

THE MISSING PIECE: PREVENTING DOMESTIC SEX TRAFFICKING THROUGH EARLY INTERVENTION

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INTRODUCTION

Domestic sex trafficking in the United States (U.S.) is a social justice and human rights issue that violates an individual's right to be treated fairly. There are risk factors that make someone more susceptible to domestic sex trafficking. A review of research, policy analysis, and an application of domestic sex trafficking within a theoretical framework will provide an extensive view of this issue and current efforts to mitigate the problem, specifically in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Additionally, a potential prevention strategy, as well as ideas to consider for future domestic sex trafficking prevention work in the social work framework, will be explored to see if domestic sex trafficking can be stopped before it starts.

I. SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUE

A. *Description of Social Justice Issue*

Sex trafficking is defined in U.S. Federal law as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for a commercial sex act,” and “severe forms of trafficking in persons” are defined as trafficking “in which the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age.”¹ The U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline found that in 2019 there were 8,248 reported situations involving sex trafficking in the United States and 14,597 survivors of human trafficking who were connected to those situations.² In the U.S. Department of State's *2019 Trafficking in Persons Report*, 72% of trafficking survivors served by victim service providers approved by the Department of Justice were U.S. citizens and 66% were victims of sex

¹ 22 U.S.C. § 7102.

² *2019 Data Report: The U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline*, POLARIS, <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Polaris-2019-US-National-Human-Trafficking-Hotline-Data-Report.pdf> (last visited Apr. 9, 2022) [hereinafter POLARIS].

trafficking.³ Assuming that not every case of sex trafficking is reported, there may be several unreported cases.

II. SOCIAL JUSTICE LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Domestic Sex Trafficking in Mecklenburg County and North Carolina*

Similar to national data, North Carolina had 266 calls for human trafficking in 2019, and sixty-five percent of them were sex trafficking cases.⁴ It was reported in 2018 that 174 minors and adults were identified as suspected or confirmed victims of human trafficking receiving services in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina;⁵ this is more than half of the human trafficking cases for the state reported to the hotline, which could indicate potential under-reporting.⁶ Eighty-six percent of the individuals identified as human trafficking survivors in Mecklenburg County were involved in sex trafficking, and seventy-one percent of these victims were trafficked within Mecklenburg county itself.⁷ Of 242 at-risk minors screened in Mecklenburg County, twenty-six percent were of clear concern (a high level of risk) regarding sex trafficking.⁸

B. *Vulnerabilities Leading to Domestic Sex Trafficking*

There are several risk factors for domestic sex trafficking that have been outlined in literature and in Mecklenburg County, the key vulnerabilities for sex trafficking correlate with national literature.⁹ The

³ U.S. DEP'T OF STATE, 2019 TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS REPORT 486–87 (June 2019).

⁴ *North Carolina Spotlight: 2019 National Human Trafficking Hotline Statistics*, POLARIS, <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/2019-North-Carolina-State-Report.pdf> (last visited Apr. 9, 2022).

⁵ Shawna Pagano, *Exploitation in Mecklenburg County: An Examination of Human Trafficking and Risk Factors 2–3* (2019) (executive summary prepared in conjunction with research grant) (on file with author).

⁶ *North Carolina*, NAT'L HUM. TRAFFICKING HOTLINE, <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/state/north-carolina> (last visited Apr. 10, 2022).

⁷ Pagano, *supra* note 5, at 4.

⁸ *Id.* at 2.

⁹ POLARIS, *supra* note 2 (noting the “Top 5 Risk Factors/Vulnerabilities” for sex trafficking victimization as the following: substance use concern, runaway homeless youth, recent migration/relocation, unstable housing, and mental health concern, based upon 2019 data collected by the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline); Pagano, *supra* note 5, at 4 (“The two greatest risk factors for adults were housing instability/homelessness (54.8%) and exposure to domestic violence (45.2%). Other risk factors were substance abuse (26.1%) and immigrant status (13.0%).”); Joan A. Reid et al., *Human Trafficking of Minors and*

top vulnerabilities in Mecklenburg county were found to be housing instability or homelessness, abuse, substance misuse, and child welfare involvement.¹⁰ The vulnerabilities that lead to domestic sex trafficking also lead to substance misuse and domestic violence.¹¹ Domestic sex trafficking has several potential root causes and is most present in childhood.¹²

1. Homelessness

Literature suggests a correlation between homelessness and domestic sex trafficking.¹³ Unstable housing was identified as a top risk factor for sex trafficking victimization in the U.S. and Mecklenburg County¹⁴ with 54.8% of trafficking victims in the county citing homelessness as the top risk factor of their trafficking situation.¹⁵ Homelessness exists in Mecklenburg County and leaves thousands of

Childhood Adversity in Florida, 107 AM. J. FOR PUB. HEALTH 306, 309–10 (2017) (examining common risk factors specific to youth).

¹⁰ Pagano, *supra* note 5, at 4–5.

