crisis centers have seen here is that the, the entry into trafficking, if you will, for a person or to that victimization than has really been through their intimate partner. Often times it takes them months when they're working with them on leaving the abusive partner to even realize that on top of being in a horrible domestic violence relationship” (Participant 6).

Participants 5 and 6 noted the idea that many people do not understand what trafficking looks like. They highlight the concept that many traffickers have intimate or personal relationships with their victims, which can help to disguise the exploitation occurring in the situation.

Unfortunately, these are events, occupations, or activities that can turn into human trafficking.

**Substance use:** One means that traffickers will use to control their victims is through controlled substances. Participant 3 states, “I mean, when you look at a broad picture, traffickers identify vulnerabilities and they swoop in to fill those vulnerabilities in an unrealistic way. If there’s a drug addiction going on, they are the drug dealer or at least they have a close connection to a drug dealer. And so they start by supplying the controlled substance and then they become the only resource for more. And that’s the control that we’re looking for in trafficking cases. Now encoded.” Participant 4 notes how substance use is often both a risk and a result of trafficking. Those who use drugs are more likely to be exploited and controlled by said drugs, but many

trafficking survivors also use substances to cope after their exploitation. Substance use also acts as a barrier towards help from service providers. If a victim was provided housing, those in the organizations do not have the means to administer detoxification, so these victims must be drug-free if they want shelter. Substance abuse acts as a risk to being trafficked, a method of control for a trafficker, and a prevention to eventual safety.

**Identification:** Victims of trafficking are being less identified during the pandemic, but many service providers question the risk associated with the identification of a victim.

“Identification as a double-edged sword, right? So we want to identify victims and survivors of sex trafficking. There's a lot of conversation in the field about the utility of such identification because particularly children who are already very vulnerable, are at an increased vulnerability when they are identified. Because there's quite a bit of risk that can be involved with being identified, and often they've been threatened. If somebody finds out it's happening, if you tell somebody that this is happening, particularly if there's a third party exploiter, you know, I can hurt you, I can hurt your child, I can hurt your family, any number of different things. What we see is that a lot of times kids don't want to disclose. And then we also see that kids don't personally feel exploited. You know, there's a lot of, just like any kind of sexual abuse, a fair amount of grooming that happens. And so a lot of folks don't realize until they're pretty far into their recovery that in fact exploitation and victimization can be labeled as bad. I mean, a lot of kids feel like they've played an active role and that's part of the grooming process.” (Participant 4)

Identification also has changed due to the lockdowns and quarantines experienced during the pandemic. Participant 1 illustrated this through different types of communities in New Hampshire. In suburban areas, there's usually sidewalks and public transportation, making it

easier for us to identify, and easier for them to access support and assistance. In rural communities, which is 90% of New Hampshire, there's a lack of public transportation and the lack of people can be isolating. The COVID-19 pandemic adds an intentional isolation, where we are no longer looking at those passing us by the sidewalk, which just adds additional barriers towards potential identification.

**Disclosure:** Once victims are identified during the pandemic, victims then have the opportunity to disclose their experiences to law enforcement, social services, among other members set to support survivors of trafficking. One of the major barriers to disclosure is the lack of in-person services, many of which that are now providing via telehealth services. Once victims are able to find a safe space where they can disclose information, they also need to attempt to form a level of trust with their service provider, before the possibility of disclosing abuse. Many victims who were clients prior to the pandemic only felt comfortable speaking to those they knew previously as assessing trustworthiness differs over the phone (Participant 1). Many times, victims will disclose exploitation after forming relationships with those supporting them. COVID-19 stunts the ability for these relationships to form and create the interpersonal connections to support and help the victim. Participant 3 also comments on this decreased ability to form relationships.

“All of the integrated services where we were previously identifying human trafficking are not seeing as many clients and are no longer seeing them in a space where they can really share if they are experiencing any kind of abuse. Because most people who are receiving services are being provided them via telehealth. And if they are doing it via telehealth, there is no way of [the client] knowing for certain that they are in a place that they can disclose information regarding abuse. And there's no providers seeing them in person. Being able to identify red flags, among other things” (Participant 2).

Like identification, disclosure also serves as a double-edged sword. Participant 4 gives the example of children disclosing abuse, many times only to return home to their families, who say they are unable to keep their child safe, and the services set up to keep the child safe are not intervening. This disclosure, then, is only for the purpose of our own curiosity, because we lack the means to help children out of the situations that may lead to trafficking. Many of us can agree that we do not want any human to live in exploitation, but when a victim of trafficking discloses their identity, and we cannot help them out of that trafficking situation, do we make the trafficking situation worse for the victim?

