"I Don't Want my Pain to be for Nothing": Sex Trafficking survivors on their Recovery and Reintegration Process

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“I DON’T WANT MY PAIN TO BE FOR NOTHING”: SEX TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS ON THEIR RECOVERY AND REINTEGRATION PROCESS

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Abstract

The current discourse on sex trafficking is plagued by a lack of consensus among scholars, a clear lack of societal understanding, and no clear valid treatment of the survivors of this crime. The limited existing research on sex trafficking survivors attempts to fit them into specific programs and services. This thesis differs from existing studies by using in-depth interviews with six sex trafficking survivors about the challenges they have experienced since exiting trafficking, to discover what was successful in their ongoing pursuit of reintegrating into society and creating a life with a high level of agency. These qualitative data resulted in several themes, including difficulties acquiring any resources from governmental bodies, battling continued societal stigma, and no clear direction for going forward. The findings not only identify the tangible resources available to the survivors, but also attempts to understand the struggles the survivors faced as they learned what helped and what did not help in their recovery processes.
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CHAPTER ONE: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In no area of the social sciences has ideology contaminated knowledge more pervasively than in writings on the sex industry. Too often in this area, the canons of scientific inquiry are suspended and research deliberately skewed to serve a particular political agenda. (Weitzer, 2005:934)

Introduction

The United States Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) defined sex trafficking as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage or slavery” (U.S. Department of State, 2000:1470). This legislation was an effort to provide benefits for survivors of sex trafficking and to create a system of punishment for people who traffic others (Reiger 2007). For my thesis, I will use the term sex trafficking “victims” to refer to those individuals still being sex trafficked, while the term sex trafficking “survivors” will refer to individuals who have exited sex trafficking, either on their own or by outside intervention.

For many people, sex trafficking victimization begins at a young age, and hundreds of thousands are believed to be at risk of this phenomenon (Kortla and Wommack 2011). What distinguishes sex trafficking victims from other human trafficking victims is that these victims are typically taken from their homes, and trafficked for the purpose of
providing sex. While sex trafficking can occur in many forms, it often ends with the criminalization of the *victims* in a society that simultaneously provides them with no resources to recover (Dempsy 2015). These both, criminalization and lack of resources, present different barriers for the survivors. For example, they are stripped of rights such as voting, and will likely have a significant difficulty with finding jobs and housing (Barnard 2015). Additionally, sex trafficking survivors can experience further challenges due to their mental states, such as not asking for help for fear of being a burden (Aron et al. 2006). However, increased funding, awareness/education, and policy changes have been recommended to increase the recovery success for survivors (Schauer and Wheaton 2006). This is exemplified in the study for this thesis when a participant discussed how sex trafficking survivors can be assisted in their exiting by saying “No, leave them in. Leave them in that life because there’s nothing out here for them.”

Globally, countries can be placed in one of the three tiers laid out by the TVPA. The first tier indicates full agreement of the standards outlined by the TVPA. The second tier (watch list) includes countries not in full compliance but are making significant efforts to comply with the standards. The third tier includes countries not meeting the minimum standards and are also not making many attempts to meet those standards (Department of State, 2015: 49). Legal trends show there has been a steady rise in prosecutions while the number of convictions has fluctuated over the past five years. The largest list is Tier 2, while the smallest is Tier 3. The U.S has demonstrated progress in the field of law enforcement, meaning it falls into Tier 1 (U.S. Department of State 2015:49). The tier identifications are based on a country’s efforts to:
1. Enactment of laws prohibiting severe forms of trafficking in persons, as defined by the TVPA and provision of criminal punishments for trafficking offenses.

2. Criminal penalties prescribed for human trafficking offenses with a maximum of at least four years’ deprivation of liberty, or a more severe penalty.

3. Implementation of human trafficking laws through vigorous prosecution of the prevalent forms of trafficking in the country and sentencing of offenders.

4. Proactive victim identification measures with systematic procedures to guide law enforcement and other government support front-line responders link the process of victim identification.

5. Government funding a partnership with NGO’s to provide victims with access to primary health care, counseling, and shelter, allowing them to recount their trafficking experiences to trained social counselors and law enforcement in an environment of minimal pressure.

6. Victim protection efforts that include access to service and shelter without detention and with legal alternatives to removal to countries in which victims would face retribution or hardship.

7. The extent to which a government ensures victims are provided with legal and other assistance and that, consistent with domestic law, proceeding are not prejudicial to victims’ rights, dignity, or psychological well-being.
8. The extent to which a government ensures the safe, humane, and—to the extent possible—voluntary repatriation and reintegration of victims.

9. Governmental measures to prevent human trafficking, including efforts to curb practice identified as contributing factors to human trafficking, such as employers’ confiscation of foreign workers’ passports and allowing labor recruiters to charge prospective migrants excessive fees (U.S. Department of State, 2015: 45-46).

The History of Sex Trafficking Legislation

Before presenting a review of the research on sex trafficking victims and survivors and the resources available to them, it is first useful to outline the history that led to identifying sex trafficking as a social problem and the resulting legislation specifically designed to combat it. The discussion of sex trafficked women began in the Nineteenth Century, motivated by racist and nationalistic fears that white women were at risk of being seduced by men from South America, Africa, and/or Asia (O’Brien et al. 2013). The Nineteenth Century is also the age in which sex trafficking was first linked to the issue of sexual exploitation, started by a campaign by well-known feminist, Josephine Butler, entitled “White slave trade” (Alvarez and Alessi 2012).

O’Brien and her colleagues report that these ideas likely arose out of an anxiety of an ever-evolving society that was slowly becoming more accepting of sexual promiscuity. Another possibility for the increase in attention sex trafficking received was due to higher levels of migration (O’Brien et al. 2013). The early attention to sex trafficking as a social issue included significant concern that the individuals entered voluntarily, which
understandably impacted how fighting this issue was framed. More specifically, the framing was that confronting sex trafficking had to target sexually deviant behavior which included targeting the victims. Indeed, there was specific targeting towards “the age of consent, the abolition of prostitution, pornography, and the gendered double standard for sexual behavior” (O’Brien et al. 2013:3).

The first anti-sex trafficking meeting took place in London at the turn of the twentieth Century, with the entire conference quickly devoted to the societal stigma of prostitution, and was followed by anti-sex trafficking campaigns appearing elsewhere (O’Brien et al. 2013). These conferences confronting sex trafficking indicated the world had created a connection between prostitution and sex trafficking. This narrative even shows up in one of the first documents about trafficking from the United Nations Convention on Human Trafficking and Prostitution in 1949 (Marinova and James 2012). These conventions ultimately became the primary influence on how sex trafficking and its victims were presented in the nineteenth and twentieth Centuries, as sex trafficking grew increasingly associated with prostitution. This association was created to advance an anti-prostitution political narrative (Alvarez and Alessi 2012; Soderlund 2005).

Support for these conventions was not universal, as they seemed to lack a specific focus (O’Brien et al. 2013). Towards the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first Centuries, support for fighting sex trafficking began to rise once more (Marinova and James 2012; O’Brien et al. 2013). Yet again, fighting sex trafficking was strongly motivated by a fear of sexual deviance, not the exploitation of the victims. This time, however, there was resistance to sex trafficking that also came from feminists motivated
to fight pornography and other aspects of sexuality that had been victimizing women, including prostitution and violence against women (O’Brien et al. 2012; Soderlund 2005). Throughout the 1900s, battling sex trafficking was marketed more as an issue of women’s rights (Alvarez and Alessi 2012). In the 1980s and 1990s, this resistance became more focused on movements addressing violence against women, particularly in Global South countries, where this violence became a leading contributor to women’s involvement in sex trafficking (Miller 2004; Soderlund 2005).

There also became a growing concern with sex trafficking tourism to other countries in the late 1900s (Alverez and Alessi 2012). This time the idea of an “epidemic” sprang into the public eye during the growing concern of the United States’ AIDS crisis. The connection between AIDS and sex trafficking can be displayed by a policy created by the U.S. Agency for International Development that would not provide organizations located in countries outside the U.S. funding for AIDS research unless they were strictly against prostitution and sex trafficking (Alverez and Alessi 2012).

Through the development of this issue in the public eye, sex trafficking became racialized. People began to see non-white women as a higher risk of being victimized (O’Brien et al. 2012). Sex-trafficking started to be framed as an issue primarily surrounding people of color, and women from countries outside of the U.S.; these populations were soon labeled as the most victimized and vulnerable groups of people (O’Brien et al. 2012). A wider focus on border control for different countries also grew. This message of rights for women, including freedom from violence, gained significant traction in the anti-sex

An ongoing focus on women’s rights eventually created two basic approaches to sex trafficking. The first was the Neo-abolitionist perspective, and the second was the Pro-rights perspective (O’Brien et al. 2013; Soderlund 2005; Tomkinson 2012). As will be discussed in the following paragraphs, there have been historical clashes between these two perspectives, and each of the perspectives are still used today (O’Brien et al. 2013). Later in this thesis, I will discuss how framing the nuanced issue of sex trafficking through one of these two perspectives can be problematic.

The Neo-abolitionist perspective started primarily through the “first wave” feminist liberation movement. This perspective views prostitution as harmful and exploitative no matter what the circumstance (Marinova and James 2012; Soderlund 2005). This perspective also forms three “value judgments” about sex trafficking. First, is the belief that sex trafficking is unique from other means of sexual exploitation in the manner victims are damaged. Consequently, sex trafficking should be treated as an entirely separate issue from other forms of sexual exploitation. The second “value judgment” is that sex trafficking primarily arises from a man’s desire for sexual satisfaction. The third “value judgment” brought up by the abolitionist movement is that sex trafficking is inherently connected to prostitution (O’Brien et al. 2013:28-29).

This perspective views prostitution as exploitative regardless of the circumstances (e.g. a woman’s body becomes a representation of male desire through male dominance) (Soderlund 2005). This assumption led to faith-based groups and this sect of feminist
advocates fighting for the same issue but motivated by separate moral imperatives. Religious groups have commonly been opposed to sex trafficking in the same way the Nineteenth Century was fraught with fighting sex trafficking by fighting sexual promiscuity, in particular, prostitution (Marinova and James 2012; Soderlund 2005). It was due to this alignment in ideas that faith-based organizations and radical feminist organizations created partnerships. Radical feminism posed the idea of prostitution being a different form of men’s domination over women. This combination of support from such disparate groups is a major reason for an increased focus on fighting sex trafficking. Examples of these unlikely coalitions include Planned Parenthood and the Catholic Women’s League (O’Brien et al. 2013).

The second perspective, the pro-rights or sex work perspective, is considered the more liberal of the two perspectives, as it values sex work as potentially legitimate work in certain situations (O’Brien et al. 2013). The pro-rights perspective more commonly fights for the rights of those working in the commercial sex industry. Yet, radical feminist activism is also considered one of the major players in the activism towards ending sex trafficking (Marinova and James 2012). In the U.S., there has been a range of views from the feminist perspective on the commercial sex industry. Some segments of the feminist movement supported the regulation of prostitution, as a means of creating legitimate financial security for women who otherwise would be unable to have economic stability (O’Brien et al. 2013).

While these two groups technically came together to help fight sex trafficking, as might be expected, there was also a fair amount of tension between the two groups. It took
a considerable effort to maintain the cohesion of the feminist and religious groups, to fight the victimization of women and girls in the sex trafficking industry (Soderlund 2005). O’Brien et al. (2013) purports that radical feminist organizations and faith-based organizations were primarily held together through the strength of the religious organizations, given the prominence of religion (Christianity) at the time (O’Brien et al. 2013).

