

Tennessee's Shortcomings in Teaching Our Children to Protect  
Themselves and Their Peers Against Sex Trafficking

by

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## Abstract

There are many different avenues that lead to child sex trafficking, and more often than not, it is a known and or trusted adult who grooms the youth and lures them into trafficking. This happens everywhere, so Tennessee is no exception. While there is a law set in Tennessee's Code that would at least teach youth about what sex trafficking is, this has not yet been added to the state's education requirements. Some districts are not even aware of this requirement. Teachers, law enforcement, and caretakers tend to be the main receivers for this type of training, but it is important that the youth are trained to recognize how they and their peers might be at risk, as well as how to respond to sex trafficking. This can be done simply through open conversation and positive interaction to make youth feel heard and valued.

## Preface

When I was thirteen years old, I went on a mission trip to Atlanta, Georgia and worked with a local business called That Grace Restored. They rescued women from sex trafficking and then employed them at their boutique that sold handmade paper goods. We got to help them make the goods they sell while listening to survivor testimonies. A year later, I had the opportunity to go to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio. There, they have an exhibit called “Invisible: Slavery Today” where they have small rooms that depict living situations and work areas of sex trafficking victims, and they are accompanied by stories. I remember reading one about a younger tween or teenage girl who was forced to have sex multiple times a day, and my heart completely broke. I felt sick to my stomach, and the feeling hasn’t gone away.

Since then, I have always been interested in learning more about how I could help victims, and I am now fortunate enough to have the opportunity to research some avenues through my Honors thesis project. What I am most interested in is arguing for sex trafficking prevention curriculum to be mandated in all K12 schools, since the age of entry is so young and since most of the time, victims knew and had a relationship with their traffickers before they were victims. It is so important to give children the tools they need to recognize and to tell a trusted adult. The purpose of this thesis project is to analyze what curriculum is available and used in Tennessee to educate minors and those that care for them in any capacity on the subject of sex trafficking, and to then compare delivery and teaching methods to those that have been proven effective for children.

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## Thesis Statement

Sex trafficking occurs when an individual has sex in exchange for some commodity by means of force, fraud, or coercion. However, if a minor is involved, force, fraud, and coercion do not need to be present. With sex trafficking continuing to be on the rise, it is important that more people are taught the risk factors, warning signs, and ways to report sex trafficking. In most cases, the people receiving trainings on these subjects are caregivers, law enforcement officers, teachers, and clergy members. However, studies consistently show that most trafficking victims both knew and had a relationship with their traffickers before becoming a victim. Training people who very well could be traffickers themselves is counterproductive. It is more important to start catering this curriculum towards children, especially given that the average age of entry into the commercial sex industry in the United States is twelve to fourteen years of age (Smith, Vardaman, and Snow, 2009, p.30). In this thesis project, I will be analyzing currently available curriculums created in Tennessee, as well as nationally available curriculums that are also in use in Tennessee. From there, I will compare each curriculum to methods that have been proven to help younger, developing minds learn best about other hard topics such as death, abuse, and addiction, just to give a few examples.

## Literature Review

To reiterate, those instances where there is a commercial sex act involving a minor are automatically considered sex trafficking. As stated above, the average age of entry for sex trafficking is between twelve and fourteen years of age, much younger than

the age typically portrayed on television shows or in movies. It can be reasonably stated that child abuse of any nature is considered abhorrent in the United States, but sexual abuse is especially frowned upon. Sex in general is a very taboo subject, and not many people feel comfortable talking about it. Unfortunately, this potentially causes sex trafficking to go undiscussed. Regardless, these discussions are needed, and they must be open, especially when it comes to teaching children how to recognize unsafe behaviors. Children are an especially at-risk group for sex trafficking and depending on a number of other environmental and or social factors (e.g., family dynamics) they could be more susceptible.

It is important to understand what types of sex trafficking there are and the differences between them. According to Susan C. Mapp, there are four main types of sex trafficking – pimp-controlled, gang-controlled, familial, and survival or self-trafficking (Mapp, 2016). Generally, traffickers will try to lure in victims by meeting a need, whether that be a physical need such as food and shelter, or an emotional need such as romance or good family dynamics. In pimp-controlled trafficking, a “pimp” controls his or her boys or girls. This is the type of trafficking that is the most well-known by the general public because it is the most portrayed on television and in movies. Recruitment for this type of trafficking involves several methods. The most common appears to be that of a pimp or one of his or her recruiters looking online or in public for young boys and girls who have needs that need to be filled, and then grooming or conditioning them to eventually be okay or at least used to being used for sexual exploitation (p.27). Pimp traffickers also tend to use the internet more heavily than other types of traffickers

(Mapp, 2016). The rise of the use of the internet in everyday life, especially in the lives of children, makes this type of trafficking a growing risk.

