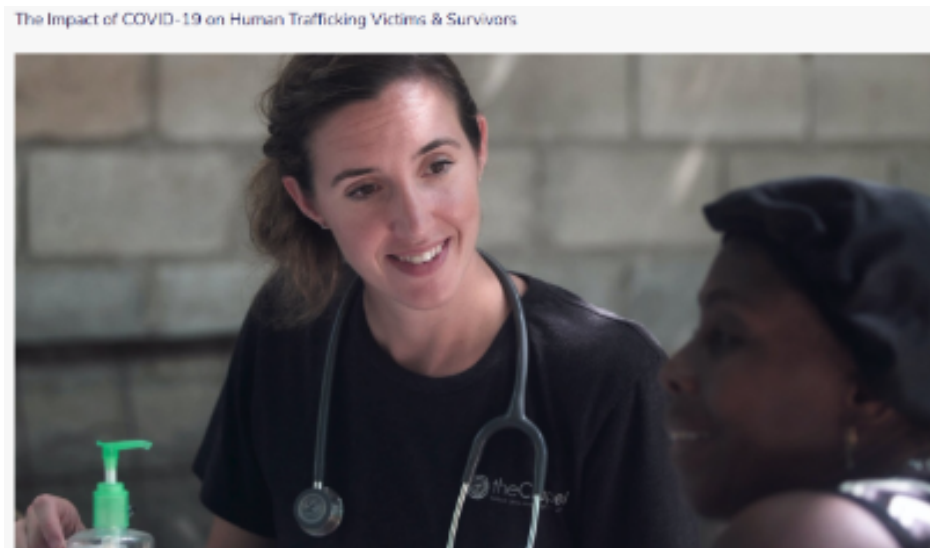


The Impact of COVID-19 on Human Trafficking Victims & Survivors



Released April 16, 2020

The unprecedented global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus is impacting people around the world and in the United States in profound ways. The direct impact on people's lives and health alone is daunting and heartbreaking. As attorneys working with human trafficking survivors in various parts of the United States, we are keenly aware of the impact this crisis is having on the human trafficking victims and survivors we serve along with so many others around the country and the world. As discussed below, the impacts include increased recruitment of victims, increased vulnerabilities and pressure on those still being exploited, and consequences to survivors and their families. These observations and predictions are based on National Survivor Law Collective (NSLC) members' work with human trafficking survivors in California, Colorado, Florida, Oregon, and Wisconsin.

As resources are stretched and in-person services are restricted, with the additional hardships imposed on survivors as enumerated below, we expect that the needs of survivors are dramatically rising. [ALIGHT\(Alliance to Lead Impact in Global Human Trafficking\)](#), a NSLC

member, reports serving three times more survivor requests for legal help in March 2020 than in March 2019. At the same time, many survivors may find it more difficult to reach out for help, especially those who are cohabitating with their abusers. As traffickers adapt new ways to exploit people, this momentary decrease for some agencies in calls for service may be the calm before the new storm.

1. Increased Recruitment

With all school-age children home from school and online more than ever, they are even more vulnerable to online predators, including human traffickers. If you are a parent with school-age children, check out this blog from NSLC member [Free to Thrive](#) on [5 tips to keep your kids safe from online predators](#).

College students may also be vulnerable to recruitment when campuses around the country closed due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Students who worked on campus or in businesses that closed such as restaurants and retail stores lost their source of income. Students who do not have family support to provide for their basic needs may be vulnerable to the false promises of a trafficker of financial support. Students without a home to return to such as former foster youth, as well as youths being released from detention facilities without support services, are particularly vulnerable to recruitment by traffickers. Likewise, those who grew up in abusive or neglectful households may be easily preyed upon by traffickers who promise them love and support.

As legal services providers to trafficked individuals, we have assisted a number of clients who were recruited by their traffickers while in college. Even during stable economic times, traffickers promise money, housing, and a glamorous life to their victims when [grooming them](#). College students who are struggling financially to put themselves through school may be enticed by promises and brainwashed by their exploiters to believe that they will support them financially. The financial insecurity resulting from COVID-19 will only increase this vulnerability.

2. Impact on Victims Still Being Exploited

Exploitation Continues. Victims of human trafficking who are still being exploited are impacted by COVID-19 in many ways. It may come as a surprise to many that some sex-buyers are not deterred by the health risks posed by COVID-19 and continue to purchase sex. Human trafficking victims are likely to have weak immune systems due to poor nutrition, poor sleep, lack of primary healthcare, their trauma, and abuse of drugs and alcohol. Our clients have shared with us that they were forced by their traffickers to work even when they were sick and would not be permitted to seek medical care. When victims are not working, their traffickers are not making money. This reality means that this population may be at greater risk of exposure to the virus and unlikely to have access to treatment.

Sex Trafficking. While some buyers are still buying sex, there most certainly has been a drop in business for those selling sex. Some victims may also be forced into web-based sexual

activity. The lines between labor trafficking and sex trafficking, which already blurred, will become even more so. The current constraints to prior methods of trafficking will likely lead to an increase in [forced criminal activity by traffickers](#). When human trafficking victims and survivors are forced to commit crimes by their traffickers, it creates a major barrier to their freedom. With a criminal record, human trafficking victims and survivors (and anyone else with a criminal record) have trouble getting jobs, housing, public benefits, keeping custody of their children, and going back to school.