¹¹ See *The Intersection of Domestic Violence, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse*, U.S. DEP'T OF HEALTH & HUM. SERVS. 2–4 (Jan. 18, 2019), https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fysb/acf_samhsa_signed_intersection_of_dv_mh_su_01182019_0.pdf (“While DV affects every community, people living in poverty experience higher rates of abuse.”); Healthwise Staff, *What Increases Your Risk of Becoming a Victim of Domestic Abuse or Violence?*, CIGNA, <https://www.cigna.com/individuals-families/health-wellness/hw/what-increases-your-risk-of-becoming-a-victim-of-tm7093> (last updated Jul. 1, 2021) (stating that certain groups may be exposed to unsafe situations creating higher risk for assault, to include the following: the homeless, sex workers, people with substance use disorders, and teens); *Drug Addiction (Substance Use Disorder)*, MAYO CLINIC, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/drug-addiction/symptoms-causes/syc-20365112> (last visited Apr. 11, 2022) (describing factors which affect the likelihood of developing a drug addiction); *Human Trafficking in America’s Schools: Vulnerable Populations*, NAT’L CTR. ON SAFE SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENV’TS, <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/human-trafficking-americas-schools/vulnerable-populations> (last visited Apr. 11, 2022) (“Particularly vulnerable groups of students tend to share histories of poverty, family instability, physical and sexual abuse, and trauma.”).

¹² Hannabeth Franchino-Olsen, *Vulnerabilities Relevant for Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children / Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: A Systematic Review of Risk Factors*, TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, & ABUSE REV. J., 2019, at 8–10.

¹³ See, e.g., Karen Romero, *The Intersection of Human Trafficking and Homelessness*, NAT’L ALL. TO END HOMELESSNESS (Jan. 15, 2020), <https://endhomelessness.org/blog/the-intersection-of-human-trafficking-and-homelessness/>; Melinda Sampson, *Homelessness and Human Trafficking: COVID-19 Creates a More Vulnerable Population*, NAT’L SEXUAL VIOLENCE RES. CTR. (Dec. 2, 2021), <https://www.nsvrc.org/blogs/homelessness-and-human-trafficking-covid-19-creates-more-vulnerable-population>.

¹⁴ POLARIS, *supra* note 2; Pagano, *supra* note 5, at 4.

¹⁵ Pagano, *supra* note 5, at 4.

individuals susceptible to sex trafficking.¹⁶ In June 2020, there were 3,111 people experiencing homelessness in the county.¹⁷ One study indicated youth involved in domestic sex trafficking experienced complications in their living situation that lead to homelessness.¹⁸ Other studies said homeless teens reported feeling pressure to participate in commercial sex to secure a place to sleep.¹⁹ An individual may enter domestic sex trafficking because it provides a place to stay or allows an escape from their unstable living situation.

2. Abuse

A common vulnerability of domestic sex trafficking survivors is abuse.²⁰ For adults, the abuse reported is domestic violence²¹ and for minors, it is sexual abuse.²² Research on this area shows that sexual abuse was the strongest risk factor leading to minor human trafficking: 2.52 times greater risk for girls and 8.21 for boys.²³ Mecklenburg County reflected national data with at least 40.4% of sex trafficked minors having a history of sexual abuse.²⁴ In the *Statistics for Mecklenburg County, North Carolina* report, Child Protective Services (CPS) reported 13,910

¹⁶ POLARIS, ON-RAMPS, INTERSECTIONS, AND EXIT ROUTES: A ROADMAP FOR SYSTEMS AND INDUSTRIES TO PREVENT AND DISRUPT HUMAN TRAFFICKING 16–18 (July 2018), <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/A-Roadmap-for-Systems-and-Industries-to-Prevent-and-Disrupt-Human-Trafficking-Housing-and-Homelessness-Systems.pdf> (discussing survey respondents' reports of being homeless or experiencing unstable housing when trafficking situation started).

¹⁷ UNC Charlotte Urb. Inst. *Charlotte-Mecklenburg 2020 State of Housing Instability & Homelessness Report*, MECKLENBURG HOUS. DATA (Sept. 2020), https://secureservercdn.net/166.62.110.60/z4b.66d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020-SoHIH-Report_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁸ Monica Landers et al., *Baseline Characteristics of Dependent Youth Who Have Been Commercially Sexually Exploited: Findings From a Specialized Treatment Program*, 26(6) J. OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE 692, 692–98 (2017).

¹⁹ E.g., Karen Countryman-Roswurm & Brien L. Bolin, *Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: Assessing and Reducing Risk*, 31 CHILD & ADOLESCENT SOC. WORK J. 521, 527 (2014).

²⁰ *The Problem*, SHARED HOPE INT'L, <https://sharedhope.org/the-problem/> (last visited Apr. 9, 2022) (explaining that one “vulnerability factor” making an individual more susceptible to trafficking is being abused or neglected).

²¹ Pagano, *supra* note 5, at 4.

²² Andrea N. Cimino, et al., *Child Maltreatment and Child Protective Services Involvement Among the Commercial Sexually Exploited: A Comparison of Women Who Enter as Juveniles or as Adults*, 26 J. CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE 352, 354 (2017).

²³ Joan A. Reid, et al., *Human Trafficking of Minors and Childhood Adversity in Florida*, 107 AM. J. PUB. HEALTH 306, 306 (2017).

²⁴ Pagano, *supra* note 5, at 5.

cases of child maltreatment and abuse.²⁵ There were over 1,500 adult and child victims of domestic violence served within the county in 2017 per the *FY17 Community Report on Domestic Violence in Mecklenburg County* report.²⁶ Both of these reports show individuals in Mecklenburg County who are at risk for domestic sex trafficking due to their exposure to abuse.²⁷

Some sex traffickers use the same tactics as the perpetrators of domestic violence;²⁸ due to comfortability, if an individual has been in a domestic violence relationship, they may be more likely to succumb to sex trafficking when the trafficker acts like a romantic partner.²⁹ For minors in abusive homes, they may seek care outside of their living environment, and that can come in the form of a sex trafficker.³⁰ Overall, exposure to abuse, both domestic violence and sexual abuse, has an impact on a person's level of vulnerability to domestic sex trafficking.³¹

3. Child Welfare Involvement

Child welfare encompasses an array of services focused on assisting children with needs and includes government and non-government service providers who assist children.³² Interaction with the child welfare system is a high-risk factor for domestic sex trafficking.³³ In Mecklenburg County, 42.6% of sex-trafficked youth had child welfare involvement before being trafficked.³⁴ High involvement with child welfare systems through Child Protective Services (CPS) and the foster care system in Mecklenburg County is evident from the number of CPS reports and the number of children placed in foster care.³⁵ Similar to homeless situations, when minors are involved with child welfare, they

²⁵ *Statistics for Mecklenburg County, North Carolina*, NORTH CAROLINA CHILD WELFARE MEASURES, <http://fosteringcourtimprovement.org/nc/County/Mecklenburg/> (last visited Apr. 19, 2022).

