

Sex traffickers target girls with intellectual disabilities

It is well known that children with intellectual disabilities face a much higher risk for sexual abuse and sexual assault than those without disabilities. Perpetrators of child sexual abuse select victims who have disabilities because they view them as more vulnerable and less capable of reporting the abuse.

According to a recent study, it now appears that this elevated risk for sexual victimization among children with intellectual disabilities extends to sex trafficking. In a review of 54 sex trafficking cases reported in Florida from 2007 to 2014, approximately one-third of the cases involved girls with intellectual disabilities. On average, these girls were 15 years old but their mental age equivalent was typically 7 to 10 years old. Sex traffickers targeted girls with intellectual disabilities because they were not capable of protecting themselves from – and some did not even comprehend – sexual exploitation. The exploited girls had very limited understanding of sexual or romantic relationships. Some victims could not distinguish between a boyfriend and a sex trafficker or buyer of sex. Other girls with less severe disabilities seemed to understand, albeit to a limited degree, that they were being sexually exploited but they did not know how to escape the exploitive situation nor did they grasp their right to say no. Compounding the girls' vulnerability, sex traffickers used threats and violence to ensure victim compliance to sexual demands and to prevent victims from breaking away.

Endangering circumstances and girls' behaviors most commonly connected to sex trafficking were running away from home or foster care, unsupervised Internet use, and getting into cars with strangers. These circumstances put girls with intellectual disabilities at extreme risk because the girls did not fully comprehend the dangerousness of unknown people or places or how to get help when in danger. Additional situations linked to sex trafficking of girls with intellectual disabilities were sexual exploitation by schoolmates, being abducted from bus stops, introduction to sex traffickers by other girls who were already being sexually exploited, and being lured into sex trafficking by their mothers who were already involved in prostitution.

Exploitation in sex trafficking is an extremely damaging form of abuse that often results in injuries, health risks, psychological problems, interpersonal difficulties, and social marginalization. Trafficking or buying sex with an underage girl who cannot recognize the difference between a boyfriend and a "john" and who does not understand how to say no is rape. This study dispels enduring societal myths regarding girls in prostitution (e.g., "there is no harm in it", "the girls chose this and are in control of the situation", or "the girls are making good money"). New awareness that girls with intellectual disabilities face elevated risk for exploitation in sex trafficking necessitates enhanced safeguards to prevent sex trafficking of children including legislation enforcing stiffer punishments for those who exploit and buy sex with children, particularly those who harm children with disabilities.

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Publication

[Sex Trafficking of Girls With Intellectual Disabilities: An Exploratory Mixed Methods Study.](#)

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