Gang-controlled trafficking tends to prey more on the desire for a strong family dynamic, making those who come from a broken home especially vulnerable (Mapp, 2016, p.41). Traditionally, when one thinks of a gang trafficking goods, they picture drugs. However, gangs have recently become increasingly aware of the financial gains they can make from selling girls for sex (p.39). This is because a person can be sold multiple times a day and throughout the week, whereas drugs can only be sold and used once. They retain their victims through fear because, especially in bigger gangs such as MS-13 or the Piru Bloods, their members are everywhere (p.43). There is never a sense of safety once someone escapes or leaves, especially since they no longer have the protection of the gang.

In familial trafficking, a family member traffics another family member. This can look like a mother trafficking her daughter for rent, a brother trafficking his sister so that he won't get bullied, or a father trafficking his son to pay for drugs, among other goods. According to Polaris, in 2020, it was found that nearly 31% of child sex trafficking cases reported were facilitated by a family member (Polaris, 2022). Rural areas are especially at-risk for this type of trafficking due to being a lower-income, lower-population area. Sometimes, family is all you have. Survival or self-trafficking (also referred to as survival sex) is mostly carried out by boys (Mapp, 2016, p.46). This is when one sells sex on their own in order to provide for themselves. A person can sell themselves in exchange for a commodity such as food, clothing, shelter, or just money.

Children have limited decision-making skills due to their stage of cognitive development. Especially during early adolescence, they are more likely to engage in risky behavior and make impulsive decisions because their prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain that tells a person how to react to a dangerous situation – has not fully developed yet. All they have to rely on is their amygdala. However, the amygdala only detects the danger (“Brain development in,” 2021; Shapiro, 2021). This puts them at risk because they likely will not know how to appropriately react when being groomed for eventual sex trafficking.

More specific risk factors include going through adverse childhood experiences, socioeconomic status, race, minority status, and cognitive ability. Adverse childhood experiences include coming from a broken family (e.g., divorced parents, raised in a single-parent home, raised by grandparents, domestic violence, etc.), involvement in the foster care system, and abuse and neglect. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), from their 2022 numbers, 18% of the children who had been reported either as missing or as runaways from the foster care system were likely victims of sex trafficking (NCMEC, 2023). Those in the foster care system are more likely to view themselves as just a commodity to their foster families, as testified by Withelma TiOra Ortiz Walker Pettigrew in 2013. A survivor of sex trafficking and former foster child herself, Walker Pettigrew states that foster children “accept and normalize being used as an object for financial gain. We also experience various people who control and come in and out of our lives,” (Preventing and Addressing Sex Trafficking of Youth in Foster Care, 2013). These characteristics mirror those of a victim of sex trafficking. Traffickers view their girls or boys as a way to make more money, and Johns (i.e.,

“buyers”) will come and go throughout the time that the victim is “working.” It’s a very familiar pattern, so it can be easy for the victims to fall into it with little resistance, which is a great advantage for the traffickers.

Abuse and neglect are both likely to cause children to run away from home, and in reality, any sort of unhealthy home environment can cause a child to run away from home. This can be because of a domestic violence situation, divorced parents, or any number of factors that causes someone to feel unsafe or unwanted at home. All of these can create a need for physical commodities and emotional fulfillment that traffickers know they can provide. According to the 2021 data report from the National Runaway Safeline, abuse and neglect made up for 15,539 of the reasons the hotline was called, while family dynamics made up for 20,066 of the reasons (National Runaway Safeline, 2021). Being a runaway and having homeless status can make it especially difficult to get a job. In Tennessee, while it is legal for minors to work, it can still be difficult for them to get jobs if they are a runaway or homeless due to the need for a permanent address or parental permission if they don’t have a government ID. This is something traffickers prey on because they know that some children can neither adequately provide for themselves, nor earn enough to sustain themselves for very long, at the very least.