²⁶ FY17 COMMUNITY REPORT ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN MECKLENBURG COUNTY, MECKLENBURG COUNTY COMMUNITY SUPPORT SERVICES DEPARTMENT, <https://www.mecknc.gov/CommunitySupportServices/PI/dvi/PublishingImages/Pages/Statistics/2017%20DV%20Data%20Warehouse%20Full%20Report.pdf> (last visited April 19, 2022) [hereinafter FY17 COMMUNITY REPORT].

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ Shannon Drysdale Walsh, *Sex Trafficking and the State: Applying Domestic Abuse Interventions to Serve Victims of Sex Trafficking*, 17 HUM. RTS. REV. 221, 222 (2016).

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ Monica Landers et al., *Baseline Characteristics of Dependent Youth Who Have Been Commercially Sexually Exploited: Findings from a Specialized Treatment Program*, 26 J. CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE 692, 693 (2017).

³¹ Cimino, et al., *supra* note 22, at 355.

³² *Id.* at 356.

³³ Pagano, *supra* note 5, at 4.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ FY17 COMMUNITY REPORT, *supra* note 26.

tend to seek acceptance from someone outside of their caretakers, and traffickers prey on this by providing support.³⁶

III. POLICIES AND LEGISLATION

Several federal laws have an impact on domestic sex trafficking in the U.S. 18 U.S.C. § 1591 makes it a federal offense to “knowingly . . . recruit[], entice[], harbor[], transport[], provide[], obtain[], [or] maintain[]” someone under the age of 18 “to engage in a commercial sex act.”³⁷ Under this same statute, it does not matter whether someone knowingly had a child engage in sex trafficking or did so with reckless disregard: their consequences still carry the same weight.³⁸ It is important to note that when someone is under the age of 18, proof is not required that the trafficker used “force, threats of force, fraud, [or] coercion” to get the child to engage in sex trafficking.³⁹ Additionally, there are other laws, like 18 U.S.C. §§ 2421 – 2423, that make it illegal to commit other crimes related to the sex trafficking of a minor like transportation across state lines or using various forms of technology to get a child to engage in illegal sexual activities.⁴⁰

For adult survivors of sex trafficking, federal courts must prove that they was “force, fraud, or coercion” into commercial sex for it to be considered sex trafficking.⁴¹ The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Prevention Act (TVPA), introduced in 2000, was “reauthorized and updated” a total of five times and was created to define trafficking on the federal level and fight against trafficking in persons.⁴² In addition to the TVPA, the only other major piece of federal legislation for adult sex trafficking survivors is the Mann Act of 1910 which “makes it a felony to . . . persuade, induce, entice, or coerce an individual to travel across state lines to engage in prostitution.”⁴³

Policies and laws in North Carolina are influenced by national legislation and have a direct impact on confirmed and potential victims of

³⁶ Cimino, et al., *supra* note 22, at 366.

³⁷ *A Citizen’s Guide to U.S. Federal Law on Child Sex Trafficking*, DEP’T. OF JUSTICE, <https://www.justice.gov/criminal-ceos/citizens-guide-us-federal-law-child-sex-trafficking> (last updated May 28, 2020).

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Fact Sheet: Human Trafficking*, ADMIN. FOR CHILD. & FAMILIES (Nov. 21, 2017), <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/otip/fact-sheet/resource/fshumantrafficking>; *Policy & Legislation*, POLARIS, <https://polarisproject.org/policy-and-legislation/> (last visited Aug. 27, 2022).

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ *Human Trafficking Laws & Regulations*, U.S. DEP’T HOMELAND SEC. <https://www.dhs.gov/human-trafficking-laws-regulations> (last updated Jan. 21, 2022).

domestic sex trafficking. The Safe Harbor/Victims of Human Trafficking (GS 14.430-20) law “decriminalizes prostitution-related offenses for minors” and creates a reporting process where every time a child engages in commercial sex, they are placed in the Department of Social Services care.⁴⁴ This legislation provides minors with services to prevent them from obtaining prostitution charges that would impact them later in life, however, the research mentioned previously found that the involvement of the child welfare system creates a heightened risk of sex trafficking.⁴⁵

Legislation GS 115C-81(e)(4a) and SL 2019-245 focus on prevention.⁴⁶ According to these laws, sex trafficking awareness and prevention must be included in the public school curriculum, and all school personnel are required to go through child sex trafficking training.⁴⁷ They also provide good-faith immunity to someone who reports potential child sex trafficking which encourages citizens to report without the fear of legal backlash.⁴⁸ Lastly, SL 2019-158 allows survivors of trafficking to sue their traffickers for damages, increases the legal consequences for sex buyers to decrease the demand for sex trafficking, and expands the list of charges that can be expunged off of a trafficking survivor’s record.⁴⁹ These laws increase access to services, awareness, and education, and decrease demand for sex trafficking.

