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## Coates' Canons Blog: Human Trafficking in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Article: <https://canons.sog.unc.edu/human-trafficking-in-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

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Trafficking, like health disparities, targets marginalized groups. The equation of human trafficking involves three types of participants:

- People who are vulnerable
- People who arrange and profit from the trafficking
- People who are customers

The Covid-19 pandemic is generating new vulnerabilities to be exploited, new strategies for recruiting or marketing victims, and now a risk of exposure to COVID-19.

Local government staff should be aware of these dynamics as they interact with residents during the daily flow of public work. They might be seeing the indicators of trafficking without recognizing the implications.

Bear in mind that predators, whether human or animal, tend to be highly adaptable to evolving conditions in their environments. If a new vulnerability emerges, or if a new population becomes affected by any pre-existing vulnerability, predators will change their strategies to take advantage of the opportunity. As an example of this adaptability, read this article from CNN about the successful strategies the Mafia is using in Italy to exploit people with a desperate need for cash due to the economic impact of COVID-19.

How are sex and labor trafficking adapting to the pandemic? These tend to be chronically under-reported crimes, according to professionals in the field. How do we think the victimization is changing? Here are a few examples:

- **Online grooming and exploitation of children.** The FBI notes that children are spending more time online, with potentially less oversight from their parents. Predators who lurk in online games and chat rooms can use this as an opportunity to build relationships with children and teens. Here is a link to a recent press release from the FBI on the risk. Responding to the Covid-19 outbreak, Shared Hope International, an anti-trafficking advocacy organization, offers a training video on online safety [here](#).
- **Abusive landlords.** Households under intensifying financial stress might be pressured to provide access to family members in exchange for rent, food, medicine, or other support. This access could come in various forms, including labor, sexual contact, videotaping, or forced marriage. A blogpost from Polaris summarizes the threat from predatory landlords.
- **Labor trafficking.** Economic stress might force people to take jobs that are exploitive, dangerous, or pay less than minimum wage. Here is an article that describes how that exploitation typically takes place. Covid-19 also creates a new form of risk in any form of close working conditions, including those found in factories and meat-packing plants.
- Always vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking, farmworkers, both documented and undocumented, are here in North Carolina for the growing season and are at increased risk of infection due to their living and working conditions. Cases of Covid-19 have turned up already in the farmworker population, according to Nancy Hagan, Senior Human Trafficking Analyst with Project NO REST. "Farmworkers might rely on the employer for access to healthcare, food, and other services. Their contact with resources is limited by lack of transportation and internet access, in addition to language and cultural barriers. The farmworkers might also be reluctant to seek medical services due to fear of job loss, as well as uncertainty about their legal rights."
- **Sex trafficking.** Some ads now make reference to trafficked victims being virus-free or willing to wear masks and gloves. "They're trying to work in safety measures to ensure that customers would feel at ease to meet up with people in the ads," FBI special agent Brian Gander told ABC News.
- **Massage Parlors.** The closure of "non-essential" businesses by local and state governments as part of larger



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efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 means that the illicit massage industry is not operating as usual.

- Heyrick Research reports that the chatter in online message boards suggests that some massage parlors are operating clandestinely, and some are employing risk management practices, such as taking the temperature of or using an alcohol-based disinfectant spray on customers, discontinuing certain sex acts, etc.
- This article from Dallas, Texas, speaks not only to the importance of local government's enforcement of shelter-at-home measures, but also agrees with Heyrick Research that the potential for fraud exists as the owners of the illicit massage businesses seek to take advantage of small business assistance programs offered at the state or federal level.
- Some victims are taking the pandemic as an opportunity to escape and seek safe shelter. Survivors report to RESTORE NYC that the health risks of COVID-19 and unemployment are top safety concerns for them, diverting their attention away from the fear of their traffickers.
- Traffickers will be seeking to recruit new victims in this "industry" and might focus on U.S. citizens, as opposed to women who come from Korea or China. Heyrick Research notes that the impact of worldwide travel restrictions will also likely decrease the recruitment of foreign-born victims.