Socioeconomic status also has the potential to present a need that traffickers can fill. In some instances, parents, other family members, or caregivers will force their children or relatives, whatever the relationship may be, to perform sex acts in exchange for commodities such as reduced rent, financial assistance, drugs, or groceries. Aside from the familial trafficking risk, there is potential for a “boyfriend” pimp or gang member to swoop in and make promises of fulfilling both physical and emotional needs,

such as food, shelter, and a loving home life. Being in situations like that can cause someone, especially those whose brains are still developing, to look past seemingly obvious red flags out of desperation to be provided for in ways they cannot provide for themselves. Living in poverty also presents environmental risks that can cause someone to participate in this behavior. According to a 2015 article, Michael Hawthorne argues that being exposed to lead through drinking water, even little amounts, had “robbed [people] of gray matter in the parts of the brain that enable people to pay attention, regulate emotions and control impulses,” (Hawthorne, 2015). Losing that impulse control can further push young boys and girls towards bad decisions, even when it may seem to be a good decision at the time (e.g., attending a party with older individuals when you yourself are sixteen).

Race can put someone at risk because of buyers’ personal preference as well as what would set off cops’ radar. For example, in a 2014 study, Dr. Meredith Dank, et al. showed that some African American pimps are more likely to deal with only African American girls because it looks less suspicious to police (Dank, et al., 2014). Some pimps believe that white girls bring in more money while others believe more “exotic” races bring in more money (Mapp, 2016, p. 9). Being any sort of minority can put one at risk for being targeted for sex trafficking, including being part of the LGBTQ community. Children and adolescents in this community are at risk of being thrown out of their homes, causing them to become homeless and engage in survival trafficking (p.22).

Lastly, cognitive ability is a big risk factor. Neurodivergent children often have a hard time distinguishing between right and wrong because of their perceptions of the world and of people in general. For example, if someone explains to a child with autism

that a trafficker is a dangerous person, they are likely to have a picture of what that looks like – traffickers are mean and scary. To a child with autism, the deacon at church who gives you candy for letting him touch you is not a trafficker; your brother that is forcing you to have sex with his friends for money but who then buys you ice cream after his friends rape you as a type of reward for obedience is not a trafficker. Additionally, those with ADHD/ADD tend to have poor impulse control, which can cause them to act irrationally or without thinking (Beyer, 2011), so there is a higher likelihood of them being lured into trafficking. Unfortunately, young people with cognitive disabilities are perfect candidates for sex trafficking because their emotional maturity may not match their physical maturity, therefore you can have a sixteen-year-old with the mind of a six-year-old (Mapp, 2016, p.24).

As evidenced above, when looking at risk factors as a whole, they can be quite diverse. When looking specifically at Tennessee, these risk factors exist in nearly every community, so it is unlikely that any area is exempt from experiencing this crime. Due to recent changes in the law, specifically in Tennessee Code § 49-6-1304, training on human trafficking is now required in high school lifetime wellness classes. This is because of the addition of section 13(B), which states that students shall be taught the “detection, intervention, prevention, and treatment of... human trafficking in which the victim is a child. The instruction provided under this subdivision (a)(13)(B) must be accomplished through the viewing of a video recording approved by the [local educational agency],” (Tennessee Department of Education, 2020). For some, this is the only training they ever receive. Others receive no formal training, and based on what methods for training are recommended by nationally-renowned agencies, a video is not the most effective delivery

method. While there are other agencies in Tennessee that offer trainings directed towards children which go more in depth than the instructional video, these are not mandated statewide.

Up until 2021, the human trafficking training required in schools by Tennessee Code § 49-6-1304 (13)(B) was only required in counties where family life curriculum (abstinence-centered sex education) was required, which used to be any Tennessee county with a teen pregnancy rate of 19.5 pregnancies per 1,000 girls aged fifteen to seventeen (Tennessee State Profile, 2021). Not every county in Tennessee has that high of a pregnancy rate, but that does not exclude the young people in those communities from being trafficked for sex. They still needed that education, and they were not getting it. Based on how low the average age of entry for sex trafficking is, it may be a good idea for districts to start teaching this type of curriculum to students who are at least twelve years old. This would put this type of curriculum in middle school as opposed to high school; however, more research is needed on the subject.