**The Current Scholarship**

As a business, sex trafficking dates back centuries. Yet, there is no consensus on many aspects of the phenomenon. First, regarding the number of people trafficked, there is no agreement among academics and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) studying and working with sex trafficking victims and survivors. Nor is there agreement on the amount of money that is made annually by trafficking, ways to prevent trafficking, and resources that can most effectively help survivors. Essentially, sex trafficking has become an issue shrouded in political opinion and agenda (Weitzer 2005).

To my knowledge, only four studies that have conducted interviews with sex trafficking survivors (Aron et al. 2006; Busch-Armendariz et al. 2013; Ellison 2009; Logan et al. 2009). Although Raymond and Hughes (2001) interviewed 128 people, 40 of whom were involved in the sex industry (prostitution and dancing), their study did not solely interview sex trafficking survivors.

For the most part, current sex trafficking studies focus on an overview of the phenomena, such as the frequency, scope, and people involved. Existing sex trafficking research notes that most sex trafficked people are women and girls (Chohaney 2016;
Marinova and James 2012; O’Brien et al. 2013; Schauer and Wheaton 2006; U.S. Department of State 2015), and they are typically recruited through non-sex promises and coercion from the traffickers (Hammond and McGlone 2014; Kortla and Wommack 2011; Reid 2012; Wheaton and Schauer 2006). These women are likely to be disenfranchised and come from marginalized areas of the world (Copley 2014). Significantly, far more is known about victims’ entry into rather than their exit from sex trafficking. However, regarding exiting, some sex trafficking survivor resources and recovery methods have been identified, including therapy and language/cultural services (Macy and Johns 2011).

Current sex trafficking studies conducted analyses of criminal/hospital records, legal documents, and media representations as a method of creating understanding about this issue (Barron et al. 2015; Goodey 2008; Hamilton 2016; Macy and Johns 2014; Macy and Graham 2012; Marinova and James 2012; Rae-Hamilton 2016; Raymond and Hughes 2001; Reiger 2007; Roe-Sepowitz 2014; Soderlund 2005; Vindhya and Swathi Dev 2011). This approach is necessary to help understand aspects of sex trafficking, but it is less helpful in grasping the complexity and nuances of this issue in terms of exiting and pursuing recovery, which is the goal of my thesis research.

Many scholars emphasize the need for empirically-based evidence on sex trafficking (Gozdziak 2008; Halley et al. 2004; Zhang 2009). Without empirically based research centered around the survivors themselves, a gap in knowledge is formed. Stated alternatively, sex trafficking survivors are likely the best experts to inform best practices for responding to sex trafficking survivors.
Theory

In terms of theoretical frameworks, it is challenging to find one theory that specifically applies to sex trafficking, particularly in terms of identifying the needs of survivors. As stated before, there are two main perspectives examining this issue: the neo-abolitionist and pro-rights perspectives (O’Brien et al. 2013; Penttinen 2007; Tomkinson 2012). Neo-abolition considers prostitution, and any other job in the commercial sex industry, as exploitative. With this perspective, sex work cannot be legitimate work, and furthermore, sex work is assumed to damage society in three ways. The first is how the commercial sex industry is a threat to monogamous relationships and families (Hayes et al. 2012). The second way is that the commercial sex industry is a danger to women (Hayes et al. 2012). Third, the neo-abolitionist perspective claims that the commercial sex industry perpetuates the activity of organized crime, along with an increased fear of the threat of sexually transmitted infections, such as AIDS (Hayes et al. 2012). Alternatively, the pro-rights perspective views sex work as a potentially legitimate occupation. This perspective provides that the issues associated with human trafficking and sexual exploitation could be minimalized through regulation, as opposed to abolition (Sullivan 2004).

Some other sex trafficking scholars use theories such as life course theory or age-graded theory to help explain this phenomenon (Chohaney 2016; Hammond and McGlone 2011; Reid 2012). The life course perspective assumes that individuals’ lives are influenced by the event they face (Garner et al. 2013). Applied to sex trafficking, this theory is used to help describe how people become victims of sex trafficking. It is through this theory that contemporary studies have discovered that women of color, who come from
socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, use drugs, have a poor educational background, or women and children who travel to a different country with a significantly different culture, are at a greater risk of being trafficked than affluent white men in a familiar culture (Chohaney 2016; Meshelemiah and Sarkar 2015; Reid 2012).

This theory helps researchers in the way that it provides a framework to analyze the people who are trafficked around the world. However, this theory does not provide much analytical help for my thesis study that solely focuses on the exiting of sex trafficking. This theory may help to explain the population that can exit sex trafficking, but the details of their time while being trafficked would need to be known.

Other scholars have used postmodern feminist theory to study sex trafficking (e.g., Alverez and Alessi 2005). This theory is a combination of postmodernism and feminist theory presenting the idea that there is a diversity of women around the world who have a variety of beliefs. By combining the beliefs of all women, a statement is formed that mistakenly assumes that all women need the same resources. Postmodern feminist theory conveys a respect for the diverse needs and opinions of women who present a wide variety of identities (Sands and Nuccio 1992). This theory is most effective in its usefulness to social workers working with sex trafficking survivors, as social workers can be a vital resource for survivors (Busch-Armendariz et al. 2013). The acknowledgment of diverse opinions conveys a message that given sex trafficking survivors’ wide range of characteristics and experiences, they will need a variety of resources that need to be tailored to each survivor’s unique needs (Sands and Nuccio 1992).
A fourth theory that could be used to analyze sex trafficking is routine activities theory. Per Cohen and Felson (1979:589), there are three benefactors that lead to the creation of crime. Those benefactions are “1) motivated offenders, 2) sustainable targets of criminal victimization, and 3) capable guardians of persons or property.” When applied to sex trafficking in Asia, organized crime was identified as having the role of the motivated offenders while women lured into sex trafficking were the sustainable targets (Nguyen 2010). Similar to life-course theory and age-graded theory, routine activities theory is better at explaining how people become involved in sex trafficking, rather than how people recover after having exiting from it.

In sum, most of the theoretical work on sex trafficking has been to explain how victims become involved in trafficking, and while this side of the issue is clearly important, it is different than attempting to figure out what resources are needed for a healthy recovery upon exiting sex trafficking. Unfortunately, in some cases, theoretical perspectives might further politicize sex trafficking in a manner that provides no assistance to, or perhaps even worsens responses to, sex trafficking victims and survivors.

**Current Study Goals**

To date, society, public health, and criminal legal system agencies have not been very effective in assisting sex trafficking survivors. These survivors are typically thrown into shelters containing survivors of other social problems (e.g. intimate partner abuse survivors, homeless shelters, and refugee shelters). Although such responses provide safe housing and some helpful resources, it ultimately conveys the lack of resources and theoretical understanding for survivors of sex trafficking in their recovery (Hacker 2015;
Ultimately, this practice presents the problem that comes with a lack of understanding. This study aims to help fill the knowledge gap in the current scholarship. It is my hope that this thesis’ findings can be used to create change to more effectively assist sex trafficking survivors in leading healthier and happier lives. It is imperative that society learns about this issue to help combat it and to provide the most effective methods of recovery and reintegration for people who become exposed to sex trafficking.

The goal of my thesis research is to contribute to a more holistic understanding of sex trafficking survivors and their needs. Thus, I focus, in part, on the reality of the recovery process and resource needs of sex trafficking survivors. It is my hope and belief that such a research approach can more ably contribute to understanding the short- and long-term resources needed to most effectively assist in reintegration into society. My perspective is that this information should come directly from those who experience the trauma of sex trafficking and the challenges in exiting and building new and healthier lives.

Although my research sample is small, six sex trafficking survivors, and thus is not strong in generalizability, this study provides a deeper level of understanding of the experiences of women exiting sex trafficking, the challenges they face, and the resources that might be most effective, than is currently available in the existing scholarship on sex trafficking. It is my hope that this thesis will be helpful to additional research in addressing this significant social problem, and how identifying and improving responses to sex trafficking survivors will result in much-needed changes.

The next section will discuss the current literature. It will primarily discuss the survivors’ mental and physical health states after being trafficked. It will then describe
what resources are recommended to combat these health problems. The final part of the literature review will be an analysis of the current resources currently available to sex trafficking survivors in the United States, and issues with current research.
CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Contemporary Overview

Unfortunately, there are many factors that contribute to the ongoing struggle to understand sex trafficking, including the identification of, and ability to provide viable resources. Though there are estimates of the extent of sex trafficking, there is no consensus on the number of people being trafficked because of the varying definitions of trafficking (Goodey 2008). Multiple studies have, to a degree, discussed the process of exiting sex trafficking. However, many of those studies maintain a connection between sex trafficking and other commercial sex industries (i.e., prostitution and stripping) hindering the conversation (Weitzer 2011). In contemporary society, sex trafficking survivors have a palpable need for physical and mental health care, but knowledge on what specifically facilitates recovery is lacking (Oram et al. 2012).

The scope of sex trafficking refers to the number of people victimized and the economic impact. Estimates for the number of people victimized range from 18,000 people to 800,000 annually (Hart 2012; Marinova and James 2012; O’Brien et al. 2013; Schauer and Wheaton 2006; U.S. Department of State 2015; Zhang 2009). In regards to children, it is thought that a minimum of 100,000 US children are trafficked for sex with another 325,000 at risk of being trafficked (Kortla and Wommack 2011). On a global scale, the estimate go from 700,000 people are trafficked on a yearly basis (number used by the U.S. State Department) to the number provided by the UN of 2.5 million people sex trafficked (Cawford 2017; Marinova and James 2012; Reid 2012; Schauer and Wheaton 2005; U.S. Department of State 2015; Zhang 2009). Human trafficking is estimated to generate
anywhere from $7 billion to just under $30 billion globally (Hart 2012; Marinova and James 2012; Schauer and Wheaton 2006; Zhang 2009). Even by the conservative estimate of $7 billion, human trafficking is considered to follow only the dealing of arms and drugs as the largest global illicit business (Limanowska 2002; UNESCO 2004). It is estimated that as many as 80% of humans are trafficked is for sexual exploitation (Kangaspunta 2003). This lack of consensus about the scope and dynamics of sex trafficking has contributed to the lack of knowledge about how best to respond the survivors (Ellison 2009).

Hammond and McGlone (2014) focus on the four barriers that face survivors in pursuit to exiting: individual, relational, structural, and societal. This is then followed by the seven-step process of exiting developed by Baker et al. (2010). The one obstacle with this model is that it is used to describe the exiting process for prostitution, and constantly connecting prostitution with sex trafficking can be problematic. This is problematic because these two issues present unique struggles and methods of exiting (Weitzer 2011). These steps include “awareness” “visceral conscious” and “deliberate planning” steps, however, some survivors do not follow these steps. Vindhya and Swathi Dev (2011) conclude that many of the survivors from their study simply had the agency to return to their previous lives. This idea is in direct contradiction with what is discussed in other studies suggesting outside intervention is needed for a survivor to exit (Macy and Graham 2012). There is no working discourse on how people are to exit this world and the only step by step analysis is attributed to an entirely different phenomenon.
For the people who exit sex trafficking, they can experience both physical and mental trauma, which has a lasting impact on the survivor’s life (Oram et al. 2012). The physical effects can be anything from bruising, contusions, broken limbs, blunt force trauma, respiratory problems, and malnutrition, to sexually transmitted infections (Alvarez and Alessi 2012; Crawford 2017; Raymond and Hughes 2001). The mental health problems faced by sex trafficking survivors may include depression, loss of appetite, suicidal tendencies/thoughts, and PTSD (Crawford 2017; Raymond and Hughes 2001; Shigekane 2017). It is then the goal of different service providers to offer health care to combat these issues, and while some do, it is often difficult because of the lack of resources available (Macey and Graham 2012; Schauer and Wheaton 2006).