**Lack of access to resources:** Participant 4 speaks candidly about the mental health crisis New Hampshire is currently facing, recalling the hours that some clients will drive just for an intake appointment with her.

“We have people who are starting to engage with us due to family members having COVID or family members dying from COVID. The grief response is outrageous. We’re seeing so many complex grief patients who lost people not even due to COVID, but during COVID, who haven’t had proper burials, proper services, there’s no closure there when traditional traditions for grieving haven’t happening.” (Participant 4)

Many potential clients, though, are struggling to find counseling in the state. Participant 4 noted clients traveling up to three hours to have an intake appointment with her, due to the waitlists for many other mental health specialists being full. Participant 5 adds to this, noting the increase in domestic violence, but the lack of mental health care services being provided to them. The services that were once available to victims of all mental health needs are now full – echoing the diminished access for victims, accelerated by the increased mental health needs for all during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We have seen that the domestic violence at least has increased. So it's hard to know really what it's looking like in human trafficking. But people aren't getting mental health care. And a lot of survivors of trafficking don't realize that they've been trafficked. So they're not like when they're coming out of it. They're not identifying as victims of human trafficking. Oftentimes, substance use has played in. And the sex work. We see a lot of sex trafficking up here. So they're afraid of, okay, I have been prostituting myself and I have substance use issues. So it's really hard to keep track and identify victims because they aren't even self-aware that they were a victim. So there's so many different layers preventing data from happening. On top of, you know, if they get into Domestic Violence Crisis Center, or if they get into counseling, if they get connected to a police department for some charge or something. It's really that service provider who's helping them figure out what happened to them and how that trauma plays into things too. And if those services are full, what's happening?” (Participant 5)

Participant 1 comments on the specific mental health issues related to reduced means of access for victims (and the participant's clients) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We had a lot of clients, a lot of survivors who were experiencing incredible levels of anxiety, just the fear is pretty unpredictable for them anyway. And the act of trauma means they tend to run like a little bit high fuel and they're vigilant, but also for what they can cope with because they're used to coping with a lot. But this was just like a whole new level of unknowns. And as things got shut down, that prevented a lot of people from doing what they need to. So you don't have your own transportation. And if you don't have your own Wi-Fi and the library is closed. So a lot of the places

that people normally went to or utilized for resources or connections were closed.”

(Participant 1)

**Isolation/Lockdown:**

The lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic created a sense of isolation for many of those experiencing it. The lockdowns also had the opportunity to put those in trafficking in more isolated areas, with a lesser likelihood of identification. If a victim was able to see others prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns may have halted all contact with those other than their trafficker. Participant 1 emphasizes these claims involving isolation:

“A law enforcement analytics group put out a report that said there has been a national decrease in reports of trafficking just in those first couple of months of movement in the US. And their expectation from the limited context they were able to make with survivors right now was that they were being more isolated. The traffickers were taking the opportunity to say, okay, it's a new work. You can't engage in commercial sex. So let's use this chance to increase your sense of isolation.” (Participant 1)

In 2010, an average of 80.7% of those residing in the United States lived in urban areas (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). New Hampshire's population of urban residents is below this average, falling at 60.3%. As almost half of New Hampshire's residents live in rural areas, lockdowns increase this sense of isolation, as access to resources can significantly decrease.

**Discussion:**

Victims of trafficking in New Hampshire are at-risk due to the lack of specialized services available to them, even prior to COVID-19. Trafficking in New Hampshire has not slowed down, or halted, but instead became even more invisible, hiding behind a computer screen. On the other hand, there is still not enough being done to identify these victims. The



pandemic increased vulnerability in the everyday citizen, through job loss, houselessness, and isolation, but New Hampshire has yet to implement a referral mechanism that can navigate victims through their recovery, transition back into society, and their upcoming judicial process. Nationally, the crisis of human trafficking has been recognized, such as by the Trump administration, creating a \$35 million dollar grant to aid victims of trafficking. Unfortunately, these funds went to already successful and developed programs, that had already enacted clear referral mechanism for victims. This grant money was not received by anyone in New England – despite the apparent need to begin supplying basic necessities to victims of trafficking. Those who support anti-trafficking initiatives in New Hampshire are both committed and passionate in eradicating this modern-day slavery in the state, but they need the financial backing to implement detoxification programs, transitional housing, and therapy focused on the traumas unique to victims of trafficking. The pandemic has slowed this progress but advocates in the state keep working to reach these goals.