IV. VULNERABILITY AMONG THE AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULATION

African Americans are impacted by domestic sex trafficking at disproportionate levels.⁵⁰ In 2018, African Americans were one of the top three reported racial groups for trafficking reports in the U.S. at seventeen percent, while they are only thirteen percent of the population.⁵¹ During a two-year reporting period, sex trafficking victims were more likely to be female at ninety-four percent and African American at forty percent.⁵² For minors, African American and Latino children accounted for almost seventy-eight percent of child sex trafficking cases

⁴⁴ N.C. DEP’T OF ADMIN., WHAT IS HUMAN TRAFFICKING? (2022), <https://ncadmin.nc.gov/advocacy/women/human-trafficking/what-human-trafficking#human-trafficking-laws>.

⁴⁵ Cimino, *supra* note 22, at 353.

⁴⁶ N.C. DEP’T OF ADMIN., *supra* note 44.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ 2019 N.C. Sess. Laws 2.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at § 4.2(a).

⁵⁰ CENSUS BUREAU, QUICK FACTS (2020); DEP’T OF JUST., SPECIAL REPORT: CHARACTERISTICS OF SUSPECTED HUMAN TRAFFICKING INCIDENTS, 2008–2010 (2011).

⁵¹ CENSUS BUREAU, *supra* note 50; DEP’T OF JUST., *supra* note 50.

⁵² DEP’T OF JUST., *supra* note 50.

that were investigated by the U.S. Department of Justice.⁵³ In Mecklenburg County, African American minors made up just over seventy percent of minor sex trafficking cases while this population accounts for thirty-three percent of the county's population.⁵⁴

The research discusses the historical context of why African American females may be more vulnerable targets for domestic sex trafficking, and one is the sexualization of African American women.⁵⁵ During times of legal slavery, African American women were viewed as property to be sold and used for sex and reproduction.⁵⁶ This thinking has continued through generations, and according to today's research, African American teens are viewed as less innocent than their Caucasian counterparts when it comes to sexuality;⁵⁷ there is a strong consensus that the media portrays African American females as more sexually aggressive or irresponsible in their sex lives.⁵⁸ Additionally, in the U.S., African Americans make up forty percent of the homeless population;⁵⁹ African Americans make up seventy-nine percent of the homeless population in Mecklenburg County,⁶⁰ and homelessness has been identified as a risk factor for sex trafficking, making African Americans more likely to be exposed to certain sex trafficking vulnerabilities.

V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Systems theory states there are influences or systems that an individual or a community will interact with that have an impact on how they function.⁶¹ Systems theory has been used to assess the current state of survivor care, and the theory can evaluate domestic sex trafficking risk factors because risk factors can be understood as multiple systems that someone has interacted with.⁶² This assists people to identify areas for

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ Pagano, *supra* note 5; CENSUS BUREAU, *supra* note 50.

⁵⁵ Cheryl N. Butler, *The Racial Roots of Human Trafficking*, 62 UCLA L. REV. 1464, 1469–70. (2015).

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 1484, 1492.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 1485.

⁵⁸ Jeannine Amber, *Our Teens' Secret Sex Lives*, ESSENCE, <https://www.essence.com/love/our-teens-secret-sex-lives/> (last visited Apr. 18, 2022).

⁵⁹ Andrew Fraieli, *African Americans have Highest Rate of Homelessness in Minorities for a Decade Running*, HOMELESS VOICE (Aug. 12, 2020), <https://homelessvoice.org/african-americans-have-highest-rate-of-homelessness-in-minorities-for-a-decade-running/>.

⁶⁰ UNC CHARLOTTE URBAN INSTITUTE, 2020 STATE OF HOUSING INSTABILITY & HOMELESSNESS REPORT 73 (2020).

⁶¹ CHARLES H. ZASTROW & KAREN K. KIRST-ASHMAN, UNDERSTANDING HUMAN BEHAVIOR AND THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT 23 (10th ed. 2016).

⁶² JACQUELYN C.A. MESHELEMIH & RAVEN E. LYNCH, THE CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING: HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS 80–81 (2019).

intervention and prevention efforts in domestic sex trafficking.⁶³ According to research mentioned previously, several systems like schools, the child welfare system, families, online platforms, hospitals, and mental health services, can make someone vulnerable to entering or reentering sex trafficking if the systems are not functioning properly.⁶⁴

Another theory that coincides with domestic sex trafficking is the Person-Centered Theory. This theory moves away from the thought that professionals, like social workers and therapists, know what is best for a client and move toward the thought that every person wants to and can fulfill his or her potential.⁶⁵ A form of care found to be effective when assisting survivors of human trafficking is victim-centered care.⁶⁶ This is based on a similar premise to the person-centered theory and addresses the needs of a survivor of trafficking (or other crimes) by making sure that clients are active participants in their care.⁶⁷ With at-risk trafficking populations, the person-centered theory can still be used, as literature shows sex trafficking victims have been subjected to crimes like abuse before entering a sex trafficking situation which would call for the victim-centered approach to be enacted.⁶⁸

VI. SPECIALIZED SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Domestic sex trafficking prevention efforts exist across the U.S., including Mecklenburg County, North Carolina; however, there is limited research on best practices in the prevention of domestic sex trafficking. Research appears to focus on interventions that address the vulnerabilities that can lead to domestic sex trafficking, like early intervention. Using these existing practices, the development of new evidence-based domestic sex trafficking prevention programs can occur.