While society does have some ideas on the scope of the issue (both in terms of victims and monetarily) there is still a clear lack of resources. There are not enough shelters for survivors to stay safe, a lack of healthcare, and a lack of cultural service provisions (Ellison 2009). Next, the current landscape of available resources will be analyzed.

The Survivors

This study is an analysis of the resources and attention that must be provided to survivors to ensure the likelihood of full recovery. It is, therefore, important to analyze the needs of these survivors based on their physical and mental trauma, and available resources. Beyond a simple needs and availability assessment, it is also important to discuss the barriers preventing sex trafficking survivors from having access to these resources.
Survivor Needs

Survivors of trauma, such as sex trafficking, have varying needs that must be addressed (Crawford 2017). The first need of survivors is identification and intervention because many survivors are only able to exit once there is intervention from an external source who recognizes/identifies that they are being sex trafficked (e.g. hospital faculty, social workers, etc.) (Macy and Graham 2012, McIntyre 2014). The needs assessment in this thesis will continue by analyzing the range of needs of sex trafficking survivors.

I will use the model set forth by Macy and Johns (2014), who broke down the needs of sex trafficking survivors into three categories: 1) immediate needs, 2) ongoing needs, and 3) long-term needs. Separate categories are necessary because trauma as complex as that which is experienced by sex trafficking survivors causes their needs to change over time (Aron et al. 2006; Macy and Johns 2011). The immediate needs typically include safe shelter and housing, as well as physical and mental health services to address the initial trauma. These needs are followed by ongoing health care and housing, as well as legal advocacy (Busch-Armendariz et al. 2013; Macy and Johns 2011). For long term needs, resources that will allow for an autonomous life, such as job and language services and permanent housing, are fundamental (Aron et al. 2006; Ellison 2009; Macy and Johns 2011).

There is a further acknowledgment by the United States Government’s “Trafficking in Persons Report” (2012) that mental trauma is complex and therefore requires a greater amount of attention. The information states that ongoing attention must be paid to survivors’ well-being, providing support, helping to establish a safety network, as well as
many other resources and actions (Hammond and McGlone 2014). Mental health is a known issue for sex trafficking survivors and, as expected, research found the violence that led to survivors’ physical injuries often contribute to their mental health problems (Oram 2012).

Currently, U.S. society sometimes provides sex trafficking survivors with access to resources and organizations for people who are victimized in other ways (e.g. domestic violence, drug addiction, refugee, etc.) (Shigekane 2007). Sex trafficking survivors are known to be placed in programs for refugees, or survivors of domestic violence (Shigekane 2007). There are even instances where law enforcement will provide sex trafficking survivors the ability to participate in anti-prostitution programs (Roe-Sepowitz 2014). Each of these provides different types of resources, but none of them cover the holistic range of services needed for sex trafficking survivors to recover. It is for this reason that few sex trafficking shelters exist (Shigekane 2007).

**Existing Resources**

Those coming into the U.S. can expect to seek out refugee-based organizations. This will allow survivors to find different types of resources that are available to refugees, such as mental health services and cultural services (Shigekane 2007). Refugee-based organizations are common destinations for international sex trafficking survivors because they also have the ability to provide access to other resources through citizenship (Busch-Armendariz et al. 2014). One major benefit of these organizations is their specialized knowledge and personnel, who assist survivors and refugees in applying for different types of visas (for survivors of sex trafficking it would be a trafficking visa, also known as a T
visa) (Reiger 2006). These organizations can also often provide legal services, language training, and cultural integration (Reiger 2006; Shigekane 2007). These services are important because having an application for a T visa, and needing to remain legally involved with the prosecution of a trafficker, is required to receive any benefit of the TVPA (U.S. Department of State 2000).

Another common organization for survivors of sex trafficking to contact is that of anti-domestic violence shelters. It is thought that the resources needed by these two populations are similar in their scope (Aron et al. 2006). For survivors of domestic violence, there can be symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as other symptoms related to PTSD (Gorde et al. 2004). Domestic violence survivors also have many experiences that can make immediate independent living a challenge (Brandwein 1999). These mental health problems are also experienced by survivors of sex trafficking (Crawford 2017; Raymond and Hughes 2001; Shigekane 2017). However, in shelters such as these, there can become a conflict between the two groups of people. While peer-led services have been shown to have benefits, the difference resources needed can lead to arguments between the two populations (Shigekane 2007).

Beyond the several types of shelters that can provide some level of rehabilitation resource, survivors have some access to medical care (both mental and physical) as mandated by the TVPA (Ellison 2009; U.S. Department of State 2000). They are also able to pursue counseling and social work to help them recover from their traumas. These act as a huge benefit for survivors as they become the contact between the survivor and society (Alverez and Alessi 2012; Busch-Armendariz et al. 2014). It is important for social workers
to connect with survivors, as their value often comes in their referral of other resources for survivors. Social workers act as a form of contact between the survivor and the resources that currently exist, and social workers can help to identify sex trafficking survivors (Alvarez and Alessi 2012). Social workers and counselors are also important because of the rapport they make with survivors of sex trafficking. Social workers can build trust, and it is in this that they become an extremely helpful method of rehabilitation. They lastly serve the function of being the teacher of cultural practices, especially for those who were trafficked into the United States from foreign countries (Busch-Armendariz et al. 2014).

Many resources can also be found via the Office of Victims of Crime through the Department of Justice, which includes several of the aforementioned resources, such as language services (Anon 2006). It should be noted that these are resources that are known to exist in the United States. Some of these may exist globally, however, this thesis focuses more on the resources available in the U.S.

**Barriers**

There is a contemporary understanding of the trauma experienced by sex trafficking survivors, and some existing resources with known and observed benefits like therapy or language services. However, there are still numerous barriers that survivors face before ever receiving these resources. Some of these barriers include a lack of awareness, a lack of feasibility and funds, and the criminalization of the survivors (Ellison 2009).

**Lack of Awareness**

This lapse in understanding begins with the way that sex trafficking is reported. In a global context, sex trafficking receives little media coverage even in areas like the Baltic,
where there was a massive spike in trafficking after the breakup of the USSR (Sobel 2016; Zhang 2009). Survivors of sex trafficking also tend to have little to no knowledge of the resources that are available to them in any given country (Marinova and James 2012). This lack of awareness extends even further to professionals who have the potential to help survivors. In one study, pediatric doctors in Delaware were screened on what to look for in survivors of sex trafficking, and what resources were available to those survivors. On a one to five scale of knowledge of further resources, the average score was below a two, meaning that the doctors had “very little” knowledge of available rehabilitation services (Barron 2015). This very same lack of formal data and information also prevents law enforcement from helping survivors pursue resources (Ellison 2009; Reiger 2007). There are also misunderstandings regarding what resources are going to be helpful. Thus, it is often a struggle to identify, and then meet, the needs of each survivor (Aron 2006).

**Lack of Feasibility and Funds**

The second of these barriers is a lack of feasibility. This is an issue in which the survivors need extensive resources to secure effective recovery, and the scope of sex trafficking means these resources would need to be globally available (Aron 2006). Survivors experience language barriers while pursuing resources, meaning that there is a disconnect in understanding, trust, and connection to those that are there to help (Reiger 2006; Shigekane 2007). As mentioned previously, there are incredibly strict requirements sex trafficking survivors must meet to receive any benefit outlined by the TVPA. This leads to other barriers such as acquiring education, literacy, deportation, and stability in physical and mental health (Reiger 2007). The application for a T visa alone is incredibly extensive
and needs various resources just to be completed (Macy and Johns 2011). Related to this is the funding for these services. The volume alone makes it a challenge for these services to exist (Aron 2006; Ellison 2009; Macy and Johns 2011).

**Criminalization**

The last of these barriers is the criminalization of sex trafficking survivors. A criminal record greatly impacts survivors’ ability to further pursue resources and their well-being in life. A criminal record makes it more difficult for survivors to get jobs, living assistance, or other qualities of a fully autonomous life (Barnard 2014; Ellison 2009; Dempsy 2015; Reiger 2007).

**Problems with Current Research**

There are many problems surrounding how sex trafficking is discussed and researched. The first of which was mentioned earlier, namely the lack of consensus on the scope of sex trafficking. This has been a contributor to slow legislative changes (Ellison 2009). The continued focus on the Neo-abolitionist and pro-rights perspectives are also troublesome for sex trafficking research. These perspectives prevent the scholarship from escaping sex trafficking’s politicization. The way it is currently researched and written about creates numerous political narratives (Stolz 2007; Weitzer 2005). The politicizing of this issue draws focus away from how to legitimately prevent people from being victimized (Penttinen 2007), how best to respond to the survivors, and skews the way people perceive the survivors (Gozdziak and Bump 2008; Hamilton 2016; Vindhya and Dev 2011).
A second major complication is a connection between sex trafficking and prostitution. Prostitution is an umbrella term defined as “sexual act or contact with another person in return for giving or receiving a fee or thing of value” (U.S. Department of Justice 2008: 5045). Because the definition of “prostitution” is so broad, it includes people with varying degrees of agency and treats them the same. Thus, a distinction between sex trafficking and prostitution is vital (Weitzer 2007). Yet in the context of this discourse, sex trafficking and prostitution are consistently linked as if they are the same issue (Kempadoo et al. 2005; Nicola 2009). In addition to some of these problems, sex trafficking also suffers from a scarcity of empirical research (Gozdiziak and Bump 2008; Halley et al. 2004).
CHAPTER THREE: THE METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify, from survivors of sex trafficking, the circumstances of their exits from sex trafficking, what was most helpful in leaving sex trafficking and resuming a self-chosen life, what would have helped, and challenges to accessing the assistance and resources they needed. Given the literature on sex trafficking reviewed in the previous chapters, this exploratory, qualitative study is a next logical step in sex trafficking research. This chapter is a description of the methods and participants. This study consisted of six in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women who had exited sex trafficking. Although my recruitment materials did not specify potential participants’ sex/gender, sex trafficking is highly gendered (Chohaney 2016; Schauer and Wheaton 2006), thus predictably all six of my participants were women.

Getting Started

After completing my extensive review of the extant research on sex trafficking, reported in the previous chapters, it was clear there had been many content analysis studies conducted on sex trafficking, drawing on medical and criminal records, as well as legal documentation, media representations, and reports from aftercare programs (Barron et al. 2015; Goodey 2008; Hamilton 2016; Macy and Johns 2014; Macy and Graham 2012; Marinova and James 2012; Rae Hamilton 2016; Raymond and Hughes 2001; Reiger 2007; Roe-Sepowitz 2014; Soderlund 2005; Vindhya and Swathi Dev 2011). Surprisingly few qualitative studies existed, although there were exceptions (Aron et al. 2006; Busch-Armendariz et al. 2013; Ellison 2009; Logan et al. 2009). I also searched available data
sets on sex trafficking survivors using the Inter-consortium for Political and Social Research data housed at the University of Michigan (and of which the University of Colorado-Boulder is a member) but was unable to find any existing data sets suitable for my research questions. Therefore, I determined I would need to collect my own data, and given the exploratory nature of my research question, semi-structured, qualitative interviews were deemed most appropriate. More specifically, in-depth interviews appeared to be the best solution to extracting a deeper level of knowledge and gaining a better conceptualization of the complexities of the survivors’ lives after exiting from the world of sex trafficking. This study was approved by the University of Colorado-Boulder (CU-B) Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Protocol Number 16-0526).