Since sex trafficking – or really just sex in general – is such a taboo subject, especially for children, they would have to be taught in ways that do not traumatize them, which can be difficult considering the subject matter. However, these are the same concerns that have to be taken into consideration when analyzing the most effective methods for teaching about tough subjects, such as abuse, drug addiction, alcoholism, and death. A more controversial approach is that of the use of scare tactics to instill fear and encourage avoiding these activities. This is obviously more for subjects like drug addiction and alcoholism than it is for those like death that people generally do not have a voice in, but it is still an interesting approach. While on its face, it may be assumed that

scare tactics would do what their name implies, research has shown that there is a chance they will backfire instead. In an article by Alyssa Lederer at Tulane University, she found that:

Research reveals mixed effects from fear-inducing strategies. A well-known large-scale study found that fear appeals can be useful at changing attitudes and behaviors when people feel susceptible to the health problem and confident in their ability to take action to prevent it. Yet for people who don't meet these two conditions, fear appeals can backfire – indeed, such tactics can induce even more risk-taking behavior (Lederer, 2017).

Their effectiveness is dependent on a person's – in this case, a child's – personal beliefs and views of the world. Another organization that supports this claim is Compass Mark.

Their research shows that:

... since [children's] brains are still developing, they often live “in the moment;” when an unhealthy situation arises, they'll make decisions based on what they're feeling then and there, instead of making a reasoned, more adult-like decision... In fact, high-risk children and adolescents, such as those who are impulsive or sensation-seekers, can become more attracted to an unhealthy behavior presented in scare tactics (Compass Mark, 2016).

For some children, seeing graphic images of sexually transmitted diseases or the inside of a drug addict's house may be enough for them to stay away from sex or drugs. For other children, that could prove more attractive to them, so it is reasonable to say that scare

tactics are not an effective method when looking at a comprehensive delivery method for a difficult subject such as sex trafficking.

Current methods for teaching some of these more difficult topics seem to include having an open dialogue that is both age-appropriate and gets the message across clearly. Take sexual abuse for example, which sex trafficking falls under in Tennessee (Tennessee Department of Children’s Services, 2023). The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) recommends certain topics and conversation starters based on age. For younger children, they recommend that parents teach them the proper names for their body parts, explaining that those parts are private, reassuring them that it is okay to say no, and showing that the parent is a safe person to confide in. For teenagers, topics get more mature and include talking directly about sexual assault and even encourage parents to use a story of personal experience to make it seem more real for them (RAINN, 2023). Open conversations with children, getting on their level, and just being genuine with them makes them more likely to listen and pay attention.

This is also true of educating children about avoiding drugs and alcohol. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism finds that adolescents are not as likely to start drinking if they have a good relationship with parents or guardians than they would be without them (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). That includes having conversations and listening to the children’s concerns, treating them as equals. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration also promotes this type of relationship as it creates a trusting relationship between a child and their parent(s) or guardian(s). Not having these conversations also sends a message – that there is nothing wrong with trying drugs and alcohol (“Why You Should Talk...”, 2022).

Parents and guardians seem to have the most positive effect on children when it comes to setting the example for life – which is understandable and expected. Children and adolescents naturally look up to their parents, so the behavior they exemplify can pass on to their children with consequences.

Unfortunately, there is limited research on the most effective way to teach children about sex trafficking specifically, but what is out there follows the same pattern as what a majority of educational and government entities tend to agree is the most effective way to prevent children and adolescents from making poor, impulsive decisions that could cause serious harm. Most of the current literature comes from government agencies or non-governmental organizations who work with human trafficking in some capacity, whether it be through victim assistance, training, or resource allocation. One of the more prominent examples available to the public is the Blue Campaign from the United States Department of Homeland Security. They are a national public awareness campaign designed to train the public, law enforcement, and other industries on the best practices about how to recognize, respond to, and report human trafficking. They offer around eighty different resources in a variety of languages, all free and available to print for anyone who wants them. One of these is their “How to Talk to Youth About Human Trafficking” guide, which, like all of their resources, was created with input from actual survivors of human trafficking. This makes the curriculum more effective because the people who wrote and gave input on it lived this exploitative life. They experienced it first-hand as opposed to having just read research articles on the topic.

The guide, while not intended to be given directly to youth to educate themselves, contains examples of how youth should be taught by caretakers and people who work

with youth (educators, counselors, etc.). For instance, its Dos & Don'ts section stresses a gentler approach in bringing awareness. It states that one should use empowering language, be empathetic, talk about protective factors, and talk about what it means to be exploited, as opposed to talking about risk factors, questioning their personal situations, and using big professional words (Blue Campaign, 2023). These tactics also have scientific backing. It is well-known that positive reinforcement is more effective for a developing mind than negative reinforcement does. This is also evidenced by the arguments against the use of scare tactics for sex avoidance.