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ See generally Cimino et. al., *supra* note 22, at 354–55, 365–66.

⁶⁵ ZASTROW & KIRST-ASHMAN, *supra* note 61.

⁶⁶ *Implementing a Victim-Centered, Trauma Informed Program for Survivors of Human Trafficking*, OFFICE FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME (Sept. 24, 2020), https://htebc.ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh311/files/media/document/Q_A_Implementing%20a%20Victim%20Centered%20Trauma%20Informed%20Program%20for%20Survivors%20of%20Human%20Trafficking_508c.pdf.

⁶⁷ HUMAN TRAFFICKING TASK FORCE E-GUIDE, OFFICE FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME § 1.3, <https://www.ovcttac.gov/taskforceguide/eguide/1-understanding-human-trafficking/13-victim-centered-approach/#:~:text=A%20victim%2Dcentered%20approach%20seeks,role%20in%20seeing%20their%20traffickers> (last visited Apr. 20, 2022).

⁶⁸ *Sex Trafficking*, CTRS. FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/trafficking.html> (Feb. 4, 2022).

VII. BEST PRACTICES LITERATURE REVIEW

The U.S. reported that their prevention efforts increased through educational and training activities for internal personnel and community stakeholders as well as outreach events for at-risk populations, and legal means through harsher penalties for traffickers.⁶⁹ Although forms of domestic sex trafficking prevention are being used, there is limited research on evidence-based prevention interventions for domestic sex trafficking. Vulnerabilities of domestic sex trafficking like homelessness, abuse, and involvement in child welfare systems⁷⁰ are also some of the vulnerabilities that would be considered Adverse Childhood Experiences, also known as ACEs.⁷¹ ACEs have been connected with involvement in sex trafficking,⁷² therefore, programs that address the vulnerabilities mentioned in ACEs, like the Attachment, Regulation and Competency (ARC) Framework and mentoring, may be effective in addressing domestic sex trafficking prevention. Literature shows that early intervention programs, like those with the ARC framework component or mentoring, have positive impacts in decreasing ACEs vulnerabilities that can lead to crimes like domestic sex trafficking.⁷³

A. *Attachment, Regulation, and Competency (ARC) Framework*

The ARC framework is an evidence-based intervention that focuses on three domains in a clinical approach for youth who have experienced adverse experiences leading to trauma: attachment, self-regulation, and competency.⁷⁴ This intervention focuses on self-regulation so the child can cope with symptoms of trauma and provides the child with community resources to encourage self-regulation.⁷⁵ The ARC Framework also improves the relationship between the child and their caregiving system through family sessions and community resources for the family

⁶⁹ STATE DEP'T, *United States, in 2020 TRAFFICKING IN PERSON REPORT 515, 515-23* (2020), <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-TIP-Report-Complete-062420-FINAL.pdf>.

⁷⁰ *Understanding Human Trafficking*, POLARIS, <https://polarisproject.org/understanding-human-trafficking/> (last visited Apr. 12, 2022).

⁷¹ *Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences*, CTRS. FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html> (Apr. 6, 2022).

⁷² *The Original ACE Study*, NAT. HUM. TRAFFICKING TRAINING AND TECH. ASSISTANCE CTR., https://nhttac.acf.hhs.gov/soar/eguide/stop/adverse_childhood_experiences (last visited Apr. 12, 2022).

⁷³ *What is ARC?*, ARC FRAMEWORK, <https://arcframework.org/what-is-arc/> (last visited Apr. 12, 2022).

⁷⁴ *Id.*

⁷⁵ *Id.*

as a whole which is the attachment portion of the practice.⁷⁶ In several studies, the ARC framework was found to be effective in behavioral and cognitive mental health symptoms for both children exposed to ACEs and their caregivers in various populations like adopted children,⁷⁷ youth in the juvenile justice system,⁷⁸ and elementary and preschool-age children in high ACEs communities.⁷⁹ One study showed that children with ACEs and their caregivers with high stress had improved functioning after the implementation and follow-up of the ARC treatment.⁸⁰ The literature identifies the ARC Framework as a key to stopping the development of destructive behaviors in children and an intervention that can change the future trajectory of a child's life.⁸¹

B. Mentorship

Programs with a mentorship component have a positive impact on childhood ACEs and deter a child's formation of harmful behaviors.⁸² One study suggested that having constant interaction with a trusted adult during childhood decreased the impact of the adversities children faced.⁸³ Literature showed that quality relationships with mentors can assist abused children in using positive coping skills, and no relationship was found between mentoring and children's avoidance of coping skills.⁸⁴ Peer to peer mentoring has also shown positive outcomes on mental health symptoms for children who have experienced ACEs as long as the mentor relationships have trust, open communication, and connectedness.⁸⁵

⁷⁶ *Id.*

⁷⁷ *About ARC: Research*, ARC FRAMEWORK, <https://arcframework.org/what-is-arc/research/> (last visited Apr. 12, 2022).

⁷⁸ *Id.*

⁷⁹ Cheryl Holmes et al., *A Model for Creating a Supportive Trauma-Informed Culture for Children in Preschool Settings*, 24 J. CHILD FAM. STUD. 1650, 1656 (2015).

⁸⁰ *About ARC: Research*, *supra* note 77.

⁸¹ See Hilary B. Hodgdon et al., *Development and Implementation of Trauma-Informed Programming in Youth Residential Treatment Centers Using the ARC Framework*, 28 J. FAM. VIOLENCE 679, 690 (2013); see also Cheryl Holmes et al., *supra* note 79, at 1652, 1658.