The Interview Questions

While reading my extensive review of the existing sex trafficking research, I worked and re-worked drafts of my interview questions. One of my standards was not to ask the participants about their sex trafficking experiences (other than their ages trafficked and the countries they were trafficked from and to), given my focus as an undergraduate researcher was on post-trafficking experiences. The final interview format, covered the participants’ current age, race/ethnicity, nationality, countries trafficked from, countries trafficked in, ages trafficked, circumstances that allowed their exit from trafficking, their challenges in exiting trafficking, recourses helping to exit trafficking, self-reported agency (self-determination) post-exiting and currently, how they empowered themselves since exiting, and what they did to be happy. The interview questions are Appendix 1.
Recruiting Participants

Gaining the trust, and availability of this population (and those that protect them) presented initial challenges, as expected. As an undergraduate with little formal training in Psychology, Social Work, or trauma, I first needed to convince those that work for organizations designed to help sex trafficking survivors, of the benefits of this research. To do this I emailed all organizations in the state of Colorado, and neighboring states who had anything to do with providing or referring trafficking resources (see Appendix 2). This included Victim Assistance offices, trafficking shelters, and sexual violence shelters. The responses were varied, but a roadblock I had not accounted for at the start of the project was the fact that certain organizations did not allow men on their premises, and even had addresses that were kept secret. However, the places that did offer assistance in recruitment for my thesis were given the description of the study, the consent form (and consent script), along with a list of resources (see Appendices 3-6). They were informed that the University of Colorado Institutional Review Board had approved each of these items. These organizations then passed my contact information (along with anything I had sent them) to survivors allowing them to contact me.

To recruit participants, I relied primarily on contacting agencies assisting sex trafficking survivors and a snowball sampling method. I emailed a description of my study and attached the consent form, list of resources that would be provided to all participants, and any other information pertaining to the study, to a variety of organizations and agencies who had anything to do with survivors. I then left it up to the survivors to contact me. I had several points of contact with each participant before they were interviewed. This was for
several reasons: 1) to allow each participant to thoroughly analyze all the material and
develop any questions about what had been sent, 2) to critically think about their desired
level of participation in, and 3) to also give them time to begin to think about their answers
and how to give their answers while also incurring a minimal amount of trauma.

I also relied on snowball sampling: I asked all the participants who completed my
interviews to pass my information on to other survivors they thought might be interested
in participating in my study. This use of snowball sampling is common in this research on
difficult access populations, such as sex trafficking survivors. It was important for
survivors to hear about this thesis from other survivors so they would not feel pressured to
participate and know someone who felt the interview was safe and worthwhile.

Participants

The participants in this study were six survivors of sex trafficking over the age of
18. Every participant in this study had been trafficked for the purposes of sex. All but one
of the participants was white (n = 5); one was Latina (n = 1). All but one participant was
sex trafficked domestically (within the United States), while the other participants had been
trafficked internationally into South America, Asia, and Canada. The ages of the
participants ranged from 29 to 54 years old.

Notably, although I did not ask the participants how they were introduced into
trafficking, four of them raised this voluntarily during the interviews, and their entries into
trafficking varied dramatically. More specifically, when I asked at what age they were first
trafficked, or if they had attempted to exit and returned, one participant’s entry was through
stripping and prostitution, another was introduced into the world of sexual abuse and
exploitation by being molested by a teacher, and then trafficked by that teacher. One participant’s child sexual abuse transitioned to child pornography, which transitioned further into sex trafficking, and another participant described being kidnapped as a child and then sex trafficked until her twenties. The last two described more vaguely being trafficked by pimps.

All the participants were compensated with a $20.00 gift card for their time in the study. This is how the largest use of the grant money was spent. Due to the nature of the topic, I felt it was imperative to compensate this population as they were being confronted with very traumatic events that took place during a traumatic life.

**Ethical Challenges of Interviews with Sex Trafficking Survivors**

Clearly, a study on sex trafficking survivors, a population who face considerable vulnerability, trauma, and stigma, is fraught with ethical aspects to consider, and thus requires careful planning. Although my interview questions only pertained to the participants’ experiences after exiting the world of sex trafficking, the trauma of being sex trafficked is inexplicably linked to their lives upon exiting. I assumed the events following the exit from trafficking could still be traumatic, including the potential suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Crawford 2017; Raymond and Hughes 2001; Shigekane 2017).

To further combat the potential trauma that may be triggered during the interview (also not knowing what level of resources each participant had been exposed to), I created a list of potential resources including witness protection, financial assistance, and safe-houses (see Appendix 6). This allowed participants to further pursue assistance after the
interview. (Even if they had chosen not to take part in the interview, I would have provided the resources).

Another ethical dilemma was how to conduct the interviews in a manner most respectful to, and cognizant of the participants’ needs, particularly given that I am an undergraduate who is not licensed to practice counseling/therapy. This was outlined by the head of a Victim Assistance Office I had contacted to recruit potential participants who told me while embarking on this study: “Our sex trafficked clients have had their ‘no’s’ forcefully and continually ripped from them. They are eager to please, eager to be accepted and often say ‘yes’ to things that will make them uncomfortable and unsafe; they typically have low boundaries.” To address this, the participants were reminded multiple times throughout the interview (as well as on first contact, second contact, and at the start of the interview) that they would be properly exercising their rights to deny answering questions which made them uncomfortable.

**Data Collection**

Once the participants had decided to participate in the study, we set a date and time for the interview. Only one of the interviews took place in person, while the rest took place over the phone. For the in-person interview, I invited the participant to set a time, place, and location, and I would accommodate them. As for the rest of the interviews conducted over the phone, I simply reserved a private room on the CU campus at the time they had specified.

During all the interviews the participants were either walked through the detailed consent form, or read a consent script (depending on if they were being interviewed over
the phone or in person), and then asked if they had any final questions before the interview began. As previously stated, the interviews lasted between 35 minutes and an hour and were recorded on an audio recording device. Along with being recorded, I took extensive notes throughout the interviews.

Once the interviews were concluded, the participants were contacted an additional time to ask their preference of gift card and where it could be sent. Each of the participants said they would like to receive the final product, and therefore instructed me to keep their contact information.

Analysis

After completing the interviews, they were transcribed. The data gathered in this study was exploratory, and therefore the analysis consisted of carefully combing through the interview transcripts for themes. More specifically, I read through each interview seven or eight times coding for possible themes. To do this, I highlighted excerpts with distinct colors for the various themes. For example, red represented emotional barriers and challenges. In all, this first phase resulted in ten themes, which appeared to permeate each interview.

After these themes were discovered I went back through the transcripts and looked for refined themes also pertaining more to their experiences with being trafficked, and their opinions on resources available to them. During this period, quotes from all the interviews were pulled when they showed relation to the more refined themes.
Limitations

While valid, and ultimately helpful information was gained through the interviews, this study was not free of limitations. Given the sample was not randomly selected and small, it is unclear how generalizable the findings are. While taking a random sample of the population would have made the data more applicable to the issue at large, the secrecy and stigma of this group did not allow me that luxury.

The further issues that arose simply by way of the method of data collection, are the issues stemming from the population itself and the limitations in contact. The most liberal estimate for number of victims of sex trafficking in the United States is still a small percentage of the total population (Cawford 2017; Marinova and James 2012; Reid 2012; Schauer and Wheaton 2005; U.S. Department of State 2015; Zhang 2009). This low number immediately restricts access to the number of participants that can be interviewed, and while I was able to interview people from a variety of backgrounds, ethnicities, and countries of origin, there are still significant barriers keeping the information gathered from being generalizable. The women able to respond to my request for research participation possessed the ability to pursue resources after their exiting from sex trafficking. Indeed, my respondents were all able to attend college, receive a discounted or pro bono therapist/counselor, have supportive family and/or friends close to them, and/or be placed in a separate social institution which provided them with resources (e.g. drug rehabilitation, etc.). And while none of this is meant to diminish the immense struggles or remarkable recoveries these participants made, it is necessary to remember this is a small sample that very likely over-represents better healed, and perhaps, more recovered, survivors.
Clearly, to truly understand the depth of this issue and question, future research needs to reach sex trafficking survivors who were provided with even fewer resources than those who participated in this study. Again, this is not to suggest these participants are privileged, but to comment that to discover valid methods of recovery for sex trafficking survivors, society must also gain an understanding of how existing resources fail to meet survivors in the present. To allow for genuine recovery from this traumatic lifestyle there must be resources allowing for mental and physical health improvement, and a system which allows these new resources to be readily accessible.

The following chapter focuses on the primary themes found in my analysis. Each primary theme is identified and discussed. These themes were gathered by the type of analysis described in this chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews with six survivors of sex trafficking. These findings are divided into two categories: “challenges faced” and “responses to those challenges.” The first category, “challenges faced,” is broken up into three themes: the first of which was a *normalization of a traumatic life*, the second theme is *isolation from society*, and the third theme is *compounding inequalities*. The second category, “responses to the challenges,” was divided into two more themes: *regaining control* and *education*. The last section of this chapter will discuss some smaller findings that did not fit in with the larger, more thematic findings.

**Challenges**

One of the purposes of this study is to understand the struggles of the people who survive sex trafficking and what would be most beneficial for them. It is important to specifically understand their needs both immediately and years after exiting, given this has not been sufficiently studied in depth. Several studies suggest a number of resources for survivors, including physical and mental health care, housing, language services, and so on (Aron et al. 2006; Ellison 2009; Macy and Johns 2011). However, an acknowledgment of these resources does not necessarily guarantee anything. It would be challenging to approve budgeting for the numerous resources suggested by scholars for an affected population that represents, by the most liberal of estimates, less than three one-thousandths of the population. On top of this, simple access to these basic resources does not guarantee long term health which is in part represented by the findings in this paper.
This is not to say that the current research on sex trafficking survivors is without its merits; it is simply to suggest that it has begun to shift into the direction where it loses the element of humanity, and looks at the problem as simply clinical. It is beneficial to have the knowledge that is already out there, but a further depth of understanding on the experiences of sex trafficking survivors is needed. The data on the challenges faced by these survivors will serve the purpose of bringing to light some of the difficulties that, to my knowledge, are seldom discussed. The survivors’ testimonies also describe the way the current system fails in some regards.

*Normalization of a Traumatic Life*

Every survivor I interviewed ultimately described a feeling of normalization of aspects that caused a great deal of trauma throughout her life while being trafficked. This normalization was prominent in the experience of Martha while trying to reenter society. Martha, a white woman who was trafficked domestically in the United States for thirteen years beginning at the age of seventeen, described being groomed by her pimp beginning at the age of fifteen, but not taking her first trip until two years later. Like many survivors from this study, she exited and returned many times. When asked what enabled her to fully exit, she stated “I was arrested and put into prison for two years. Even though I would never advise it… I mean for me in some ways I needed to go to prison. I needed that betrayal by my pimp because I thought he was going to save me, you know?” Her arrest began to show her that this life of living and being around her pimp created a normalization of a false reality he had created. In this instance, it was a false “reality” that her pimp was there for
her. This false reality was described even further when she said “I needed that betrayal, to wake up, to realize ‘wow he doesn’t love me.’”

Martha went on to describe what was, in her eyes, the biggest challenge she faced upon exiting sex trafficking, and it became clear that part of it was escaping this world that had become her reality for over a decade:

I would say…you know interacting with a real human being, with people in the real world. I mean cuz you have to realize that I was trafficked for over thirteen years. I was with this guy for fifteen years. I … I was conditioned to, you have to ask and talk a certain way to survive in that life. And it becomes very normalized. One of the aspects simply is just swearing. You know, every word that came out of my mouth, when you’re in that life, you say a lot of swearwords just talking.

