



Caring for Vulnerable People during COVID-19: *Understanding the effects of a pandemic response on Child Maltreatment, Human Trafficking, and IPV (Intimate Partner Violence)*

As COVID-19 continues to require physical distancing (also known as social distancing), it is important to understand the effects these conditions are placing on vulnerable people caught in abusive relationships or human trafficking situations, as well as survivors of both. Being able to identify these vulnerable populations in your community, and having an understanding of their unique needs, will enable you to minister and help them.

For victims and survivors of human trafficking and domestic violence, the pandemic response may exacerbate or trigger the experiences of exploitation and violence. Individuals in these situations need to understand there is no shame, blame, or guilt for being triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, they need to be reminded they are not alone and there is support and a community of survivors standing with them. They are not forgotten. They are seen (*We can see them*). They are not alone (*We are with them*).

The following outlines the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic response may simultaneously exacerbate the existing conditions for victims and trigger past experiences of exploitation, violence, and/or human trafficking for survivors:

1. Isolation Physical distancing keeps victims and survivors physically isolated from their support networks. They are no longer able to physically access people, places, or community organizations that have become safe places to them. As a result, victims may be further isolated within their trafficking and exploitation situation. It may also remind survivors of their trafficking experience and the emotions associated with it taking them back to a place of trauma.

2. Restricting Access to Information Traffickers and exploiters are usually the only source of information and connection to the outside world for a victim. The traffickers and exploiters' virtual presence and power would therefore be intensified in the midst of physical distancing making the victim feel further entrenched while magnifying a sense of hopelessness that there is no escape from them.

For survivors, having to rely on news and virtual platforms can feel similar to their trafficking situation as they are again expected to trust sources that are outside of themselves for information. They may also feel overwhelmed by the amount of information being distributed. This too may feel similar as it was the trafficker and exploiter determining what they heard, saw, and thought about. This may produce feelings of being controlled by another and remind them of the lack of control they once had to reliable information.

3. Unpredictable Expectations The “rules” and “recommendations” around COVID-19 are in a constant state of flux. For victims, this adds additional pressures and stresses in order to survive. For

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

World Evangelical Alliance:

www.worldea.org

The Salvation Army-Canada and Bermuda:

www.salvationarmy.ca

The Salvation Army-United States of America:

www.salvationarmyusa.org

Humanitarian Disaster Institute:

www.wheaton.edu/hdi

survivors, it may remind them of traffickers and exploiters who enforced rigid and unrealistic rules that they changed constantly in order to make survivors feel insecure and never knowing what they were supposed to do.

- 4. Increased Abuse and Threats** The abuse may worsen during this time as victims may be spending more time in contact with their traffickers and exploiters. Victims may also experience new or different types of abuse during this time. For survivors, the threat of a loved one dying or the potential loss of a child being taken away or the need to disclose their personal medical history can trigger them to feel similar emotions that they felt while being trafficked.
- 5. Feelings of Exhaustion and Fear** In the midst of “rules” and physical distancing, survivors may feel that they have lost control over accessing food, sleep, and medical care. This may remind survivors of when their trafficker or exploiter withheld food, sleep, and medical care that contributed to their sense of constant exhaustion and weakness. These can trigger feelings of fear: fear of the unknown, of exposure, getting sick, death, and / or things getting worse. For victims, lack of access to food and medical care may increase further, placing their life at risk.
- 6. Financial Abuse** Many victims and survivors are experiencing financial burdens due to being unable to work. For survivors, this may trigger fears of the unknown and cause stress over whether they will be able to financially survive COVID-19. Traffickers and exploiters may further financially exploit victims during this time by demanding more money and / or services to be performed.
- 7. Parenting** Victims and survivors who co-parent their children with their trafficker or exploiter may face unique challenges during these times, such as barriers to visitation and / or increased exposure to the abuser due to lack of accessible childcare. For example, in order for a victim or survivor to work, they may need to utilize their trafficker or exploiter for childcare.
- 8. Internet Abuse** During COVID-19 porn websites have seen a spike in users. With schools closed and learning moved to online, children are spending time on the internet more than ever. With learning, combined time spent gaming and video chatting online, porn companies are taking advantage of this new situation. Porn companies are offering free viewing of content and according to Google, porn searches skyrocket 4700% when children are not in school. Internet human trafficking is the most prolific form of sex trafficking of minors and with increased demand this vulnerable population faces further abuse and exploitation.

If you or someone you know needs help call the Human Trafficking National Hotline in the United States of America at 888-373-7888 or the Canadian National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-833-900-1010.

References:

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www.Sharedhope.org

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