One of the most difficult elements to combat in human trafficking is the culture that has been created surrounding it and the way we respond to people who have been exploited in our society. To combat trafficking in a way that will protect its victims requires a culture change that wants to understand and treat the root of a problem, instead of its results. For example, those who are victims of sex trafficking face the fear of prosecution, as the industry they are participating in is illegal, and they fear leaving their trafficker. Many children in the United States who were sex trafficked are still being facing prostitution charges. There is a lack of trust in law enforcement, as distinguishing between trafficking and sex work is difficult and takes time to unravel. If sex work was decriminalized in the United States, sex trafficking could be more easily combatted.

Sex workers, who are working under their own agency, would not have to fear the police, and could report potential trafficking to the police. Victims could identify themselves, but also be identified by others without fear of prosecution by those attempting to help. If non-governmental organizations could operate for those practicing sex work, those who wanted to leave the industry, or those being trafficked, could receive the support necessary to live a stable life without it. Sex workers would also be allowed more negotiating power, and violent or aggressive buyers can be more readily reported to the police. Decriminalizing sex work looks like enacting a law that replaces any laws that previously have criminalized aspects of sex work or indirectly impacted sex workers. These laws would also emphasize the illegality of minors engaging in sex work, while creating separate laws pertaining to the differentiation and prosecution of sex trafficking.

Richter et al. (2010) analyzed sex work during the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa and its relation to the spread of HIV. The authors found that most of the vulnerability that sex workers have to HIV in South Africa is directly related to the criminalization of their work (2010:2). Sex workers have limited access to services, face sexual and gender-based violence, unsafe work conditions, difficulties negotiating safe sex practices, and face stigmatization. To reduce HIV transmission from the sex work industry, Richter et al. (2010) recommends decriminalization through a pragmatic, human rights based approach. Sex workers, then, could access necessary health services to reduce their chance of COVID-19 transmission, while opening the door to an increased identification of victims of trafficking.

A similar argument can be raised for a culture change regarding labor trafficking. To help protect one of the most vulnerable populations to labor trafficking, migrant workers, the United States must find alternative ways to manage immigration documentation. If people are waiting

for years to hear about their citizenship status, unable to renew their documentation in a timely matter, especially in times of COVID-19, people will still be forced to work in informal, exploitative jobs that do not check documentation.

It is also equally as important to protect all victims, having a mechanism set up to treat them after identification, while also having a legal system that advocates for their human rights. Currently, New Hampshire's anti-trafficking industry operates under a collaborative, statewide model. As New Hampshire is a hybrid-state, with smaller, urban areas, and large rural areas, human trafficking must be combated with different approaches based on the area. As human trafficking has been identified in every county in New Hampshire, separating combative strategies based on socioeconomic/community similarities in smaller, more concentrated areas, may improve New Hampshire's success in identifying more victims and/or trafficking businesses. One of the major partners that New Hampshire may be successful in collaborating with are the hospitals, as 30-87.8% of victims access medical services at some point during their exploitation (Schwarz et al. 2016). Educational trainings can be focused and specialized for healthcare workers, implementing more state-specific guidelines. The more citizens and professionals who are trained to accurately identify and respond to situations involving human trafficking makes it more visible – and more able to identify victims. If New Hampshire sets up the proper services to treat victims with dignity while also protecting their rights, identification becomes a more feasible and helpful tool.

New Hampshire's experts fighting human trafficking are some of the most passionate, knowledgeable individuals I have spoken to. Each person was aware of the struggles the state's anti-trafficking fight faces, yet still meets every week, consisting of minimal grant-paid employees and many volunteers from across the state. A collaboration of organizations, people,

and partners consist of those helping to end human trafficking in New Hampshire, without there being a true coordinated direction in how these matters proceed. On my own university's campus there is a small, donation-based coffee shop that operates out of a house's basement, donating all of its proceeds to anti-trafficking organizations. Even though there is a rhetoric that New Hampshire is immune to human trafficking, it seems Granite Staters are also becoming increasingly aware of the topic and how the everyday consumer can combat it. Overall, human trafficking can be a regulatory issue, an immigration issue, and even a law enforcement issue, but most importantly, it is an issue that is entirely human.

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