⁸² Mark A. Bellis et al., *Does Continuous Trusted Adult Support in Childhood Impart Life-Course Resilience Against Adverse Childhood Experiences - A Retrospective Study on Adult Health-Harming Behaviours and Mental Well-Being*, 17 BMC PSYCHIATRY 1, 10 (2017); see Ashley A. Chesmore et al., *Mentoring Relationship Quality and Maltreated Children's Coping*, 60 AM. J. MTY. PSYCH. 229, 238 (2017); see also Lesley J. Douglas et al., *Rewriting Stories of Trauma Through Peer-to-Peer Mentoring for and by At-Risk Young People*, 28 INT'L J. MENTAL HEALTH NURSING 744, 753 (2019).

⁸³ Bellis et al., *supra* note 82.

⁸⁴ Chesmore et al., *supra* note 82.

⁸⁵ Douglas et al., *supra* note 82.

C. Domestic Sex Trafficking Outreach Prevention Programs in Mecklenburg County

This Author gathered detailed information from six organizations working in Mecklenburg County as part of her work for The A21 Campaign, Inc., a global anti-human trafficking non-profit organization.⁸⁶ Three of the organizations had prevention programs.⁸⁷ All three used education and awareness prevention to the public and outreach prevention programs that work with populations believed to have a high risk of victimization of domestic sex trafficking.⁸⁸ Only one of the outreach prevention programs was identified as an early intervention program and even though this early intervention program addresses all of the ACEs, there is a lack of longitudinal data on the program's ability to prevent domestic sex trafficking from occurring.⁸⁹ Two of the programs stated they did not have a prevention program, but they provide education for the community about human trafficking.⁹⁰

This author researched other organizations working in Mecklenburg County that did not directly report to The A21 Campaign, Inc. Of those organizations, seven had prevention programs on their website in the area of education but the education was not listed as human trafficking prevention.⁹¹ Only two organizations listed a prevention

⁸⁶ *Home*, JUST. MINISTRIES, <https://www.justiceministries.org/> (last visited Aug. 15, 2022); *Join the Fight*, PROJECT FIGHT, <https://www.salvationarmycarolinas.org/projectfight/join-the-fight> (last visited Apr. 18, 2022); *Our Solution*, A21, <https://www.a21.org/content/our-solution/grdpnc> (last visited Apr. 16, 2022); *Prevention & Intervention Strategies*, PRESENT AGE MINISTRIES, <https://presentageministries.org/prevention/> (last visited Apr. 16, 2022) [*hereinafter* PRESENT AGE MINISTRIES]; *Prevention and Education*, PAT'S PLACE CHILD ADVOC. CTR., <https://www.patsplacecac.org/what-we-do/prevention-and-education/> (last visited Apr. 16, 2022) [*hereinafter* PAT'S PLACE CHILD ADVOC. CTR.]; *Sexual Assault Treatment at Atrium Health*, ATRIUM HEALTH, <https://atriumhealth.org/medical-services/emergency-services/sexual-assault-strangulation-treatment> (last visited Aug. 15, 2022).

⁸⁷ PRESENT AGE MINISTRIES, *supra* note 86; *see* PAT'S PLACE CHILD ADVOC. CTR., *supra* note 86; *see also* *Our Solution*, *supra* note 86.

⁸⁸ *Id.*

⁸⁹ PRESENT AGE MINISTRIES, *supra* note 86.

⁹⁰ Pagano, *supra* note 5, at 5; *Humans Should Never Be For Sale*, PROJECT FIGHT, <https://www.salvationarmycarolinas.org/projectfight/> (last visited Aug. 15, 2022).

⁹¹ *See Community Outreach*, FED. BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, <https://www.fbi.gov/about/community-outreach> (last visited Apr. 20, 2022); *Prevention Work*, MECKLENBURG CNTY. GOV'T, <https://www.mecknc.gov/CommunitySupportServices/PI/Prevention/Pages/Home.aspx> (last visited Apr. 20, 2022); *Resource Center*, COUNCIL FOR CHILD.'S RTS., <https://www.cfrights.org/resource-center/#resources> (last visited Apr. 20, 2022); *Sexual Trauma Resource Center*, SAFE ALL., <https://www.safealliance.org/programs/sexual-trauma-resource-center/> (last visited Apr. 20, 2022); *Battered Immigrant Project*, LEGAL AID OF N.C., <https://www.legalaidnc.org/about-us/projects/battered-immigrant-project> (last visited Apr. 19, 2022); *Our Mission*, LILY PAD HAVEN, <https://www.lilypadhaven.org> (last

program specific to human trafficking in the form of legal assistance to victims.⁹² Overall, the prevention efforts in Mecklenburg County are reflective of prevention efforts in the United States; there are an array of prevention definitions and very few, if any, mention the use of long-term data for evidence-based prevention practices.

VIII. EMPOWERMENT-BASED SPECIALIZATION DESCRIPTION

A lack of evidence-based practices in the field of U.S. domestic sex trafficking prevention, specifically in early intervention programs, calls for the creation and implementation of an early intervention domestic sex trafficking prevention program that assesses, treats, connects, and supports minors pre-domestic sex trafficking. The intervention would provide qualifying at-risk minor clients and their caregiving systems with trauma-informed clinical services using the ARC framework and connect them with a paid mentor. This intervention incorporates evidence-based practices that address ACEs in children and create a future course void of domestic sex trafficking.