Martha was conditioned to believe that her time being trafficked was similar to any given chosen life. The conditioning went to the level that it even influenced her speaking patterns. Martha went on to describe the stranglehold this feeling had over her continuing into her life. She elaborated on the normalization of trauma, and feeling of subordination as something that has stuck with her years removed from the actual events of trafficking:

I was completely brainwashed by him. So even though I had okay, free will, but the thing is that…so many of…the thoughts going through my head were still his. So, you know I was still controlled by [the thoughts of] “I’m a piece of shit, I’m garbage, I can’t live in the real world, I’ll never succeed in the real world, they don’t want me in the real world.” So I mean…so you’re really…what is the word,
there’s another world you know, just split you know? It’s like your almost like two different…two different people. There’s you trying to make it in the real world, and then there’s the other half of you that’s always you know, cold…you know to…talk the way you talked before and, you know, you wanna reach out to the…to the old people in your life.

This feeling of a normalization of a traumatic life showed up as well in the interview with Amy who is a 29-year-old Woman who’s experience with sexual exploitation began at an early age as she explained “My trafficking situation started when I was very young. I know, so it started out as child sexual abuse, then turned into child pornography and then it turned into me being pimped out.” She had been trafficked throughout Canada, the United States, South America, as well as Asia. She had been trafficked from an early age in her life until the age of twenty-two. She describes the circumstances in which she exited fully, by talking about a conversation she had with a woman who, for the first time, presented her with a different reality than the one she had been around for the previous years in her life:

So I…when I was back in Canada was under a bunch of blankets, and on my bed, and called her. And it was a very short conversation, and not the last conversation I had with her. But it was the beginning of me, for the first time in my life having someone speaking into me, and basically taking the lies that I was believing like “this is all I’m good for” and “this is my, this is my future, this is, my past defines my future.” Through her…speaking truth into me, encouraging me that I can leave, that she would help me leave.
Amy conveyed a normalization of self-deprecation that she had believed all her life. Amy had been taught that her victimization was “all she was good for.” It was only when someone showed her that this normalized reality she had experienced for several decades was wrong, was when she could exit.

Ellen’s experience with trafficking was a diversion from the other participants interviewed in this study; however, she discussed entirely similar feelings of having a normalization of the life experienced while being trafficked. Ellen was first trafficked in her early twenties and fully exited the world at the age of 32. What made her situation unique was that she had been trafficked through the stripping industry run by organized crime. She found herself placed/forced into different systems of stripping, prostitution, and trafficking. Ellen, like many others I interviewed, talked about her full exiting of sex trafficking coming as a result of external forces. In her case, it was an individual who had been in her position earlier in life whose advice and guidance provided the catalyst for her also exiting.

Ellen talked about the jarring experience of facing society after she had exited trafficking, and how it differed from the normalized “reality” she had been surrounded in for the previous decade of her life:

I mean, I was not accustomed to being out during the day time. When I had to turn my life around so to speak, it was like I was petrified to walk around downtown. I walked downtown at night, but I just wasn’t expecting it to be like…I was afraid to be out during the day time. I mean it was like, it was you know…because back then you were living in such a sub culture and everything. And I, I just wasn’t expecting
that there would be sleep patterns, and all this stuff in the beginning was really
difficult…to work through the sleep patterns, being out during the day. Not that I
wasn’t ever out during the day when I was being exploited, but…you know most
the time it was at night or, you know. I was walking, it’s like, you know, like if you
stuck a small child out at night they would be afraid, well if you stuck me out in the
daytime I was afraid.

This normalization of self-destructive thoughts also emerged while talking about her initial
recovery and exiting. She explained while she was able to exit, the topic of sex trafficking
was not commonly talked about, or even known. There were truly no resources specifically
designed for survivors of sex trafficking. For this reason, Ellen had to pursue resources
provided for people involved in other social issues. Ellen talked about being in a treatment
program for drug addicts. Through this program she describes the aggressive, and hostile
style simply reinforcing what had been her reality while being trafficked:

So we didn’t have particular housing which meant I had to live in a substance abuse
treatment program which didn’t understand my trauma, and didn’t understand my
exploitation, and would beat on the door in the middle of the night…and, you know
tell me what a piece of shit I was, and I already knew that, like I was real clear about
that, like I didn’t need help with that. What I needed was somebody to live in an
environment where I was being empowered, where my trauma was understood.

Feelings of low self-worth continued in each interview. These women consistently
described the connection they felt with the people who trafficked them, resulting in a sense
of normalcy in their lives. In many cases, they described that a feeling of inadequacy
ultimately became normal to them. Much of what was said to participants became so engrained that they believed it was truth.

*Isolation from Society*

Paired with the normalization of a traumatic life was isolation from society. I decided to pair these themes because in many cases the normalization of a traumatic life contributed to the participants’ isolation from society. In almost every case, it was an isolation that existed mentally rather than physically. This isolation came in many forms. In some cases, survivors were isolated because others around them did not understand the survivors’ complex trauma. Other participants felt a sense of being an outsider, and there was even a case where a survivor felt isolated within the community of survivors.

Debra described her exit after an intervention from others. She was trafficked from the ages of 4 to 24, having tried to escape “the life” (slang for their time being trafficked) six times. She described her exit by saying “I had been paralyzed from the waist down…my back was severely injured, I almost completely severed my sciatic nerve…I was taken to a hospital. There was a nurse on duty that saw the extent of my injuries and called…everyone she could think to call, she called.” She went on to describe the feeling of isolation she felt when asked about the most challenging obstacles to overcome:

Not feeling like I had anyone on my side, that I could turn to that would understand…I went to therapy, I saw doctors, I even went to school and, there was no book, there was no movie, there wasn’t anything anyone could give me that…looked like me or what I’d been through…Everyone, even in the material specifically for trafficking…. Everyone was either international or a poor Hispanic
or African American kid from inner cities. No one was ever the upper middle class, high class, low high class, white kid.

With this she described a twofold isolation. The first isolation was one from society by not feeling like anyone would understand her, and the second a feeling of isolation among survivors because she could not relate to what had been commonly portrayed. This feeling exemplifies the manner in which sex trafficking is portrayed in media and culture. There is a consistent narrative to show sex trafficking as if the representations in movies, and anecdotal evidence gathered is the norm when it is not.

Debra further explained this isolation didn’t allow her to understand how society worked. That after everything she had been through she experienced isolation by not understanding norms and values of people living traditional lives creating a feeling of being an outsider. She expressed that once “trafficking survivors get out and we don't have jobs. We don’t have identification; I didn't even know what a checking… I didn't I never had a checking account, check book. I didn't understand any of those things.” Due to the fact that Debra had been exposed to trafficking from such an early age, she had missed out on society at large for almost the entirety of her childhood, which is a crucial time period of development. She explained “all those social norms that people take for granted, those had been tortured out of me before I was five.”

Jenn’s experience with trafficking started in school, as sexual assault from a teacher who, after two years of this abuse, trafficked her at the age of fourteen. She was able to fully exit four years later when she was eighteen, when she began attending college. Jenn conveyed similar feelings to many of the other survivors, who came to believe the horrible
things said to them for years was truth. She described her feelings by stating, “He told me that I would never be able to find anybody, and you know, that I was damaged goods and what not.” These feelings and beliefs prevented her from letting other people into her life after exiting. She later exclaimed:

That made it…extremely challenging and scary to allow myself to have any kind of intimate relationship. And then when I did, I thought that the only way that that can happen…is if I gave myself up sexually.

Jenn’s isolation stemmed from a feeling of unacceptance; her experiences had placed her on the periphery of society where she had to fight to fit in with everyone else. This was also a challenge she did not foresee. When asked about challenges she did not expect to face, but ended up having to she said:

I would say again, feeling accepted. I, I thought that “oh good I’m done with him so now I can…have a normal life.” And you know that, that never, that never, [happened]. I never [had] the stereotypical high school girl, college student profile. I mean I tried to fit in, but I mean it was pretty impossible.

Isolation even permeated the home life for survivors as well. Maria was able to exit sex trafficking by the age of seventeen and described how her home no longer felt like a place where she could be comfortable or supported. Part of this was due to a drug addiction, but it was also a feeling that her family was being dragged through what she had experienced:

You know, being with my mom and seeing how much I was hurting my family because of my addiction… My family, allowed me, my mom allowed me to stay
there. But at the same time, I felt that she was ashamed of me. So I thought there wasn’t really much support.

Ellen shared a similar experience when she talked about the challenges of trying to reintegrate back into society. She said a prominent struggle was “just the, living daily life. I mean, I was not accustomed to being out during the day time… I just didn’t feel like I belonged there.”

This separation from society was so severe that Martha even likened it to being in a foreign land and not being able to speak the language. She explains an experience with attempting to make her way, yet having a fundamental misunderstanding of the norms and functions of everything in society:

So, coming out of that life, you don’t know how to interact with people you know? You know when I first came out…some of the girls would “wow you swear like a sailor, why is that?” And I was like “Oh my god I didn’t even realize, I didn’t even know, wow.” Just gestures we use, just interacting you really feel [outside]. I’m just assuming you don’t know Chinese so if I told you right now if I just [dropped] you in China, not knowing the right language, not knowing anything, with no money, no skills and told you “okay make your way.” That is what it feels like for a survivor in this real world. It is foreign, all the time. Every step you take you think “am I doing this right, am I doing this wrong, I don’t know what to do next.” It is a completely foreign experience. I mean you know I…speaking for myself I was in it for thirteen years, but depending on how long a person was in that life, and how conditioned they were to the realities of that life.
Through this idea of being in a foreign land, again reiterates the idea of sex trafficking survivors having an isolation from society. Martha’s analysis of her situation conveyed an isolation not only from people, but also from culture. Exiting sex trafficking and entering a new chosen life caused these survivors to be hyper critical of what separated them from society. The survivors described feeling isolated from family, friends, other survivors, and society.

Compounding Inequalities

As expected, many of the women interviewed reported problems with drugs, mental health, the criminal legal system, and/or issues with the resources that were available to them. It is this portion of the findings, along with the theme of education most notably influencing the suggestions for legislative change that are made in the discussion section of this paper.

Both Ellen and Martha described the challenges placed before them after being arrested. Martha had clear barriers to finding jobs and places to live:

You know, I go out I speak at events, I’ve gotten awards, people of all walks of life know me, they know they can trust me, they know that I am on the up and up. I go out of my way to help others, but yet trying to get an apartment. So to this day, if you have a felony on your record, it is an automatic denial. Times, this is what shocked me, this is what I was not prepared for. I really thought that if I, I knew the first five years was going to be hard. I even figure the first ten years there were still going to be obstacles. I really did not believe that those obstacles would still be here fifteen years later. That I can’t get into an apartment. You know, it’s like all because
of a felony record. We don’t care who you are, we don’t care what you’ve done. We don’t care any you know other circumstances. If you have a felony, we will not let you live here. That is what still, I face it every day, I have [Inaudible] that would not accept me I was really stressing that if I did everything I was supposed to do, and I worked really hard, and I went over and above, and I showed my work to society, society would accept me and treat me as one of their own. That is what I believed, and I got a rude awakening.

Later in her interview she said:

Thank god I finally found a job that doesn’t ask. Now a days, guess what? Job applications “have. You. Ever. Been. Convicted. Of. A. felony.?” They no longer ask seven years, ten years, it says “Have you ever been convicted of a felony?” And so any job I had before this I had to disclose my entire story. Well now I’m at a job, they said seven years. “Have you ever been convicted of a felony in the past seven years?” And I was like “oh, no” and they hired me, and it’s like “wow, holy shit.” I got a real job, I did that without having to disclose my life.

