

FEATURE

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## Modern-day slavery

Through public awareness campaigns, education and advocacy, psychologists are working to end human trafficking.

By Rebecca A. Clay

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When Americans look back on their country's history, says psychologist Thema S. Bryant-Davis, PhD, they often speculate about how they would have reacted to slavery.

"They say, 'I would have led a revolt' or 'I would have been an abolitionist up North helping people get free,'" says Bryant-Davis, president of APA Div. 35 ([/about/division/div35.aspx](#)) (Society for the Psychology of Women) and an associate psychology professor at Pepperdine University. "But it's not a hypothetical question; we are living during slavery."

Today's slavery takes the form of human trafficking — the use of force, fraud or coercion to lure people away from home and make them work as prostitutes, domestic servants, field hands, factory workers and other types of laborers.

The United Nations Office on Drug and Crime estimates that at any given time 2.5 million individuals are being trafficked. Every nation in the world is involved as a country of origin, transit or destination, says the UNODC, with Europe the destination for victims from the widest range of places and Asia the source of victims trafficked to the widest range of places.

Victims may be trafficked abroad or within their own countries. The Department of State, for example, estimates that 14,500 to 17,500 individuals are trafficked into the United States each year. That's in addition to internal trafficking of both U.S. citizens, such as teenagers being sold into sexual exploitation, and foreign nationals targeted for trafficking or re-trafficking.

And the problem is growing. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, human trafficking is the world's fastest growing criminal enterprise and is already tied with arms dealing as the world's second largest illegal industry (drug dealing takes first place). Now Bryant-Davis is urging her colleagues within psychology to become what she calls "millennium abolitionists." She and other psychologists are working to raise awareness of human trafficking, ensure appropriate evaluation and treatment of survivors and understand the motivations of perpetrators.

A new APA Task Force on Trafficking of Women and Girls — the outgrowth of a trafficking task force created by APA Div. 52 ([/about/division/div52.aspx](#)) (International) — will help achieve that goal. The new APA-wide task force is still in the process of coming together. APA's Committee on Women in Psychology is reviewing nominations and APA's Board for the Advancement of Psychology in the Public Interest will make the final appointments. Drawing on its members' expertise in research, practice and education, the task force will review the literature and write a report summarizing its findings and offering recommendations for future research, training, practice and policy.

### Helping survivors cope

Human trafficking is a silent epidemic, says Nancy M. Sidun, PsyD, supervising clinical psychologist for Kaiser Permanente Hawaii Region and chair of the original Div. 52 trafficking task force.

You might never suspect that a neighbor has a maid who's never allowed to leave the house, for example. You might walk by someone who's on the way to work at a job she can't quit because of a massive debt to her trafficker. Or you might drive past fields or orchards being harvested by trafficked agricultural workers. Sidun's own state became the scene of what the FBI called the largest human trafficking case in U.S. history last year, when it was discovered that traffickers had lured workers from Thailand to work on farms in Hawaii and on the mainland and then forced them into labor with little or no pay.

"Most people are oblivious; they see trafficking every day, but don't know they're seeing it," says Sidun.

That's true for practicing psychologists, too.

"Clinical and counseling psychologists will probably at some point in their lives have someone in their practices who has been trafficked even if they don't articulate it as such," says Sidun. A client might say she was a sex worker without going into the details of how she got into that work, for instance.

The emphasis thus far has been on prosecuting perpetrators and tending to victims' immediate practical and medical needs rather than addressing the psychological damage that being trafficked can cause, say Sidun and other psychologists.

"Psychology as a discipline is behind the times in acknowledging trafficking," says Sidun.

Even when psychologists are aware of trafficking, they may not know the best way to evaluate and treat survivors — even if they're trauma specialists, says Elizabeth K. Hopper, PhD, who directs Project REACH (Rapid Evaluation, Assessment and Consultation for Human Trafficking Victims) at the Justice Resource Institute in Boston. In addition to providing direct services to trafficking survivors, Hopper travels around the country providing training and consultation to other professionals.

It can be difficult for outsiders to understand what keeps trafficked people from escaping, she says.

"Someone doesn't have to be chained up or physically locked up in a room," Hopper explains. "Traffickers use very subtle psychological coercion techniques."

These include forced isolation, verbal and physical abuse, nonstop work, threats and failure to provide basic necessities. Even after traffickers are taken into custody, survivors may still worry about threats from criminal affiliates to their family and friends back home. "There's a lot of learned helplessness," says Hopper.

Plus, trafficking survivors may have complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

"Traffickers target folks in their home countries because they're vulnerable in some way," says Hopper. "That might be because of poverty and lack of opportunity, but there's also a huge number of trafficking survivors who have experienced previous trauma, whether it's witnessing domestic violence, having been sexually assaulted themselves or coming from a situation with a lot of violence." Such situations render individuals susceptible to false promises that they'll have wonderful lives — promises that fail to mention the debt they'll never be able to repay.

