



# Survivors of Sex Trafficking, Their Children, and Opportunities for Intervention

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## Key Findings and Recommendations

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## INTRODUCTION

A sex trafficking survivor's identity as a parent may affect their experience during and after exploitation in critical ways. A study aimed at estimating the prevalence of sex trafficking in Sacramento—and understanding the context of the experiences of those who had experienced it—found that having children impacted survivors at many stages of their trafficking experiences.

Understanding the effect of children on survivors' experiences with sex trafficking exploitation was not initially an included objective of this study, which, as described below, was intended to estimate the scope of sex trafficking and to better understand the context in which survivors experienced trafficking in Sacramento County. Yet, children emerged as a strong and consistent theme throughout interviews with trafficking survivors. Although we did not ask any questions about children, more than half of the study participants (80 of 158) discussed their children in the course of responding to interview questions.<sup>1</sup> Survivors discussed the ways that having children affected their experiences with sex trafficking at multiple stages of exploitation, from recruitment to active exploitation to their exit from trafficking to their needs upon exit.

This brief provides an overview of the main themes that emerged from survivors' discussion of their children as related to their trafficking experiences, and it concludes with recommendations to better intervene and support sex trafficking survivors who are parents. These recommendations have been generated by an advisory council composed of survivors, who served as critical members of the research team and authors of this report.

<sup>1</sup> More than 80 respondents may have had children; this figure represents only the number who discussed their children in the course of interviews.

## STUDY OBJECTIVES

Understanding the scope and nature of sex trafficking in a community is an important first step toward mobilizing efforts to identify and provide services to trafficking survivors. Estimating the prevalence of sex trafficking has been a perennial data challenge with profound consequences. Without empirical data, efforts to disrupt trafficking or meet the needs of its survivors are subject to public opinion—often either sensationalizing or disregarding—resulting in either too little intervention or too much. Furthermore, lack of data stymies anti-trafficking efforts to guide any strategic public health or justice approach to effectively tackling this issue.

## STUDY DESIGN

This study used a participatory action research approach and mixed-methods design. Multiple systems estimation, which relied on nine sources of administrative data on identified sex trafficking victims/survivors, was used to generate a prevalence estimate. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 159 people with lived experience of sex trafficking in Sacramento County who were identified using a respondent-driven sampling design to gather more contextual information about sex trafficking exploitation and the needs of victims and survivors. One interview was not included in the analysis, as it was difficult to code accurately.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1) **Estimate the prevalence of sex trafficking among adults in Sacramento County,**
- 2) **Better understand the nature and scope of sex trafficking in Sacramento County, and**
- 3) **Provide data capable of informing a strategic, coordinated, multi-system response to prevent and respond to sex trafficking exploitation in Sacramento County.**

### Interviewed

**159**  
people with  
lived experience



## THE SURVIVOR ADVISORY COUNCIL

This study was supported by a Survivor Advisory Council (SAC), composed of nine members who provided expert guidance throughout the duration of the project, including guiding the overall research direction at the beginning of the project, supporting the respondent-driven sampling for interview participation, conducting interviews, and helping with interpreting study findings. The SAC was convened monthly. The findings and recommendations in this brief have been compiled by the SAC with limited support from other members of the research team.



# HOW HAVING CHILDREN AFFECTED THE EXPERIENCES OF SEX TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS: KEY FINDINGS

## Before exploitation

**Some survivors become mothers at a young age.** Trafficked women in this sample who had children often became mothers as teenagers. It was common for women to lose custody of their children, which may have happened before or during the time in which they were actively being exploited.

**Some women enter commercial sex to provide for children.** When asked about what could have helped them leave the life earlier, respondents frequently discussed having stable housing and the financial resources to provide for their children.

## During exploitation

**Survivors' children are often fathered by traffickers.** Among our study sample, it was very common for women to have one or more children fathered by a past or current trafficker.

**Children can be a tool for traffickers to control victims or compel them to continue to engage in commercial sex.** Women in this study discussed a wide variety of ways that pimps and traffickers used their children as a method of controlling them, including threats of harm to and death of children, and controlling access to visits or telephone calls with children. Some participants explained that their children did not know they were involved in commercial sex and their traffickers would threaten to tell their children if they tried to leave, which brought shame and fear for survivors and compelled their continued servitude.

## Exiting exploitation

**Pregnancy can be a motivator to get out of the life.** Multiple respondents discussed pregnancy as a critical pivot point for when they decided to leave a trafficker or get out of the life. These individuals often talked about how they wanted a better life for their children, and most who left at this point are now out of the life.

**Losing custody of children was a deterrent to getting out of the life.** Some respondents discussed how having access to their children or custody of their children would have motivated them to get out of the life sooner.

## After exploitation

**Accessing shelter can be difficult with children.** Some participants described challenges finding shelters with space available for them and their children. Shelter options are limited when you have children, particularly older boys. At least two participants described how they were not allowed to live in a shelter with their adolescent sons and said that there is at least one women's shelter that does not allow boys aged 12 or older. In both of these cases, the respondents chose not to separate from children and sought shelter elsewhere.

**Survivors express regret at the state of their relationship with their children.** Many women discussed how they wished they were closer with their children. It was common for children to be in the care of Child Protective Services (CPS) or to be raised by relatives. Some women had engaged in programming through community-based service providers to help regain custody of their children.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **To better identify and support youth who may be vulnerable to sexual exploitation,** provide school-based access to reliable health care, including reproductive health services when necessary. Focus on the health and wellness needs of school-aged youth in the school setting.
- **To better support survivors with children after their trafficking experience,** expand legal services and flexible support for victims who have children, even if the children are not in the home, and especially when they are not receiving CPS services.
- **To provide inclusive housing options for sex trafficking survivors with children,** ensure short- and long-term housing access that accommodates all ages and genders of children, women in reunification, and pregnant and first-time mothers.
- **To provide opportunities for healthy family reunification and to support survivors in building capacity for parenting, build connections with community-based organizations to offer free legal services,** flexible funding, guaranteed minimum income programs, and rapid rehousing services to build the resiliency of survivors of sex trafficking who are parenting, have guardianships or CPS involvement, or are having their parental rights terminated.
- **To provide lasting support for survivors who are parents,** build capacity for sustained support for sex trafficking survivors—beyond stabilization—that includes individualized supports specific to needs of parenting.
- **To ensure the self-sufficiency of survivors and allow them to provide for their children,** provide community-based economic empowerment/employment programming that is trauma informed and tolerates the nonlinear process—including both progress and setbacks—that can be typical among sex trafficking survivors. Ideally, maintain support for the long term or until a survivor is self-sufficient at 200% of the poverty rate.



FOR DETAILED FINDINGS  
AND ADDITIONAL  
INFORMATION ON THIS  
STUDY, VISIT:

<https://www.rti.org/impact/estimating-sex-trafficking-in-sacramento-county>