Martha’s experiences convey the reinforcement for the cycle of poverty by not allowing already disenfranchised people, the opportunity to better their lives. This inequality was also described by Ellen who challenges “Criminal records as well…yeah. Because as long as we are still arresting exploited women, including trafficked women…you’re always going to have that criminal history challenge. And you know, that’s a policy issue.” While
a criminal record is a significant hindrance on a survivor’s ability to recover, it is sadly not the only barrier they face.

Struggles with mentally adjusting to contemporary U.S. society were talked about in depth by Amy, Ellen, Debra, and Maria. For Amy, it was the issue of dealing with the trauma that had characterized her entire life. She said: “I did not know how difficult it would be to begin to face memories, and begin to face reality, and…learn how to be an adult, and learn things that I did not know growing up.” Similar struggles were expressed by Ellen: “And [my] whole life was scary. It was like ‘okay I'm gonna restore and rebuild, and I gotta walk through these challenges, these very basic living challenges. Like sleeping, eating, and all that kind of stuff.’” On the topic of mental health, which created an additional barrier on top of her addiction and need to take care of herself, Martha said, “Well developing anxiety and having to pretty much take care of my own addiction on my own…that was pretty challenging.”

Through Debra’s interview it was clear that she knew of existing resources designed to aid her in recovery, but she explained that after she left trafficking she was not necessarily in a position to pursue those resources:

I would say…probably just money, I mean everything I…I couldn’t work a full time job. I lived less than pay check to pay check. There, there wasn't any opportunities or anything extra or special. And what [I] could work was even limited because I needed so much therapy, and I wasn't able to mentally be at a work place. Most people get their first part time job when they are sixteen or seventeen years old. I,
I didn't have that [opportunity] or that stored up experience. And so what jobs I could do physically. I can't work there real long I can't [inaudible].

Later stating:

And so if I need one thing, or if I ever needed one thing. It's been the money to pay for all of the medical, money to pay for insurance. Money to pay to have access of resources. There are a lot of resources. There are all kinds of, even other things besides regular therapy, but you gotta be able to pay the bill.

For Amy, there was an issue of citizenship. She was the only survivor interviewed who had to experience the struggles that come with migration to a new country, on top of the struggles of a recently exited sex trafficking survivor.

But I struggled with Visa issues, and… and that was a huge thing that I struggled with. I struggled with finding a job issues, because…with the Visa I could only work twenty hours a week, at my college. And, so I eventually ended up with a student Visa, which then presented its own challenges.

...the way that the government has the T Visas set up, makes it very difficult, and very traumatizing for people who experience trafficking to get a T Visa. A T Visa, a trafficking Visa. So that is something that…that I believe we could do better on, in helping individuals that have been trafficked…obtain abilities to remain in the states and stay safe.

Each of the survivors described the challenges brought on by the complexity of their trauma as well. They described this as contributing to their social isolation, but it was
also this complexity of the trauma that prevented them from receiving help from resources like community mental health or social workers who already have to see a large amount of people. Debra discussed why it is difficult for survivors of trafficking to heal from programs such as this:

…I think one thing really important to note from my perspective. I see this so much now. Community mental health, won't help will never ever help human trafficking survivors…Community mental health programs, they will never have the services needed to help human trafficking survivors. We need more than somebody fifty minutes a week that, is stamping a time slot…but is so overwhelm[ing] to try to get quota in, that they don't have time to truly invest in what we dealt with.

Responses to Challenges

Interviewed survivors’ responses to their challenges show how they were able to achieve long-term success and recovery. It is from the responses that I believe the creation of programs and legislative change can materialize to ensure successful reintegration and recovery. These two responses were Education and Regaining Control. In many instances, the survivors noted that these two things allowed them to feel empowered. Ultimately, these two responses moved the survivors closer to having an autonomous life.

Education

An education was something virtually all the survivors were able to do after being trafficked, and those who spoke of it talked about the tremendous impact that it had on their lives. The way education helped had three primary impacts. First and most commonly, was that education was a place where the survivors could regain confidence and create
independent thoughts. School became a source of empowerment. The second way school helped was by opening the door to more resources, allowing for more financial gain and greater pathways out of the traumatic situations in which the survivors had been living. The third way that education helped was by simply being a place where social norms were taught. This institution became a place where they could learn to function in society. It also became the place they began to learn about how society worked. In one case, it influenced the way that the survivor would raise, and teach their children.

Empowerment for survivors was a significant outcome from going to school. Martha, Amy, Debra, and Jenn spoke about this impact. Martha said: “And it just felt like a safe place where I could go and observe people. I could just observe people, and just sit there and people watch, you know? Between classes, and I was learning, and it was empowering me, but it was a safe place for me to be empowered.” Later, when she was asked about what empowered her after she fully exited trafficking, she said “Well going to school, you know, going to college. That was huge.” This theme of empowerment as a result of education was also brought up by Amy:

and so it’s just amazing to me like how education has given, education has [given] me several gifts. One of the gifts that it gave me was the ability to think for myself and believe what I believe based upon my own research, and being able to line it up with other research.

This topic was further elaborated on by Debra, who described an increase in her ability to formulate her own opinions, and participate in conversation using her own unique thought process:
But in college, it was truly about my opinion, my personal statement, my thoughts, and my ideas about the material I had read, and, and the lessons I had...conversations that I was a part of. It impacted this truly different side of my brain. That I didn't have to be in total survivor mode all the time. And I was learning how to avoid just that, fight of flight, 24/7 hyper vigilance. And school was that place, of "wow I can memorize the periodic table, I can memorize theories, and I can go through all of these processes in my head and these connections and things, and no one can take that away from me," and no one tried.

This point of building self-confidence was reiterated by Jenn after being asked what she did to empower herself after exiting sex trafficking: “Well, I was in college, so that helped…I think, it gave me…it helped me build confidence, that I could, I could survive a life. That I could do life.”

As stated earlier, school was not simply a method of regaining self-confidence; it also served the purpose of creating opportunity which was emphasized by both Amy and Maria. Having no resources upon exiting trafficking was a burden expressed by multiple survivors in this study and school became a method of combating that. Amy talked about the way school gave her the opportunity for socio-economic advancement:

And so, the second thing that education gave me was the ability to move out of one socio-economic status into another socio-economic status. And, at that time and I’m still seeing the fruit of that, umm but at that time I could only work twenty hours a week on campus. And now, I’m the director [name omitted for anonymity]. I’m now starting to see the benefit of the degree that I have, and the work that I do
with survivors of human trafficking in the field of Psychology and counseling. And so, for me it’s been incredible to see that.

For Maria, this aspect of college was very important, but it also served the purpose of teaching her about society, the norms, the values, and everything she had been unable to learn while she was being trafficked. School also enabled her to create opinions about what to teach her children:

Well, first college, what’s that done for me is that gave me a degree in social science, I’m actually learning about how our society works, and that actually helps me figure out what to teach my children, and pretty much how to direct them in this life.

Well, getting a college diploma to work in the medical field helps me become independent. Because I’ve been there ever since working in the medical field. And now I’m pursuing a college degree, and you know actually it was college who explained how our society works, and was describing social norms and empathy, and that’s pretty much led me into helping other people. And now today I am running a whole organization on helping people.

Regaining Control

Regaining control was the most prominent theme that showed up throughout each interview. What is meant by regaining control are all the small and large efforts made by the survivors about their own lives to regain autonomy. All of them described the empowerment they felt by creating their own independence and creating responsibility for
themselves. This is represented by their ability, and actions taken to successfully reintegrate themselves back into society. The discussion surrounding this basic theme of regaining control over one’s life was so varied that it will be broken up into three sub-sections. The first of these is decision making, the second is an acquisition/distribution of knowledge, and the last is self-motivated actions towards recovery

*Decision Making*

Upon exiting, Amy was able to get a college degree. She is currently in graduate school, working towards a Master’s Degree. While she did experience problems with citizenship and trying to get a Trafficking visa, she ultimately married and was able to remain in the country. She routinely publicly speaks, and has even worked with universities trying to start scholarships specifically for sex trafficking survivors. Towards the end of Amy’s interview, she described the impact of being able to make small decisions most people take for granted:

The second time I exited, somebody took me, this is before I started school, somebody took me to go clothes shopping. And just even the whole process of me choosing clothes, and that was another thing like. It was really small to the person taking me clothes shopping, but to me it was like I was making my own choices and I was choosing the things that I like me. Which left a very strong impact in me, in my brain. Just enabling me as I walked into this college environment enabled me to go “wow, like I can actually make choices, and I can actually make good choices.”
It was clear from Amy and others that were interviewed that making decisions that were not labeled as “wrong” was an important step towards recovery.

Ellen described more the power of being able to make larger decisions, as well. Ellen is now the CEO of her own business designed to help survivors of sex trafficking. To this day she continues to take active steps in her healing process by going to trauma therapy, exercising, and remaining active in the sex trafficking survivor world. She works with survivors, and leaders in that community, and participates in studies so society can gain a better understanding of this issue. She describes decision making as it relates to her daily schedule and professional life:

….Basically have the ability to say yes or no or to engage in conversation. I mean I can say yes or no, I can work it into my schedule, I can say yes or no to an interview, I can say yes or no to the media. I can, I mean I just have options to say yes or no that I didn’t have before. And I the freedom, although it’s not always funded, to do what I want to do

…Basically being able to choose what job I take, being able to choose to…leave that job and move onto another job, and you know, being able to…have access eventually, to, to different healing modalities.

Acquisition/distribution of Knowledge

Maria received a degree to work as a medical assistant after exiting the world of sex trafficking. She describes her children as a high point in her recovery, as well as her ability to teach all the knowledge she has gained over the years. It is important for her to ensure all the things she has learned get transferred to other people:
I pretty much apply my experiences to the greater field of empathy so I can better help the individuals that are going through a similar situation.

Pretty much…trying to I guess teach individuals…you know their conviction, their situation isn’t who they really are. That’s empowering, being able to be someone who I was, was there for me when I was going through the same thing.

Martha also discussed the importance of acquiring knowledge, because it is that learning that enables reintegration into society:

It’s learning how to live. It’s learning how to, you know, go shopping, learning how to put away your groceries, learning how to clean up your room, learning how to interact with other people, learning how to take responsibility for, you know, what’s happening now in your life, you know.

*Self-Motivated acts towards recovery*

Debra continues to take steps to ensure good mental health. She explained how beneficial compassion, investment, and time were in her recovery. She described the therapist who had done so much for her throughout her recovery. Beyond the time spent with a therapist Debra touched on the impact that her own job had on her, and the way it helped facilitate her recovery: “I...absolutely one hundred percent love my job. [I] love my job. I work, am happy with work.” She went on to explain the things outside of work she pursues that continue to help her every day:

I have great friends, I make sure that we meet once a month, no matter what's going on, no matter how busy I am. I take the time to spend an evening out without any
distractions, with friends. We'll go to the drive in movie theater, there's old school drive in movie theaters. And we park, we tailgate, watch double features, sometimes a triple feature. And just laugh and have a good time. And on a day to day basis...I talk to other survivors, and my allies, the people that believe me, support me.

Jenn described that being able to provide for this population, placing herself in a position of helping and fighting against trafficking was one of the most important things she has done in her recovery. She said “I also serve on the Colorado human trafficking counsel, I’m a survivor and that is the ultimate empowerment tool because I am fighting back.” She also explained that it was not just the fact that she got to serve on this counsel, but she also made the decision on her own to go through with it:

And, so I applied not knowing what I was doing. I didn’t know anything about…I actually was not going to be on it because I talked to my sister and she was like “Jenn this is going to be too much. I’m afraid it is going to hurt you physically, I don’t think you I should do it, because it really was very scary.” And one day I got a certificate in the mail from …the governor with the governor’s seal on it. And I was like “oh my gosh.” And so I, still did not say yes. I just set that up against the wall and looked at it every day and wondered. And one day I said “you know, I’ll never know” I can always quit if it doesn’t feel good. And so, I just did it.