It's not just the clinical issues that are complicated, adds Hopper. Survivors often need help finding safe housing, getting assistance with school or job training and tackling other issues psychologists usually aren't involved with.

Psychologists must also be aware of legal, immigration and other concerns.

If an evaluation is for immigration purposes, for instance, a psychologist must be able to assess whether someone's experience qualifies as trafficking. A trafficking victim's immigration lawyer or a social service agency might ask a psychologist to evaluate the individual and provide a report highlighting the trafficker's use of force, fraud or coercion; identifying any mental health consequences of the trafficking experience; and offering recommendations.

"Psychologists should seek specialized training in conducting psychological evaluations of survivors of human trafficking and writing psychological affidavits as part of immigration relief applications," says Hopper, who offers free consultations and training to psychologists and others.

The stakes are high in these cases, adds Hopper. Trafficking victims are eligible to apply for a T-visa, a temporary visa designed specifically for trafficking survivors. Those who win T-visa status may also apply for visas for certain family members. In addition, adult trafficking victims who agree to cooperate with the investigation and prosecution of their traffickers are eligible for such federal services as Medicaid, Refugee Cash Assistance, job training and employment programs, food stamps and victim compensation.

## Preventing trafficking

Other efforts focus on preventing human trafficking in the first place.

Educating vulnerable individuals is one strategy Bryant-Davis uses. Working through schools and faith-based organizations, she and her graduate students have given workshops in Los Angeles, Baltimore and New York on healthy relationships and safe dating that also alert potentially vulnerable individuals to the warning signs. "It's important to do these workshops in the U.S.," she says. "Our youth are vulnerable to trafficking, particularly when they are uninformed." That's especially true given the increasing sophistication of traffickers, says Bryant-Davis, who has created a Div. 35 task force that is creating a documentary offering a mental health perspective on the trafficking of women.

"Trafficking is a large money-maker, so traffickers have come up with effective skills," she says. "We tell young people that a perpetrator doesn't necessarily look like they want to harm you."

Traffickers often use women as recruiters, for example, playing on people's assumptions that women have their best interest at heart and won't lie to them. Traffickers may pose as boyfriends, who ask women to work as prostitutes to help out financially. Traffickers may also promise a too-good-to-be-true life in the United States or even admit that you might have to work in a strip club at first to pay back the costs of getting you there. "We let them know they'll never be able to earn the money back," says Bryant-Davis.

When it comes to sex trafficking, understanding the demand side of the equation is also key, says Melissa Farley, PhD, founder and director of a nonprofit advocacy group called Prostitution Research and Education.

"If you want to stop human trafficking, you have to stop the purchasing of sex," says Farley, adding that sexual exploitation also happens alongside domestic, agricultural and other forms of trafficking.

Farley is frustrated by claims that her goal of eliminating the world's oldest profession are unrealistic. "There are many social ills that have been around since the dawn of humanity," she says. "No one walks around saying, 'We just have to let murderers go free because people have been murdering each other for a long time and we should just give up.'"

In her own research, Farley has found that men are often well aware that the women they are having sex with have been trafficked. In a presentation at APA's 2010 Annual Convention, Farley said that more than half of 327 men she interviewed who had bought sex in England, Scotland and the United States believed that most prostitutes have been trafficked or otherwise tricked into their trade. The men cited the women's inability to speak English, bruises and in one case "a look of terror" in a woman's eyes.

"We need to understand the motivation and thinking of the buyers," says Farley. "I would love to see more dissertations on what it is that has resulted in the mainstreaming of human trafficking." An article by Farley and colleagues on the attitudes and social characteristics of men who buy sex in Scotland is forthcoming in *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*.

Public policy can also make a difference, says Farley, who applauds Sen. Harry Reid's call to end legal prostitution in Nevada since legal prostitution is strongly associated with increased trafficking.

She points to Sweden as an example of what's possible. A decade ago, Sweden passed a law that shifts attention away from those selling sex to those buying it. As a result, police no longer arrest prostitutes but focus instead on johns, charging them with the equivalent of a felony rather than the misdemeanor charges prevalent in the United States. The law also provides counseling, medical care, housing and other services to help prostitutes exit the profession. Not surprisingly, says Farley, that approach has given Sweden the lowest rate of trafficking within the European Union.

For Bryant-Davis, all these efforts are signs of progress within psychology. But much more remains to be done, she says.

APA's new task force represents one avenue for action. The task force will reach beyond its own membership to engage other psychologists to serve as resources on specific content areas and to review drafts of the final report, says Shari E. Miles-Cohen, PhD, senior director of APA's Women's Programs Office.

"We have to make a decision," says Bryant-Davis. "Are we going to stay on the sidelines or are we going to use our science, our clinical skills and our advocacy opportunities to combat modern-day slavery?"

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