To find appropriate participants, at-risk minor clients should be screened using the ACEs survey in public and private schools as early as kindergarten, hospitals and medical offices, the Department of Social Services, homeless and domestic violence shelters, local directories like 211, and mental health facilities. The program should include bi-weekly meetings with a licensed social worker both individually with the at-risk minor client as well as with the at-risk minor client's caregiving system utilizing the ARC framework. The goal of each meeting should be to focus on providing coping skills of self-regulation for the child and caregiving system and providing them community resources to address needs and further encourage the use of those coping skills. Another goal of the meetings would be to address any issues with attachment between the child and their caregiving system. The program would also include bi-weekly one-on-one time with the at-risk minor client and a paid mentor to engage in activities the client enjoys. This program would continue until the at-risk minor client reaches the age of 18, then services would move to an as-needed basis where the social worker and mentor will contact the at-risk minor client and caregiving system monthly to see if they have a need that must be addressed.

This proposed intervention would address the social work values of service and social justice by helping children in need who encounter

visited Apr. 19, 2022); see also *Human Trafficking Pro Bono Project*, MOORE & VAN ALLEN, <https://www.mvalaw.com/pp/flexpage-Human-Trafficking-Pro-Bono-Project.pdf?19813> (last visited Apr. 19, 2022).

⁹² See *Battered Immigrant Project*, *supra* note 91; see also *Human Trafficking Pro Bono Project*, *supra* note 91.

ACEs and providing them services to prevent them from domestic sex trafficking⁹³ which is a social justice issue violating people's rights. Empowerment within and outside the client would be the key empowerment practices highlighted in this proposed intervention. At-risk minor clients would feel empowered to engage in positive coping skills, self-regulation, and positive activities in the community through the skills they learn in the ARC framework. Additionally, at-risk minor clients, their caregiving system, and mentors would feel empowered with one another to work towards a common goal, which is the prevention of domestic sex trafficking.

IX. ENGAGEMENT AND ASSESSMENT

The early intervention domestic sex trafficking prevention program engages at-risk minor clients individually and within their respective communities. Prospective clients would be assessed by a licensed social worker using the ACEs survey to see whether they would qualify for the program based on the number of ACEs they experienced. An ACE score of four or higher has been found to indicate a high risk for toxic stress,⁹⁴ so this score would qualify someone for the intervention. Qualifying clients and their caregiving system (parent, guardian, foster parent, treatment facility, etc.) would meet with a licensed clinical social worker to assess their needs linked to ACEs; ACEs include physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, physical and emotional neglect, and household dysfunctions including mental illness, an incarcerated relative, a parent treated violently, substance abuse, and divorce.⁹⁵ The program would empower an at-risk minor client through mentors who encourage the client to utilize their strengths, coping skills, and resources to prevent poor behaviors from forming.

X. INTERVENTION AND EVALUATION

To evaluate whether the intervention is effective in the prevention of domestic sex trafficking, longitudinal studies on the reduction of the at-risk minor client's vulnerabilities and lack of entry into domestic sex

⁹³ *Read the Code of Ethics*, NAT'L ASS'N OF SOC. WORKERS, <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English> (last visited Apr. 19, 2022).

⁹⁴ *ACE Screening Clinical Workflows, ACEs and Toxic Stress Risk Assessment Algorithm, and ACE-Associated Health Conditions: For Pediatrics and Adults*, ACES AWARE (Apr. 2020), <https://www.acesaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/ACE-Clinical-Workflows-Algorithms-and-ACE-Associated-Health-Conditions.pdf>.

⁹⁵ *Risk and Protective Factors*, CTRS. FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/riskprotectivefactors.html> (Jan. 5, 2021).

trafficking would be conducted both during and after the intervention. Since the prevention program's main focus is addressing ACEs and vulnerabilities in children that often lead to domestic sex trafficking, it is important to utilize a tool that assesses these vulnerabilities. The International Justice Mission's Assessment of Survivor Outcomes (ASO) is a validated evaluation tool that assesses individuals on safety, legal protection, mental wellbeing, economic empowerment and education, social support, and physical well-being because these are vulnerabilities that research shows lead to human trafficking.⁹⁶ The ASO is completed at the start of an at-risk minor client's services, quarterly during the receipt of the intervention, and yearly post-intervention to determine how successful the intervention is in decreasing the level of vulnerability and prevention of entering domestic sex trafficking.

XI. IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK

A. *Intersection with Core Values*

An early intervention domestic sex trafficking prevention program encompasses several values of social work. This potential program is at no cost to the at-risk minor client and their caregiving system because the goal is not for the organization running the program to make money, but to provide services to prevent a vulnerable child from entering a domestic sex trafficking situation. An intervention that assists clients with social issues using their skills and knowledge with no minimal expectation of significant financial return is a clear alignment with a social worker's values.⁹⁷

One of the intentions of the potential early intervention program is to prevent a vulnerable population from entering domestic sex trafficking due to their risk factors. An important social work value is that of social justice, where social workers challenge social injustice through efforts of change for vulnerable populations to make sure that members of those vulnerable populations have opportunities that match those around them.⁹⁸ A large percentage of domestic sex trafficking victims are African Americans,⁹⁹ so this potential intervention must focus on areas with high African American populations. A focus on this population follows social

⁹⁶ *Assessment of Survivor Outcomes: Guidance Manual*, INT'L JUST. MISSION (2018), <https://ijmstoragelive.blob.core.windows.net/ijmna/documents/studies/ASO-Guidance-Manual.pdf>.

⁹⁷ *Read the Code of Ethics*, *supra* note 93.