A widely known non-governmental organization that also gives input on how to talk to children about sex trafficking is DeliverFund. They have a guide specifically for parents on questions to ask to get a conversation started about sex trafficking with their child or children. It is split into "Convo Starters" and "Crucial Questions." Included in "Convo Starters" are questions that get the child thinking about their personal response to situations that could either be or turn into sex trafficking. The "Crucial Questions" are more focused on asking the child about circumstances in their own personal lives that could put them at risk of being trafficked, such as "Do you ever chat with people online who you have never met in real life? Would you ever meet someone in real life that you met online?" (Kim, 2020).

Other non-governmental organizations make tools to be given directly to children. For instance, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) has several resources for children aged Kindergarten through Fifth Grade, and they include worksheets, eBooks, and computer games. They are one of the few non-governmental organizations that appears to publish materials specifically for children. However, in

alignment with the previous examples, they also push for parents to be transparent with their children and have those important conversations so that they are able to recognize those unsafe situations and feel comfortable enough to either talk about it with their parents or a trusted adult when it happens. This also gives them a picture of what to look for in their friends, as well as how to keep their friends safe. It may be that a child has a friend who does not have that positive relationship with their parent or guardian and so that friend is more likely to talk to that child in the circumstance that they are being trafficked or exploited in some way. That is part of what makes it so important for children to know how to respond when they encounter trafficking in any capacity.

Overall, there is a common theme in the guides and literature currently available for public use – talk to and be open with children. Providing an encouraging environment is much more effective than trying to scare them by telling them all about the sexually transmitted diseases they could catch or the mental toll it could take on them, or even that they have any number of risk factors that make them more susceptible to being lured into sex trafficking. By both treating children and talking to them like adults when having these conversations, they are more likely to listen attentively and really understand what is being communicated to them.

### Methodology

For this project, the initial plan was to review available curriculums in three states – Georgia, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Upon beginning research, specifically when it came to looking for available curriculums in those states, I came to the conclusion that it

would be more effective if I just focused on Tennessee, as I was not able to find as much public information about Georgia and Mississippi as I was with Tennessee. However, I think this turned out for the better, as we have more of a role to play in Tennessee. As a general rule, when reaching out to non-governmental organizations, if their curriculum is not directly published online, I reached out twice without them answering before moving onto a different non-governmental organization. When reaching out to school districts, I also reached out twice without them answering before moving on. I anticipate it will be a little more difficult to get an answer from them since the school year is in session, but from what I can already tell, a lot of them just use a non-governmental organization's curriculum or a short video approved by a local educational agency. Due to time constraints, it was not feasible to survey all 95 counties in Tennessee, so I chose six counties in each region to contact. These specific counties were chosen based on their teen pregnancy rating (from the Tennessee Department of Health's 2019 Teen Pregnancy Risk Summary), as that was the indicator for whether or not the family life curriculum, which includes the human trafficking prevention video, is required. While a recent change to the law made it so that family life curriculum is required in all counties, I still found the summary report to be a good deciding factor in choosing who to contact since the curriculum is so new to those areas.

## Findings

The first step was to find information on initiatives that had been attempted on a congressional level to put curriculum in schools that teach about the risk factors and warning signs, as well as how and where to report. To my dismay, after a quick search on

the United States Congress's website, only two House Bills were found pertaining to or mentioning human trafficking curriculum in schools in the 115<sup>th</sup> and 118<sup>th</sup> Congresses, not counting reattempted Bills – H.R.623 (118) and H.R.2268 (115). Neither one has made it past the introduction phase. Sponsored by Vern Buchanan, a Republican Congressman from Florida, H.R.623 is a proposed amendment to the Public Health Service Act that would add a section giving the Director of the Office on Trafficking in Persons of the Administration of Children and Families the authority to create a “demonstration project for training students, teachers, and school personnel at elementary schools and secondary schools to understand, recognize, prevent, and respond to signs of human trafficking and exploitation in children and youth,” (H.R.623, 118<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2023). While the Bill does not go into detail about what that curriculum would look like, the fact that it has been proposed shows the recognition of the need. Similarly, H.R.2268 “authorize[s] the Administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the Department of Justice to award grants to local educational agencies... to provide classroom curricula to students on how to avoid becoming victims of sex and labor trafficking,” (H.R.2268, 115<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2017). This bill was sponsored by Susan Davis, a Democratic Congresswoman from California. Both bills had very few cosponsors, but there was a mix of both Republicans and Democrats, showing that this is a nonpartisan concern. While these are admirable steps in the right direction, if one were to make predictions based on previous attempts, as well as a lack of support or perhaps lack of floor time, one could see that these were likely to be unsuccessful yet again.