**Other important points**

There was much information gathered from this research that did not necessarily fit into the thematic findings of this thesis. These points were not discussed with the frequency
of the other main thematic findings, but in many cases were discussed by most, if not all, of the survivors. For the purpose of future research, I am noting them.

One important component of recovery not addressed in this thesis was, to a degree, discussed by all the participants is the amount of compassion needed for survivors to successfully recover. Some talked about the impact of strangers who would go out of their way to help. One even said “I’ve had strangers do horrific things to me, and I’ve also seen some that are very good, I’ve also seen some that are very good. I’ve seen horrific people; I’ve also seen such amazing people who are absolutely the most incredible people in the world.” There is a definite compassionate component to recovery. It may sound obvious that one way to help people recover from trauma is compassion, however, it was mentioned by too many of the participants to ignore. This idea pairs with the need for physical and mental healthcare, because access to these types of care are more useful if the care is delivered compassionately.

Another aspect of recovery mentioned by the survivors is how it takes a great amount of time for a successful recovery. Five of the six survivors interviewed in this study described the immense amount of time it takes for them to feel (by their own words) normal. In the findings, it was reported that one aspect of recovery was self-motivated actions taken towards recovery. Regarding this, one of the survivors described extensive involvement in the trafficking recovery world, yet later disclosed that this involvement did not happen for many years following the exiting. Martha also explained how time helped her gradually reintegrate into society by saying “You know, and I can tell you like after that it was like maybe a month later I felt normal for ten whole minutes. And maybe six
months later I felt normal for an entire day. And then slowly, slowly, slowly over the next ten years.”

The amount of time it takes to recover was often discussed alongside the need for compassion throughout the recovery process. This was important to the survivors, because consistently needing compassionate care, for the amount of time sex trafficking survivors need, became a contributor to the sense of social isolation some survivors felt. Several described how meaningful it was to have those individuals who did provide compassionate support for a great amount of time.

There was also a clear educational component the survivors felt was missing from society. Several described how they never had a conversation about what resources were available to them. In Maria’s case, it was because the law enforcement officer who pulled her out of the trafficking world was unaware of the resources available to her. In two other cases, society had a lapse of understanding of the actual issue of human trafficking and therefore did not have resources available. Jenn described this missing educational component leading to her involvement in trafficking, as her parents found out about her situation, but failed to discuss it or acknowledge it. She said:

A time when his wife actually called my parents and…reported in and my parents said: “no she wouldn’t do that.” You know they blamed me, they said I’m not a bad girl, and now I’m not, but this guy was. And so they just…didn’t want to believe that it was actually…that it was actually happening.

Some of the participants described a lack of knowledge about the reality of sex trafficking, claiming that people did not realize sex trafficking permeates different social
institutions like school and stripping. This reinforces the existing idea that the missing educational component prevents law enforcement from being able to provide resources, and prevents survivors from being able to reach these resources (Ellison 2009).

The final important point of note from the interviews is that several described a defunding of the few resources they used. In Amy’s case, the incoming winter Olympics defunding the shelter she was in, and it was this event that became the catalyst for her re-entry into sex trafficking. Others described the resources that helped them out the most being stripped of their funding and being forced to shut down. This not only prevents future survivors from seeking out these resources, but it also prevents the current survivors from helping, as the resources that helped them no longer exist.

The following chapter will describe the way that this study fits into the larger scholarship on the topic. It also outlines several suggestions for legislative change, along with potential future research. These were informed by the findings of this study, and are designed to help the societal understanding of the sex trafficking survivor.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Contemporary studies have looked at the range of physical and mental health problems that sex trafficking survivors suffer from (Alvarez and Alessi 2012; Crawford 2017; Raymond and Hughes 2001; Shigekane 2017). Others have taken the knowledge gained from these studies and applied them to an analysis of needed resources, to understand how to help survivors recover (Macy and Johns 2011). This research adds to the scholarship on the survivors’ recovery and integration by gaining a deeper understanding of the mental state of the survivor. Since this study interviewed survivors of sex trafficking, the results of this study add a further understanding of the current scholarship on sex trafficking survivors. In this chapter, I discuss suggested policy changes and potential areas for future research.

Significance of the Current Study

To my knowledge, only a handful (maximum of 4) studies to date have interviewed sex trafficking survivors about their experiences, their needs, and their feelings (Aron et al, 2006; Busch-Armendariz et al. 2013; Ellison 2009; Logan et al. 2009). One of these studies is simply a review of an existing program simply to see what was beneficial, what was missing, and what can be improved (Aron et al, 2006). While this information is valuable, it is difficult to apply to sex trafficking survivors since it assesses one organization. Another one of the studies reviews the importance of social workers, and what qualities are most useful in a social worker (Busch-Armendariz et al. 2013). Again, this is helpful but fails to use the voices of the survivors in a holistic way by focusing on one specific resource for mental health recovery.
It is this lack of empirical research involving survivors that is the major contribution of the current study. This study provides a voice for the survivors to gain a deeper understanding of their lives and experiences, and how they can recover. While this research is in no way generalizable to the entire population of sex trafficking survivors, it is a start into creating more knowledge on the struggles of sex trafficking survivors.

It is my hope that studies such as this can be used in the future to continue the conversation about sex trafficking survivors. It is possible to analyze content like hospital and arrest records to determine what sex trafficking survivors experience, and what resources should be allotted to them. However, if the goal is to understand long-term methods of recovery, it is imperative the perspective of the survivor is understood. One problem that has plagued the scholarship is the consistent conversation about a need for empirical evidence. While this is a good recommendation for future research, it can only be stated so many times before the point of the recommendation loses its point. As stated earlier in the paper there is an acknowledgment in this research that there are available resources, but even an understanding of those resources does not indicate an actual plan for recovery, nor does it guarantee a successful reintegration into society.

**Recommended Policy**

The results of the current study have numerous policy implications. Some of these are grandiose and are incredibly unlikely to be implemented, yet they are still policies I believe would help in the long run.

The first of these policies is to see an implementation of scholarships for trafficking survivors. It would begin with a full ride scholarship to any public state school and advance
to private schools as the research on trafficking gets better. Having a scholarship in place would enable any survivor to pursue an education at their own will. As seen by the results of this study, school serves many purposes including an open door to opportunity, an increase in self-worth, and an increased understanding of how society works. It is already known that disenfranchised women are the most likely targets for sex trafficking (Hammond and McGlone 2014; Kortla and Wommack 2011; Reid 2012; Wheaton and Schauer 2006), so the availability of school will allow a population of marginalized people to increase their socioeconomic status.

The next policy I believe should be implemented is the legalization of prostitution. This is a highly controversial topic for a couple of reasons. The first of which is because of the eternal tie that prostitution and sex trafficking share. My research is not suggesting there is no connection between these two phenomena, but rather to point out that prostitution and sex trafficking are two different parts of the commercial sex world. Marinova and James’s (2012) conducted a study analyzing the legal response of prostitution in Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands. This study concludes by stating legalization does not necessarily work at preventing the sex trafficking of humans, but they also acknowledge in their writing that their results do not mean legalization of prostitution is an absolute negative in preventing sex trafficking. I suggest the legalization of prostitution not to prevent sex trafficking from happening, but rather to minimalize the criminalization of survivors. Adding to decriminalization policy, I suggest the U.S. pursue a decriminalization of drug users. This is to prevent criminalization of sex trafficking survivors who are also drug users.
The last legislation I recommend is to allow easier access to both Trafficking visas (visas for trafficking survivors to exit) and the resources from the TVPA. As it currently stands, an attempt to get resources from either of these, or the benefits mandated by the TVPA come with a high amount of re-traumatization, and these resources are not able to reach many survivors due to the strict requirements outlined by the TVPA (Reiger 2007). The process of getting a T visa is too arduous and can become a barrier for some survivors receiving benefits (Ellsion 2009). To enable the highest amount of recovery there needs to be an access point to varying resources that also do not re-traumatize the people who apply for them.

**Future Research**

Future research should continue the trend of examining the issue of sex trafficking from the direct point of view of the survivors. Future research needs to provide a platform for those survivors to voice their feelings and experiences with the current system and society.

Future research should also produce longitudinal data on survivors who have recently exited the world of trafficking and analyze their physical and mental health over a period of many years along with the many resources they accessed. Such a study would provide an improved understanding of what precisely contributes to their recovery, and how to execute certain resources better than they are currently executed.

Other forms of research should conduct studies with survivors and policymakers to create a feasible plan for implementing a policy that could genuinely improve the lives of survivors. By talking with these two populations there could be an understanding of where
the two have interests that intersect. From the existing studies, including this one, it is clear recovery for survivors is resource-intensive so it is important to examine the recovery of sex trafficking survivors from multiple perspectives. In an ideal world, there would be feasible to provide every suggested resource for every survivor without affecting funding towards any other important societal issue, however, this is not the case, so research should examine what is possible.

Additional future research could contribute to understanding sex trafficking by empirically studying the traffickers. This type of study also carries many ethical considerations and would be nearly impossible. However, if ever conducted it would increase the knowledge on the topic immeasurably by shedding light on the aspect of sex trafficking that arguably is the least understood.

**Conclusion**

Survivors of sex trafficking are in an incredibly unique position, having faced some of the most traumatic experiences in modern society. It is the obligation of society and government to care for these survivors, yet this care has, in many ways, not been extended to this population. This thesis does not provide answers to every question, rather, it is to suggest to best assist survivors of sex trafficking, the focus must be shifted to the actual survivors.
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Appendix 1

IRB APPROVED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Each interview question is to help gain an understanding of your experiences. You are fully free to refuse to answer or skip any question or questions you are not comfortable answering.

1. How old are you?
2. What is your race or ethnicity?
3. What is your Nationality (What country were you born in?)
4. What country or countries were you trafficked from?
5. What country or countries were you trafficked in?
6. At what age were you first trafficked?
7. At what age did you exit trafficking?
   a. Were there any times where you exited and returned to trafficking?
   b. If so, how many?
8. Exiting Circumstances: Can you describe the circumstances in which you exited trafficking?
   a. How were you able to exit trafficking?
9. Challenges: What was most challenging in exiting trafficking?
   a. What were the most common challenges you faced?
   b. Were there any challenges you expected to face that you ended up not having to?
   c. Was there anything you didn’t think would be a challenge that ended up being a challenge?
10. Resources: What was the most helpful tool or resource in allowing you to exit?
    a. Looking back, what was the most useful or helpful resource for you to exit trafficking?
    b. What resources did you not have access to that would have been helpful for you to exit?
11. Agency Questions: Are you familiar with the term “agency,” which refers to an individuals’ self-determination? (If no explain. If yes, continue. Explanation of agency: Agency refers to a person’s capacity to act in any given environment.)
    a. On a scale of 1 to 10, with one being “no agency” and 10 being “completely able to determine my life,” what number/level of agency best describes you after exiting trafficking?
    b. What number best describes your agency level now?
    c. In words, how would you describe your level of agency when you after exiting trafficking?
    d. And now?
12. **Empowerment Questions**: Agency and empowerment are two terms that are very connected.
   a. When you first exited trafficking, can you tell me any things you did to empower yourself? If so, how well did they work?
   b. Today, what kind of things do you do to empower yourself? How effective are they?

13. **Happiness Questions**: Similarly, were there things you did or tried to do to make yourself happy when you were being trafficked? If so, what were they and how effective were they?
   a. When you first exited trafficking were there things you did to try to make yourself happy? If so, what were they and how effective were they?
   b. What things do you do now to try to be happy and how effective are they?