Labor Trafficking will likely rise as vulnerable people take up high-demand, low-wage, dangerous jobs. Those already supporting the construction, agriculture, healthcare and domestic service industries are likely to see [increased work hours and hazardous working conditions](#), including exposure to COVID-19. Others will lose jobs completely and may end up homeless. NLSC member Free to Thrive has already received a referral of a new client who was labor trafficked since the COVID-19 outbreak. This individual was vulnerable to exploitation after losing their job. Without status, undocumented workers will be even more vulnerable to force, fraud and coercion and less likely to come forward if they are assaulted, abused or exploited. Most will also [not be eligible for the relief](#) the government has put in place.

Intimate Partner Violence. Finally, many current victims and survivors cohabitate with, are married to, and have children with their traffickers. With shelter in place orders around the country, victims are even more isolated and in greater danger of intimate partner violence at the hands of their trafficker. Experts have already warned of an [increase in domestic violence incidents](#) in the United States and around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. At one of our member organizations, Free to Thrive, [88% of sex-trafficked clients have experienced domestic violence](#) at the hands of their traffickers or another intimate partner. Given the intersection between domestic violence and human trafficking, victims and survivors are at great risk of interpersonal violence during this time.

3. Impact on Survivors and their Families

Health Risks. Human trafficking survivors who were formerly exploited share many of the same health risks as those who are still being exploited. Many current clients have weak immune systems and chronic health problems that are related to their trauma and trafficking. Moreover, some clients our organizations serve are in jails and prisons. In San Diego, a nurse who works at Las Colinas Detention and Reentry Facility [recently tested positive for COVID-19](#). At Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility, two employees tested positive the first week in April. Should an outbreak occur at any jail or prison, the virus will likely spread quickly among staff and inmates, putting everyone's life at risk, including human trafficking victims and survivors. Florida member, the [Justice Restoration Center](#), has seen an increase in Florida prison and jail officials testing positive for COVID-19. Also, the release of low-level offenders to reduce jail populations, has placed many survivors back on the streets unable to obtain adequate housing, work, and basic needs resulting in greater vulnerability to further exploitation.

Family Instability. As discussed above, human trafficking survivors have children with their traffickers. Even after escaping from or leaving them, some survivors have joint custody with their former traffickers. The COVID-19 crisis can be challenging for any divorced parents co-parenting at this time, leading to an [increase in child custody issues](#). For survivors co-parenting with a former trafficker, those issues are far more complicated. Abusers and traffickers often use children as a form of coercion and control. They might violate court ordered custody schedules or refuse to return the child/children altogether. If the parents do not already have a custody order in place, with [courts closed nationwide](#), it will be extremely challenging for survivors to obtain any custody orders.

Victims Rights. As courts and government agencies like Immigration Courts shut down across the country, victims rights are negatively impacted. Courts have pushed scheduled hearings months into the future. In Wisconsin, according to NSLC member Lotus Legal Clinic, the court system is working to adapt technology to hold remote court proceedings in certain cases, but it will be months before this is completed or consistently working. Attorneys believe that trafficking victims with little trust in the legal system will be even more reluctant to exercise their rights in this climate. Officials in many places are also considering releasing inmates due to the spread of COVID-19 in jails and prisons. Oregon NSLC member, [Trafficking Law Center](#), is helping clients manage the fear that traffickers could be released from custody and harm them. For victims who are awaiting justice, restitution, preparing for the traumatic task of taking the witness stand against their perpetrator, or hoping for immigration relief, justice delayed will very much be justice denied.

Economic Harm. Survivors will also suffer from the economic impact of COVID-19. Survivors are often left with nothing when they leave or escape their traffickers and have to rebuild their lives from scratch. As discussed above, many have criminal records from when they were trafficked, which can impede their financial independence and self-sufficiency. Whatever progress they have gained is going to be at risk given the [soaring rates of unemployment](#), like other Americans, they will likely face job losses, evictions, food insecurity, and homelessness. Oregon NSLC member, [Trafficking Law Center](#) reports that some of their survivor clients are experiencing retraumatization from the COVID-19 pandemic resulting in an, “urge to use or return to the life [of commercial exploitation].”

Unmet Mental Health Needs. Finally, most of our clients experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and many struggle with depression, anxiety, and overcoming addiction. In addition, the isolation and lack of freedom to safely visit public spaces has a devastating impact on survivors who are in the process of trying to build or rebuild a network of healthy and supporting relationships. When coupled with housing instability and lack of financial resources, trafficking victims and survivors are less likely to have the technology to access mental health services through remote options.

Our Hope. During this moment, we prioritize adaptation of services and compassionate response to the needs of those we serve. We must look not just to the present critical needs,

but also into the future where survivors will face a drastically changed economic, social, physical and emotional reality. All members of the National Survivor Law Collective are committed to an ethical, survivor-informed approach to our work and toward raising awareness of the impacts to vulnerable individuals. Our hope is that others will be well-informed and will act in diverse, creative and efficient ways to support our efforts to serve victims of trafficking and exploitation.

About the National Survivor Law Collective (NSL Collective)

Founded in 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Survivor Law Collective (NSL Collective) is composed of U.S. organizations focused on providing free legal services to victims and survivors of all forms of human trafficking, regardless of gender identity, nationality, or age. The Founding Members include organizations operating in California, Oregon, Colorado, Wisconsin, and Florida.

Founding Members of the NSL Collective

ALIGHT (Alliance to Lead Impact in Global Human Trafficking), Denver, Colorado
www.alightnet.org



Free to Thrive, San Diego, California
www.freetothrive.org



Justice Restoration Center, Tarpon Springs, Florida
<https://www.jrcenter.org/>

JUSTICE RESTORATION CENTER

LOTUS Legal Clinic, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

www.lotuslegalclinic.org



Trafficking Law Center, Portland, Oregon

www.traffickinglawcenter.org