Tennessee specifically has Tennessee Code § 49-6-1304 (13)(B), which, as stated above, does not do much. This is especially evident when looking at what has been

proven to aid in prevention of children becoming victims of human trafficking. Teachers showing their students a short video approved by a local educational agency does not have the same effect as that same teacher having an open discussion with their students. Some students may become bored quickly and stop paying attention if they are listening to someone lecture them. Having the interaction that comes with an open conversation with a trusted adult is far more influential on a child. Other reasons this delivery method (showing a short video recording) could fall short of being effective include the personal beliefs of the local educational agency, the age group that receives it, and the personal choice of the parents. Personal beliefs of the local educational agency can play a hindrance on deciding what video is to be chosen and shown to the students in that district, as the deciding body may not agree with certain statements or imagery shown in the video, even if they are grounded in reality. Family life curriculum is required in high schools' lifetime wellness classes, so the students getting the information are around fourteen to eighteen years old. The average age of entry for sex trafficking in the United States, as stated earlier, is around twelve to fourteen years of age, so it potentially misses an entire age group who may have already experienced some form of sex trafficking or sexual exploitation. Finally, parents are allowed to take their child out of these sex education classes if they do not want their child learning about that topic. While it is understandable that some parents would rather teach their child or children on their own than to leave it up to schools, some do not even do that. Some are just against their child or children learning about sex entirely. This, however, may not produce the results those parents want anyway. Similar to the consequences of not talking to children about alcohol

and drugs, not talking to them about sex may send the message that there is nothing to worry about when it comes to sex – no danger and no risk.

It was surprising to find that when looking at Tennessee’s statewide education standards, the human trafficking education requirement was not reflected anywhere in the high school (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade) standards. According to the document posted on the Tennessee State website, the standards have not been updated since July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018. The human trafficking requirement went into effect on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019. When contacting districts, I found that most I had contacted were actually unaware of this piece of the law, leading me to believe that no one is checking as to whether or not this standard is actually being taught in all districts in Tennessee.

Launched in 2017, Tennessee has a group called the Tennessee Counter-Trafficking Alliance, which consists of one major actor per region. East Tennessee has the Community Coalition Against Human Trafficking; Middle Tennessee has Ancora (formerly EndSlavery TN); West Tennessee has RestoreCorps, which has unfortunately been unresponsive to requests for curriculum. The trainings put out by these three agencies are free to the public, but Ancora’s are the easiest to access that deal with talking to children about human trafficking. Ancora’s are separated into two age groups – tweens (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade) and teens (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade). These combine resources from both Ancora and NCMEC. To this extent, Ancora provided videos on information about human trafficking, indicators of human trafficking, specifics about sex and labor trafficking, and how human trafficking impacts a community. NCMEC provided a PowerPoint presentation for both sections along with several videos from their NSTeens series, as well as some newer live action videos. Admittedly, the NSTeens videos are out of date, as all of the characters are

using flip phones. A majority of today's children are not familiar with flip phones, so there is the possibility of this small detail causing disconnect with its intended audience. In other words, they may not feel as though they can relate to it. However, the PowerPoint presentations have a lot of useful information and do well to facilitate conversations between the presenter and the intended audience. They use the same, previously stated tactics of having open conversations about exploitation and how to protect against it. The PowerPoint for teenagers specifically includes a celebrity appearance from Tyler Joseph, the lead singer of Twenty One Pilots – a popular music group. Similar to the influence adults have on children, by seeing a celebrity, especially such a well-known one, engage in or support safe internet habits sends the message that developing safe habits is cool, which appeals more to that age group and makes them more likely to adopt said safe habits.

The Community Coalition Against Human Trafficking – also known as Grow Free TN – provides training for children through a program called Foundations. They use curriculum geared towards children from the National Runaway Safeline as well as an organization called iEmpathize. The curriculum from the National Runaway Safeline covers exactly what one would expect it to with a name like that – subjects surrounding social skills that are important to develop in order for children to react appropriately to dangerous or just odd situations, as opposed to just running away. As stated earlier above, runaways are at high risk of being trafficked, so by providing prevention tools and creating a good skillset for encountering people who have bad intentions, there is the likelihood that these upward trends will at the very least be less steep.