**What can you do now?** Learning to see the indicators of human trafficking is an important skill for local government staff to develop.

- One source of excellent online training modules about human trafficking, SOAR (Stop, Observe, Ask, Respond), is available for health professionals, organizations, and communities.
- Print resources specifically written for local governments are available to download from the School of Government's resource page on human trafficking. Many more training resources are provided within these bulletins.

Remember that trafficking victims rarely identify as such and will likely evade direct questions that use that language. Instead, learn to ask indirectly about their sense of safety, freedom, and health. In terms of the intersection of Covid-19 risk factors and human trafficking, questions such as the following can start the discussion:

- How physically close are you to the people you work with or serve as you perform your job duties?
- What opportunities do you have to wear a facemask, wash your hands, or disinfect surfaces as you interact with others?
- Has anyone asked you to do anything that makes you feel at risk of infection or unsafe, in general?
- Have you been offered any uncomfortable opportunities to make money or to exchange something you have for something you need?
- What can you do if you need health care? Are you able to get the support or medicine you need?

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affects our most vulnerable populations in much the same way that the threat of victimization through human trafficking does. As we interact with members of our community, we will provide greater service by building our awareness of that intersection of risk factors.

Anyone, anywhere, who suspects a situation might involve human trafficking can report it through the National Human Trafficking Hotline. Callers who are uncertain about the indicators witnessed are welcome to call and share their concerns.

1 (888) 373-7888

### **National Human Trafficking Hotline**

**SMS:** 233733 (Text "HELP" or "INFO")

**Hours:** 24 hours, 7 days a week

**Languages:** English, Spanish and 200 more languages

**Website:** [humantraffickinghotline.org](https://humantraffickinghotline.org)



## Links

- [www.cnn.com/2020/04/19/europe/italy-mafia-exploiting-coronavirus-crisis-aid-intl/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2020/04/19/europe/italy-mafia-exploiting-coronavirus-crisis-aid-intl/index.html)
- [www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/school-closings-due-to-covid-19-present-potential-for-increased-risk-of-child-exploitation](http://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/school-closings-due-to-covid-19-present-potential-for-increased-risk-of-child-exploitation)
- [sharedhope.org/what-we-do/prevent/awareness/internetsafety/](http://sharedhope.org/what-we-do/prevent/awareness/internetsafety/)
- [polarisproject.org/blog/2020/05/landlords-coercing-tenants-unable-to-pay-rent-to-provide-sex-sex-trafficking-or-not/](http://polarisproject.org/blog/2020/05/landlords-coercing-tenants-unable-to-pay-rent-to-provide-sex-sex-trafficking-or-not/)
- [polarisproject.org/blog/2020/04/covid-19-may-increase-human-trafficking-in-vulnerable-communities/](http://polarisproject.org/blog/2020/04/covid-19-may-increase-human-trafficking-in-vulnerable-communities/)
- [abcnews.go.com/US/fbi-task-force-focuses-human-trafficking-amid-coronavirus/story?id=70329172](http://abcnews.go.com/US/fbi-task-force-focuses-human-trafficking-amid-coronavirus/story?id=70329172)
- [www.heyrickresearch.org/research/snapshot-assessing-the-potential-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-imi](http://www.heyrickresearch.org/research/snapshot-assessing-the-potential-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-imi)
- [www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/05/03/sex-traffickers-at-massage-parlors-are-evading-shelter-in-place-orders/](http://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/05/03/sex-traffickers-at-massage-parlors-are-evading-shelter-in-place-orders/)
- [restorenc.org/updates/covid-19](http://restorenc.org/updates/covid-19)
- [nhhtac.acf.hhs.gov/soar](http://nhhtac.acf.hhs.gov/soar)
- [cplg.sog.unc.edu/learn-now/human-trafficking/resources-for-specific-positions/](http://cplg.sog.unc.edu/learn-now/human-trafficking/resources-for-specific-positions/)
- [humantraffickinghotline.org/](http://humantraffickinghotline.org/)