

# #TraffickingTruths: Realities of child sex trafficking!

[Get the facts behind the misconceptions so we really can](#)

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Right now, we are experiencing a cultural moment centered on combatting the devastating and very real issue of [child sex trafficking](#). However, despite the well-meaning intent behind much of this national discussion, many of the theories and social media posts being passed around are riddled with misconceptions that actively harm the anti-trafficking movement.

For instance, in July popular conspiracy [theories about sex trafficking on Wayfair](#), an online furniture company, exploded across the Internet. And while it's more than true that child sex trafficking is often happening right under our noses on the Internet, viral theories such as the Wayfair conspiracy do not offer accurate portrayals and divert important energy and resources from the real problem.

Similarly, some may recall the false reports of sex trafficking and pedophilia allegedly occurring at a pizza restaurant and underground tunnels where a secretive group of global elites were said to rape and feast on the blood of child victims (often referred to as [“PizzaGate”](#) or [#PizzaGate](#)). This story originally surfaced in the lead up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Threads of this story and have since morphed and become tied to the “QAnon” conspiracy theory, and now include other phenomena such as the global COVID-19 pandemic ([among many other things](#)). Although the bulk of these theories are not based on meaningful facts or credible evidence—[indeed, many of their aspects have been found to be false](#)—they have gained traction online and distracted potential anti-trafficking allies and advocates from recognizing those [who the data shows are actually purchasing sex illegally](#) and actively exploiting sex trafficking victims above ground in their local communities. We cannot simply ignore ill-informed takes on sex trafficking because the subconscious acceptance of the narratives they create make it more difficult to address real problems and implement effective change and reform.

So, in what follows, I've broken down some common misconceptions and will share the truth about child sex trafficking. My hope is that this reality check helps equip and inspire you to keep you involved in the fight against not only child sex trafficking, but all forms of sexual exploitation!

**MISCONCEPTION: Sensational, popular action films like Taken or viral conspiracies like Wayfair are accurate depictions of how sex trafficking occurs.**

**REALITY: Most sex traffickers prefer to develop relationships with their targets—[sometimes virtually](#) and [sometimes in-person](#)—in order to methodically groom and traffic them. Child sex trafficking often involves a person who knew the child or even a family member of the child.**

For example, [prevalence of parental pimping has been documented](#) as ranging from 3% – 44% among survivors, revealing that parents play a significant role in sex trafficking. Further, a Journal of Family Violence study reported that almost 60% of familial sex trafficking victims have ongoing contact with their trafficker, making it exceedingly difficult for children and youth to remove themselves from harmful situations and protect themselves—both physically and psychologically. Further, as documented in a review of active federal sex trafficking cases in 2019, 23.3% involved a pre-existing relationship, whereas only 3.5% were organized crime-

directed. In other words, sex trafficking is not the stuff of Liam Neeson thrillers. (And, by the way, William G. Hillar, the man who claimed that *Taken* was based on his daughter's sex trafficking and death, was [sentenced to 21 months in prison](#) for a myriad of fabrications.)



**MISCONCEPTION: Child trafficking victims are usually white children with blonde hair and kept in dirty basements with chains.**

**REALITY: In active federal cases of sex trafficking in 2019, only 5.3% of cases involved cages, locked rooms, or barred cells. Most victims are groomed and held captive through psychological abuse, manipulation, and coercion that can be [difficult to identify](#). Sex trafficking can happen without the child being kidnapped at all!**

Additionally, while all children are at risk for sex trafficking, especially given the proliferation of the Internet and the rise of social media use at younger and younger ages, it is not white children who are being disproportionately affected by sexual exploitation and trafficking. In fact, truly combating commercial sexual exploitation is a racial justice issue. As these studies ([A](#), [B](#), & [C](#)) document, black youth comprise the majority of child sex trafficking victims.

It is imperative that organizations and individuals dedicated to ending human trafficking are also dedicated to responsibly portraying this issue in their messaging and materials. In the past, many in the movement have overwhelmingly depicted the white, female child victim versus using racially diverse images of black and brown children, who comprise the majority of victims, as well as white children. (Another disparity is the lack of depictions and discussions involving boy victims or that LGBTQ+ youth are often at greater risk.)

To truly care about child sex trafficking, one must also care about the other social issues that fuel victimization.

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**MISCONCEPTION: “This could never happen to my child” or, “that would never happen in this neighborhood”.**

**REALITY: While it’s true that most victims of child sex trafficking are children of color or come from backgrounds of poverty or abuse, it is also absolutely true that trafficking can happen in any community, to children from stable home environments.**

Sex trafficking is certainly a dark and shadowy crime, but it is not a dark and shadowy crime that only exists in the abstract of “somewhere else.” Sex trafficking is happening in your community.

The Internet has leveled factors like race and class, by allowing exploiters access to children who usually had the benefit of more protective barriers. I have heard countless tragic stories at NCOSE from families who had no idea their child was being groomed, victimized, and preyed upon in their own homes due to predators using and abusing social media and other Internet sites. In a focus group I had earlier this year with youth ages 16-18 from stable families in the wealthy suburbs of Washington, DC, EVERY single one of them had been solicited for sex online by a stranger.



Based on [survivor testimony](#) and [research](#), sex traffickers and child predators appear to be using popular social media apps such as Instagram, Snapchat, and [TikTok](#) to identify, [groom](#), and [exploit](#) children in the online space. In many of the cases occurring on these platforms, minors are receiving unsolicited direct messages from strangers who will often pose as peers or as cohorts from nearby areas.