The iEmpathize curriculum has received very positive reviews. Their modules focus on forming empathy in children as well as making them aware of what exploitation is and what it looks like. The combination of these two subjects creates both the ability to recognize exploitation in others as well as recognize factors and people around them that could make themselves vulnerable. There are five modules in total plus a human trafficking supplement. Facilitators of the curriculum are given a facilitator handbook, as well as videos to show children to help start and guide conversations. It is a very discussion-based curriculum in which students are encouraged to give their opinions and share examples of what is being discussed in each module. The human trafficking supplement is taught with the same methods but also includes giving resources to students, such as website links for NCMEC and Polaris, as well as cards with the Human Trafficking Hotline number on them.

Starting with what West Tennessee offers their students in schools, I reached out to educational representatives from Shelby, Hardin, Dyer, Jackson-Madison, Henry, and Benton Counties. Benton County was unfortunately the only county that reached back out to me. What was sent back to me when asking for what they used to teach their students about human trafficking was Ancora's training designed specifically for Tennessee educators. This training included information surrounding TCA § 37-1-403 (reporting child abuse that occurred on school grounds or under school supervision), what teachers should look out for in student behavior, internet safety for students, and provided some classroom resources for teachers to use. While this is a great resource, it is not something to be given directly to students, nor does it fulfill the requirement set by Tennessee Code § 49-6-1304 (13)(B). I emailed Benton County back asking for clarification, whether or

not they actually had something they taught their students, and to my disappointment, I was left empty-handed. Whether or not curriculum on the subject is used anywhere in West Tennessee could not be found.

Out of Middle Tennessee, I contacted educational representatives from Rutherford, Moore, Davidson, Cumberland, Bedford, and Humphreys Counties. Moore County and Cumberland County were the only two to reach back out to me. Moore County was unaware of the requirement, but they pointed me to their lifetime wellness curriculum, which comes from an organization called Decisions, Choices, & Options (DCO). Specifically, Moore County uses the Life Choices and Healthy Boundaries lessons. Upon looking at the DCO website, they do list the human trafficking requirement from Tennessee, so I am unsure how Moore County was unaware of this requirement. Even while the human trafficking requirement is listed on the website, neither DCO's Life Choices curriculum nor their Healthy Boundaries curriculum reflect the standard. This could be due to the language in the standard stating that it must be completed through a video approved by the local educational agency, but I cannot be sure. The lesson plans do include features such as improving communication skills, recognizing unhealthy situations and relationships, conflict resolution, and internet safety, all of which are important skills to develop to safeguard oneself against human trafficking attempts, but it still does not directly address the issue. Cumberland County was also unaware of the human trafficking requirement, but they include it anyway. A local organization called the Avalon Center teaches that element in Cumberland County schools.

Out of East Tennessee, I contacted educational representatives from Sevier, Knox, Campbell, Unicoi, Roane, and Hamilton Counties. Knox County was the only county to

reach back out to me. However, I was able to find Roane County's textbook that they use in their lifetime wellness classes. In Knox County, they use resources from a non-governmental organization called Street Hope. Their human trafficking curriculum is geared more towards those in 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade, and their standards seem to do the most in terms of coverage. Their curriculum covers two class days. Day one is spent going over safe internet practices, how to behave on social media, legal consequences for certain online behaviors, and how to respond to inappropriate use of social media. Day two is spent going over what human trafficking is, where it happens both locally and globally, and encouraging students to think of ways to combat human trafficking within their own communities. Both of these sets of elements are taught through PowerPoint presentations, large group discussions, and small group discussions, and they both stress the importance of making good life decisions. Roane County Schools teach from the Glencoe Health textbook in their lifetime wellness classes, but upon looking at the subjects covered in it, there was nothing explicitly mentioned about human trafficking. It does, however, cover skills and topics that could equip students to prevent themselves getting into those situations or even to recognize that they are in one. In the generic textbook, it covers topics such as healthy relationships with friends and family, overcoming abuse, refusal skills, self-esteem, self-respect, and healthy ways to express emotions. There is an additional Human Sexuality Module that schools can choose to tack on, and it covers making good decisions about sexual relationships, sexual abuse, and sexual violence. I am unaware as to whether or not Roane County uses this supplemental curriculum in their schools, but the generic textbook curriculum provides a good foundation for issues that could arise in the future.