14. Is there anything I did not ask that you would like me to know?

   **Thank you for your time in answering these questions.**
Appendix 2

EMAIL TO AGENCIES ASSISTING SEX TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS TO REQUEST HELP WITH RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

Dear XXXXX,

I’m a University of Colorado Boulder student who has been fortunate to be accepted into the Honors College to pursue my interests in identifying the resources available to and that are most effective for people who exit the world of sex trafficking. The faculty adviser of my project is Dr. Joanne Belknap, who is the former president of the American Society of Criminology. I’ve copied her on this email. I took an upper-level course on “Violence Against Women & Girls” with her last year, and have since been working with her on designing my honors thesis research. I’ve also been fortunate to be selected by CU’s Undergraduate Research Program to be paid to work with Dr. Belknap last summer, so that I could focus on my research design and get it approved by the CU Institutional Review Board (the human subject’s board). I’m happy to say that my protocol was approved by this board in August.

I am planning on interviewing people over the age of eighteen to learn about the resources available to them, and what they wished would have been available because this gravely important issue is largely ignored, and the voices of these individuals who have suffered a great injustice need to be shape the direction of responses to sex trafficking victims. I would like to compensate any person twenty dollars who decides to participate, along with providing them with a larger list of further resources. I was wondering if you would allow me to come to your organization and provide you with fliers containing my contact information, and a description of the project itself. Or to discuss any organizations that could potentially provide participants. Any input or advice would be greatly appreciated.

I am also fully willing to send you a copy of the flyer, the interview questions, or a more detailed description of the project, should you desire. Due to the nature of the topic I understand that it is a challenging issue and that there is much psychological trauma felt by this population. That is why I am trying to provide a safe and comfortable environment for these survivors to give voice to their desired resources. I look forward to talking with you soon.

I’m copying this to my thesis adviser, Dr. Joanne Belknap, in case you would like to ask her any questions, as well.

All the best,

Stephen Abyeta
Honors Student
Department of Sociology
President of Alpha Phi Omega, Boulder Chapter
University of Colorado
Appendix 3

RECRUITMENT FLYER

FOR SEX TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS 18 YEARS AND OLDER

We are looking for individuals to volunteer their time to have an interview (30 minutes to 1.5 hours in length) about exiting the world of sex trafficking. The interview focuses on resources available to you as a survivor of sex trafficking. But we are also interested in what is not available to you that you wish was. Your information and identity will be kept entirely confidential. The goal of the study is to document the resources helpful to sex trafficking survivors, and to advocate for the access and implementation of these resources.

*If interested, please see the contact information below.*

Stephen Abeyta
Honors Student in Sociology at the University of Colorado Boulder
Email: Stephen.Abeyta@colorado.edu
Telephone: (720) 207-7257
Appendix 4
IRB-APPROVED IN-PERSON CONSENT FORM

Title of research study: The exiting and Recovery of Sex Trafficking Survivors
Investigator: Stephen Abeyta

Why am I being invited to take part in a research study?
I invite you to take part in a research study because your experiences in being a survivor of sex trafficking is truly unique and perfectly apt to answering the questions asked in this study. There have not been many studies research the actual exiting experiences of survivors of sex trafficking. It is important to gain an understanding of an issue from all perspective including, and especially those who have been perfectly affected.

What should I know about a research study?
• Someone will explain this research study to you.
• Whether or not you take part is up to you.
• You can choose not to take part.
• You can agree to take part and later change your mind (withdraw from the study).
• You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
• Your decision will not be held against you.
• You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

Who can I talk to?
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the research team at Stephen.abeyta@colorado.edu
This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (“IRB”). You may talk to them at (303) 735-3702 or irbadmin@colorado.edu if:
• Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
• You cannot reach the research team.
• You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
• You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
• You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Why is this research being done?
This research project is being done to address the issue of Sex Trafficking in contemporary society, ideally, to identify resources and actions that are most useful to exiting sex trafficking. As it currently stands, people who are sex trafficked or who have exited sex trafficking have a voice that is not commonly heard in society. There are many issue that surround the healing process for survivors of sex trafficking. Survivors can be criminalized in many instances, and for those that seek resources most find that there is a scarce amount of resources. Many studies show that people who experiences different traumas throughout their lives require different resources to fully recover/heal.
Unfortunately there seems to be a large gap in knowledge when it comes to what survivors of sex trafficking both require and desire.

How long will the research last?
I expect that you will be in this research study for the research will last anywhere from a half an hour to two hours, depending on how much detail you provide in your interview answers. How many people will be studied?
I expect about 8-10 people to participate in this research study. If I am so fortunate to have as many as 20 participants, I plan to interview that many, but this is very unlikely.

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?
• You will be interviewed about your experiences with exiting sex trafficking starting with some lighter ice breaking questions.
• The interviews will be recorded with an audio recording device, and I will be taking detailed notes throughout the duration of the interview.
• There will be no follow-up to this interview, but you are able to ask for, and receive the results of the study.
• There will only be one interview lasting around one hour in duration.
• You will only interact with me for the interview
• The interview will take place wherever is most comfortable for you.
• The research study will be done around May of 2017
• The final project will conceal the participants’ identity keeping the information anonymous.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?
You can choose not to start this research and if you choose to start, you can choose leave the research (or skip any questions) at any time and it will not be held against you. You are also able to participate to any level that you want and do not have to answer any question you do not want to.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?
You can leave the research at any time it will not be held against you. You can decide at any time to skip questions, or decide to stop your participation in the study as a whole. There are no adverse consequences in deciding to remove yourself from the study. If you so desire your information will be destroyed once you decide to cease participation. If this is not your desire your information may still be used in the study.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?
It is possible that some of the questions asked in the interview could potentially cause feelings of discomfort. One or more of the questions has the potential of causing negative feelings. You have no obligation to answer every question or any question you do not feel comfortable answering. I also have a sheet of resources that will be distributed to the participants. The sheet contains resources surrounding housing, mental health, monetary help, and several more.
Will being in this study help me anyway?

There is no promise of any benefit beyond simply providing an education for people unaware of the issue of sex trafficking. Although I cannot guarantee it, I hope to commit my career to providing information to policy-makers, non-profits, and the general public on how best to assist sex trafficking victims/survivors. I also hope, but can’t guarantee, that participating in my study will result in feeling heard. In sum, it is my goal that sharing your experiences or desires when it comes to what was or may have been most helpful in you exiting sex trafficking may one day lead to policy changes that provide more resources for you now and/or for people that will exit the world of sex trafficking in the future.

For questions on the after effects of your participations, you may email any member of the research team for information: Stephen.Abeyta@colorado.edu  
Joanne.Belknap@colorado.edu

What happens to the information collected for the research?

The information you provide will be kept on a secure electronic file that can only be accessed by members of the research team. Your identity will be kept entirely secret and your confidentiality will be protected by being given. Therefore all of the information kept will be secured and confidential.

Your alias will be kept throughout the study and the information you provide will be used in the study to further advance the research question.

Signature Block for Capable Adult

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

____________________________  _________________________
Signature of subject               Date

____________________________
Printed name of subject

____________________________  _________________________
Signature of person obtaining consent               Date

____________________________
Printed name of person obtaining consent

IRB Approval Date
Appendix 5

OVER-THE-PHONE INTERVIEW CONSENT

Hello, I would like to thank you for offering your participation in this study. I am going to go over some of the more technical details of the study that will hopefully answer some questions you may have. I am doing this as a means of getting your full consent for this research study. Are there any questions you have before we continue?

First I will discuss the purpose of the research study, and then I will discuss what happens to the information that you give to me along with any benefits to or any way this study could be harmful.

The purpose for this study is to discover the desires, challenges, and successes of those that have exited the world of sex trafficking. There are many issues that present themselves in contemporary with few have a gap in knowledge as large as the one presented in the resources needed for sex trafficking. I am attempting to pull on your unique experience to discover the reality of exiting sex trafficking.

You are not obligated to take part in this study if you do not desire to, and you are also not obligated to answer every question. If a question makes you uncomfortable, or you simply do not want to answer a question you are fully within your right to not answer that question. If you decide to not to participate, that decision will not be held against you and you are free to take as much time as you need, along with ask any question you want before we actually begin.

If you have any further questions or things you would like to tell me after the interview is over you can contact me or the research team. My email is Stephen.Abeyta@colorado.edu and my number is 720207725. You are also able to contact the Institutional Review Board at irbadmin@colorado.edu with their number being 3037353702.

The interview itself will only last around 1 hour, and the research project should be done by April or May of 2017, and will have at least 8 participants in total.

If you say yes to participating in this research study you will be interviewed about your experiences with exiting sex trafficking. The interviews will be recorded on an audio recording device and I will be taking extensive notes throughout the duration of the interview. There will be no follow up interview so this will be the only interview we do, however if you would like to receive the results of the research study you are free to contact myself or the research team to get the results.
Your information will be kept in a secure on a locked electronic file that is only accessible to myself and the research team. You will also be given an alias so that your identity will remain secure and confidential.

If you change your mind about wanting to participate in the study there is no adverse consequences, and if you want your information will be destroyed.

The only way this study could have adverse consequences is by bringing up questions or topics that could potentially make you uncomfortable. Although as stated earlier you can refuse to answer any question you want.

There are some potential benefits though, the primary of which is to get information from people who are in the incredibly unique position having exited the world of sex trafficking. Your answers give us an inside where as to the desires of those who have exited sex trafficking and could potentially lead to some policy or legislative changes that provide more resources for future survivors.

Are there any other questions you would like answered?

Do I have your full consent as a participatory factor in this study?

Date:
Appendix 6

RESOURCE SHEET PROVIDED FOR PARTICIPANTS

Hotlines
National Human Trafficking Resource Center
1-888-373-7888
nhtrc@polarisproject.org
www.traffickingresourcecenter.org
RAINN
800-656-4673
www.rainn.org
National Hotline for Crime Victims
1-855-484-2846
www.victimconnect.org
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
1-800-273-8255 (24/7)
1-888-628-9454 (Spanish)
www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Housing and Employment
Public Housing Program
Contact local Housing Agency or The Housing and Urban Development field office
portal.hud.gov
Tenant Based Vouchers
Provides greater access to affordable housing
Visit local public housing agency
portal.hud.gov
American Job Centers
1-877-872-5627
www.careeronestop.org
Find local help under “Explore & Find”
Job Corps
800-733-5627
www.jobcorps.gov
U.S. Department of Labor

Monetary
Victims of Crime Act Victim Compensation
1-800-363-0441
810 Seventh St. NW. Washington DC 20531
ITVERP@usdoj.gov
www.ovc.gov

Medical and Protection
Medicaid
877-267-2323
# Appendix 7

## PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Age at 1st Trafficking</th>
<th>Age Fully Exited Trafficking</th>
<th>Country/ies Trafficked From</th>
<th>Country/ies Trafficked In</th>
<th>Exited Multiple Times</th>
<th>Recruitment for Study Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>17, Started being groomed at 15</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>“Yes multiple…around, let’s go 10”</td>
<td>Snowball from previous participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Canada, United States, South America, Asia</td>
<td>First exit at 21, second time at 22</td>
<td>Was sent project info by director of non-profit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debra</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>“I attempted to leave…six different times”</td>
<td>Snowball from previous participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>20’s</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>“Oh yeah”</td>
<td>Snowball from previous participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenn</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Groome d at 12, trafficked at 14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>“Nope”</td>
<td>Snowball from previous participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Puerto Rican, Irish</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>“Yes, approximately five.”</td>
<td>Snowball from previous participant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Names are not the participants’ actual names. They were assigned by the researcher to protect anonymity.