This type of direct grooming via social media platforms has led to [several reported](#) (and probably many other unreported) instances of sex trafficking and child sexual abuse. In other instances, adults who may know the children outside of the platforms will use the platforms as a means to [groom the children for sexual abuse and exploitation](#).

**MISCONCEPTION: Pornography and prostitution have nothing to do with sex trafficking.**

**REALITY: Sex trafficking only exists because of the demand for paid sex.**

Without the (mostly) men who believe they have a right to purchase access to a woman or child’s body, there would be no need for more sex trafficking victims (the supply) to meet that demand.

Prostitution websites are [major hubs for sex trafficking](#) in the modern world. Additionally, [evidence and testimony is emerging](#) which shows that one of the largest and most well-known online pornography platforms, Pornhub, and similar sites are also hubs for sex trafficking. We have seen clearly and spoken out about the reality that pornography and sex trafficking are [inextricably interwoven](#). In fact, the business models of sites like Pornhub are [built to profit from and encourage](#) sexual abuse and exploitation.

Sites such as Pornhub do not require verification of consent for any videos uploaded. This means that, in any video hosted by the site, it is unclear whether or not the “performers” were coerced, manipulated, or forced. [Recently](#), the [TraffickingHub campaign](#) has made these issues apparent, as more and more [survivors](#) have come forward to share their stories.

Importantly, Pornhub is a so-called “tube site” that offer “free” content. They rely on user-generated content to fill out their “offerings” without verifying consent or age in videos. As a result, their content has featured the literal [rape of sex trafficking victims](#). Even when confronted with evidence Pornhub has refused to take down these videos and has continued to profit from them and be complicit in the abuse and exploitation perpetrated by the traffickers and sex buyers who create the “content.” Prominent pornography production companies, like GirlsDoPorn, have also been found [guilty of creating pornographic content in a manner that included fraud, force, and coercion](#) — sex trafficking — of women and minors directly.

So, if you care about ending child sex trafficking, you must care about the sexual exploitation occurring not on Wayfair, but on websites like Pornhub and others, where sexual exploitation is normalized, and where victims are exploited.

[\*\*Exposing #TraffickingHub as a major exploiter is vital to #SaveTheChildren and end child sex trafficking. #RealityCheckIt #TraffickingTruths\*\*](#)[CLICK TO TWEET](#)

**MISCONCEPTION: Once a child is rescued, the work is done.**

**REALITY: You cannot solve trafficking by swooping in and stealing the victim back from the traffickers. While rescue is critical, it is PREVENTION that will stop this problem. Moreover, recovery and healing is a process that often lasts a lifetime.**

We can’t only focus attention and money towards the moment of rescue. For many survivors, the trauma they endure is just as bad (or worse) after they leave “the life” and are forced to relive triggers, or have videos of their abuse traded, or as they struggle to come to terms with the abuse they endured, obtain education, find work, build secure, loving relationships, etc.. This is of course in addition to the hard work of finding their footing in a system of weakened social services and immense judgement from others.

The truth is, combating sex trafficking and other forms of sexual exploitation is hard, heartbreaking work, and all of us have a part to play in that work! In fact, when we allow sexual exploitation to be normalized in society—either through bad laws and policies, glamorized by the media, standing by as corporations reap in profits based on exploitation, dismissing behavior with excuses like “boys will be boys”, watching pornography—we are part of the problem.

**MISCONCEPTION: Sex trafficking will never go away completely.**

**REALITY: This issue can feel overwhelming, but we should never give up hope.**

Sex trafficking and other forms of sexual exploitation are NOT a given. Recognizing the problem and acknowledging the interconnected threads of sexual abuse and exploitation is empowerment. Together we can untangle the web and usher in a world completely free from child sex trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Here is a list of tangible ways you can be actively anti-trafficking:

- **Share responsibly-sourced information.** Parents, educators, health professionals, and law enforcement need to become educated on [signs of trafficking](#) rather than viral hoaxes.
- **Educate children about potential harms that come with the use of technology.** Technology doesn't need to be feared or shunned, but individuals, parents, and families alike must [understand and address its potential harmful realities](#) with sober-minded judgment and wisdom.
- **Maintain involvement in your use and your children's use of technology.** Lead by example and [keep conversations about tech use open and ongoing](#) in your home.
- **Invest time in implementing parental controls, filters, and other software solutions that can help protect children in the digital space.** They don't solve every problem, but they definitely help limit opportunities for exploitation.
- **Invest in programs that keep children safe.** Our world is filled with new spins on old threats and organizations like ours and others who make up the [Coalition to End Sexual Exploitation Safeguard Alliance](#) work hard to make the world safer for children and to equip parents with crucial information for making better-informed decisions for their families.
- **Invest in organizations that lift people out of poverty.** Sex traffickers often choose and target victims in vulnerable populations and groom them with promises of provision and sustenance.
- **Hold corporations accountable for the platforms they have created that facilitate sex trafficking and other forms of sexual abuse and exploitation.** You don't have to stand idly by while technology companies do the same. [You can use your voice in targeted ways to make a difference.](#)
- **Don't be a bystander.** When you see others engaging in normalizing behavior, or sexually exploiting others, speak out.
- **If you consume pornography, please stop.** Consuming pornography normalizes the use of others for narcissistic sexual gratification, and fuels demand for people who are exploited in pornography production.

No matter how involved you are able to be in this moment, hold on to hope! [Victories are being won](#) in these dark spaces and momentum is growing to see them eradicated entirely.

So let's stay the course and work together to build a world free from sexual exploitation!

By Diane Hawkins, National Center on Sexual Exploitation NCOSE