Overall, what is offered in Tennessee seems to go along with what has been recommended both by national anti-trafficking organizations and government agencies, which is ideal. What unfortunately was also found was that not many districts in Tennessee knew about or are doing anything about the human trafficking education requirement written into the State's Code. This makes it seem as though Tennessee is not enforcing its laws. It appears as though districts are not being held accountable. No one is checking to make sure that education standards are up to date or that they are being enforced and taught. Perhaps Tennessee uses statewide test scores as a way to make sure all standards are being taught adequately. However, there is no TNReady or End of Course (EOC) test for high school lifetime wellness classes. Those only exist for Biology, English I/II, Algebra I/II, Geometry, Integrated Math I/II/III, and U.S. History and Geography, and as evidenced by what sex trafficking and or human trafficking is out there for children and adolescents, this is not a subject that can necessarily be tested on in a way that one would test students on these other objective subjects.

It is hard to even say whether these programs and curricula are effective simply because there are no quantitative or qualitative measures. A lot of victims do not see themselves as victims. Not everyone has a way to report. Not everyone knows where or who to report to. These facts alone are enough to push for this type of curriculum to be in place in all schools. Tennessee introduces this curriculum to their students roughly two years too late based on the average age of entry for sex trafficking in the United States, and that does not mean that one cannot be lured in at a younger age. Victims can be any age and there are plenty of reports involving children as young as infants/toddlers. There is really no limit, but the fact that there is a growing number of people in Tennessee and

all over the world who experience child sex trafficking should raise enough alarm for educational leaders, those who teach and those who set the standards, to realize that students need to be prepared for encountering trafficking themselves or coming to the aid of a friend who has.

Tennessee is not exempt from any of the risk factors. There are impoverished people in Tennessee. There are homeless people in Tennessee. There are people of all races and ages in Tennessee. There are LGBTQ+ people in Tennessee. People tend to portray Tennessee as a wholesome southern state with very friendly people where nothing bad ever happens. This is such a dangerous stereotype. It completely takes away and distracts from real issues that go on in Tennessee, from child sex trafficking to other crimes and societal issues. To say that child sex trafficking does not happen in Tennessee, in different communities, in different cities, could not be further from the truth. Most recent numbers from the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation show that 68 of Tennessee's counties reported at least one case of child sex trafficking (Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, 2011). It is a hidden crime, but it happens everywhere. Currently available data shows only a percentage of how big the actual problem is. Children are an especially vulnerable group of people because they have very little voice and authority. It is easy to push them aside because of this, but in order to protect them, they have to have the tools to both defend and speak up for themselves. Programs and curriculum such as those previously mentioned help them do just that. Since it appears that Tennessee does not ensure that its students are getting this education in their classes like it is supposed to according to law, it is possible that it may appear to the public that the state does not care about the wellbeing of its children.

## Conclusions

At the beginning of this project, I was focused more on ways to get children to remember the risk factors, warning signs, and preventative measures in the way that one would remember objective facts, like multiplication and the Periodic Table, but I was pleasantly surprised to learn that it was a much simpler process than that. Knowing how to keep oneself safe is a social skill set, and the teaching process for those is a lot different than what it is for those objective facts. What was found instead was that the best way to protect children is to have open conversations with them and lead by example.

This is simultaneously encouraging and discouraging. On the one hand, I think it is reasonable to say that it is not hard to be a good example in a child's life. On the other hand, not all kids have access to great examples in their lives. Not everyone has good parents or good teachers, or even good friends, and there is no big fix for that. It also does not help that there appears to be not one agency or governmental department in Tennessee ensuring that students are taught what they are legally required to be taught. Apparently, no one is even updating the education standards posted on the Tennessee government website.

The findings seem to point towards a narrative that what is needed most to protect children from sex trafficking is for people to care and take initiative. From what was shown through contacting school districts, it does not appear that this is an issue people want to acknowledge. Yes, Tennessee has taken a step in the right direction, or has at least shown that they want to by including Tennessee Code 49-6-1304 (13)(B). However, if that law is not enforced, it does no good. To some, it may appear that Tennessee has just

glossed over the issue to make it seem like they are doing more than they are. It may be that people do care, they just do not know what to do about it, or they do not like the idea of talking to their child or children about sex trafficking, which is understandable given the content surrounding the subject. However, coddling our children and acting like sex trafficking is not a problem does no good. Children need to be taught and given the tools to protect themselves and their peers, should they ever find themselves in a situation that could lead to them being sexually trafficked.

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