⁹⁸ *Id.*

⁹⁹ *See* DUREN BANKS & TRACEY KYCKELHAHN, CHARACTERISTICS OF SUSPECTED HUMAN TRAFFICKING INCIDENTS, 2008-2010, at 6 (2011); *see also* Pagano *supra* note 5, at 3-4.

work values of social justice because the intervention assists African Americans by decreasing their risk of being disproportionately impacted by domestic sex trafficking.

Relationships are at the heart of the potential early intervention domestic sex trafficking prevention program. The relationship between the child and their caregiving system will be fostered through the ARC framework sessions and long-term consistent relationships will be built between mentors and the child. Social workers understand that relationships built, like the ones in this intervention, can lead to effective change.¹⁰⁰ Instead of forming a relationship where the client obtains all of their support from the social worker, social workers use community relationships through mentors and existing relationships within the client's caregiving system to support the client. The social worker acts as a partner with the client and facilitates positive relationships outside of themselves instead of creating a dependency, which is a value of social work.¹⁰¹

B. Ethical Implications

As social workers, there are standards to assist in navigating ethical dilemmas.¹⁰² With the potential early intervention domestic sex trafficking prevention program, several ethical issues may arise. There are a number of ways to combat these issues if they arise. When assisting an at-risk minor client and their caregiving system in the early intervention program, there could be situations where the needs of the minor and the needs of the caregiving system conflict. For example, if an at-risk minor client builds enough rapport with their mentor and reveals they are in a relationship with someone, but this new partner identifies as a gang member, this could pose a potential safety risk to the caregiving system. However, this disclosure allows the mentor to explore with the client why this relationship is comfortable for them and provide resources that may give the same sense of comfort to replace the comfort the client is obtaining from their new relationship.

This situation, and ones similar to it, pose two ethical conflicts. Whose interests and rights are best served: the rights of the client or the rights of the caregiving system? Also, does the mentor need to disclose information to the client's caregiving system or social worker? The prevention program staff and mentors must always remember that their commitment is to the client's care and privacy, not the caregiving system. A social worker's commitment to their client and the client's interest is

¹⁰⁰ *Read the Code of Ethics, supra* note 93.

¹⁰¹ *Id.*

¹⁰² *Id.*

always primary and unless any incidents would require a staff member or mentor to report incidents of abuse or neglect, the primary client's interests, in addition to their right to privacy, always come first.¹⁰³

Another area where an ethical issue could present itself in the potential intervention surrounds when the client's services should end. From the age of entry to the program to the time the client is eighteen years old, the client and their caregiving system are active participants in the program. After the age of eighteen, the client and their caregiving system are no longer in the program so it would mean bi-weekly social worker meetings would cease, and the mentor will no longer be paid. Due to this service change, there may be a question of whether the mentor and the social worker have a responsibility to continue a relationship with the client after the age of eighteen. Mentors and social workers should follow the social worker's ethical principle of the termination of services. Social workers should end a client's services and their professional relationship if the services they are providing no longer serve the needs or interests of the client.¹⁰⁴ However, a mentor's job may never end, paid or unpaid. Their service to the client is to emotionally support them and talk about life issues that arise; this is something that can continue well after an individual turns 18 years old. Additionally, since domestic sex trafficking is something that does not just target children, it would be best to leave contact between the client, the client's caregiving system, and the social worker, open after the client turns eighteen years old. This way, if the client or caregiving system encounters any issues that may place them in a situation leaving them vulnerable to a domestic sex trafficking situation, they have a social worker who can connect them with appropriate steps and resources that minimize the impact of a potential vulnerability. The transition from bi-weekly contact with the client and caregiving system, to an as-needed service, is something that could be perceived as abandonment on behalf of the client. However, it is the social worker's job as the client reaches the age of eighteen to have consistent communication with the client, outline the new relationship, and explain the benefits of the new relationship in order to mitigate feelings of abandonment.¹⁰⁵

C. Moving Forward

As prevention programs are developed and implemented, it is important to consider several factors moving forward. Oftentimes, victims and potential victims are viewed as individuals coming from upper-middle-class Caucasian families, which dates back to the "white slavery"

¹⁰³ *Id.*

¹⁰⁴ *Id.*

¹⁰⁵ *See generally id.*

movement.¹⁰⁶ It is important to note that research shows the majority of domestic sex trafficking victims, both adults and minors, are African Americans,¹⁰⁷ therefore prevention programming should not only address the African American community, but also employ active participation from this community in the development of such programs. Furthermore, shifting some, but certainly not all, efforts and funding of domestic sex trafficking prevention programs from education, awareness, outreach, and legal to early intervention could have positive outcomes in preventing individuals from entering domestic sex trafficking situations. Equally as important, longitudinal research on the effectiveness of various prevention programs of all forms would be beneficial in seeing which prevention efforts are most effective in stopping domestic sex trafficking before it starts.

CONCLUSION

Much of the literature covers domestic sex trafficking in the U.S., its vulnerabilities, its legislation, and existing prevention interventions at the national, state, and county levels. It also indicates a clear gap in evidence-based domestic sex trafficking early intervention prevention programs both nationally and at individual state levels, as shown in the case example from Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Addressing the prevention of domestic sex trafficking and mitigation of further victimization will require clear distinctions in prevention definitions as well as the implementation of and evaluation of evidence-based early intervention programs. Populations like the African American community will remain exceptionally vulnerable to domestic sex trafficking until systemic needs are addressed in the creation and implementation of any actions moving forward.

¹⁰⁶ Butler, *supra* note 55, at 1489–90.

¹⁰⁷ See BANKS & KYCKELHAHN, *supra* note 99, at 5; Pagano, *supra* note 5, at 3–4.

