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Human Trafficking as a Community Issue: Prevalence and Reporting in the San Joaquin Valley

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Introduction

The term “Human Trafficking” describes any form of forced labor against a victim’s will that directly benefits a trafficker, which includes but is not limited to forced labor and sexual exploitation. Heightened risk factors that increase susceptibility of becoming trafficked include lower socioeconomic status, poor personal and familial history like abuse and substance addiction and being a person of color (POC) or LGBTQIA+ identifying. Human trafficking has become a widespread problem, with an 84% increase in human trafficking incidents and reports from 2011-2020 alone.¹ However, a majority of individuals in rural communities do not believe that involuntary servitude is an issue for their communities. Rural communities have been denoted as prominent regions for traffickers to recruit and take victims to due lack of adequate resources for victims like shelters and anti-human trafficking organizations, inadequate education and prevention, and a higher prevalence of economic hardship.¹ Rural communities are notorious for having lower socioeconomic statuses and are driving forces for human trafficking in lower developed regions. The prevalence for human trafficking in rural communities across America does not stop at the national level with human trafficking having detrimental effects in the San Joaquin Valley. In 2022, the Kern County District Attorney’s Office notified the public that Kern County had the highest number of reported incidents for human trafficking out of any county in the United States.² The prevalence of human trafficking nationally is growing at an almost exponential level, yet not much public advocacy, funding, nor education occurs in regions where it matters most. Major discrepancies and inequities are at the forefront of rural communities’ disbelief and disregard of human trafficking. The purpose of this research is to bring attention to reporting issues involving the prevalence of human trafficking incidents and public education efforts for anti-human trafficking initiatives in the San Joaquin Valley.

San Joaquin Valley Communities are More Susceptible to Human Trafficking

A widespread ideology amongst rural communities is that human trafficking cannot affect such communities, especially in the San Joaquin Valley. Due to social and cultural stigmas and other rural-based issues in this area, residents have the belief that traffickers do not have the resources to operate, but this is incorrect. Social determinants of health are major contributors to overall community health, which include socioeconomic status, neighborhood safety, general infrastructure, and community engagement and resources, among other factors. The aforementioned topics are essential to strengthening communities and upholding the preexisting strength of some communities, but the San Joaquin Valley is notorious for having low community-based health due to inequities regarding social determinants of health. Traffickers pursue individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds with promises of a better life, whether that be employment, guarantees of shelter for unsheltered populations, and even claims of giving victims better lives socially and geographically.³ Some of the social markers that traffickers look for describe some of the main populations that live within the San Joaquin Valley, including migrant populations, individuals with low incomes and socioeconomic statuses, and minority women. Rural communities are prime regions for traffickers to operate in because of such social markers.

Opportune Location and Geographical Implications Aid Human Traffickers

Poor infrastructure plays another crucial role for those who are already victims of or at higher risks for human trafficking. Human traffickers rely heavily on the quickest routes in and out of regions in the San Joaquin Valley. This enables traffickers to benefit more from the high levels of clientele within surrounding areas. Highway 99 spans both northern and southern borders of

California state lines, with the most northern point near Wheeler Ridge and the most southern point in-state ending near Bakersfield, making it an easy method for traffickers to quickly transport victims and isolate them from friends, family, and help. Vast highways like 99 also having major public transport agencies, like Greyhound Buses, that are notorious for housing human trafficking victims on them due to low fares and quick transport. Basic infrastructural concerns within rural communities like distance to help centers, hospitals, and other government agencies who aid anti-human trafficking initiatives are also large concerns for those who are already victims within the San Joaquin Valley. Over a quarter of all women residing in rural or underdeveloped regions are positioned more than 40 miles from the nearest anti-violence program compared to their counterparts in urban settings.⁴ The San Joaquin Valley has greater factors contributing to higher likelihoods of human trafficking in local communities due to infrastructural concerns and location.

The San Joaquin Valley Has Detrimental Levels of Human Trafficking

The dangers of human trafficking in local communities do not stop at the heightened risk factors for individuals who reside in regions within the San Joaquin Valley. A multitude of anti-human trafficking organizations exist typically within each regions' county seat, which are imperative, designated cities within every county in America that are responsible for public county services and Victim Services Units (VSUs), like Victim/Witness centers. Additionally, an abundance of civilian led, and non-profit organizations have come together within county seats and beyond to increase public information and resources for community members and victims of human trafficking. Together, these entities work relentlessly to provide adequate care and education to victims across the San Joaquin Valley, yet major gaps still exist between the information widely known to residents and the impacts made by these groups, with community members not fully

understanding the scope of how severe the rate of human trafficking is within their residing areas.

The Prevalence of Human Trafficking – Looking at the Numbers.

The State of California has an incidence rate of 28.88 victims of human trafficking per 100,000 people making it the top state in the nation for rates of trafficking. Areas like the City of Modesto, Madera County, and Kings County, however, multiply this amount by 3.5 times with 101.87, 101.93, and 108.72 victims per 100,000 residents, respectively. Merced County also has detrimental rates of human trafficking at almost 2 times higher than the state average, with 56.84 victims per 100,000 people.^{5, 6} The rate of phone calls received on local and state levels regarding human trafficking is also higher than state averages, with the Merced County Valley Crisis Center (VCC) having 1,377 calls in 2023, yet the National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH) California Division reported 3,152 calls that same year. The county average incident rate according to the NHTH is ~53 calls per county, yet Merced County reported numbers at 25.8 times higher than this estimate.⁷ Statistics implicate that regions in the San Joaquin Valley are contenders for the worst spots in the nation, but even without numerical data, some government agencies have confirmed through federal databases that areas in the Valley are the most predominant areas for human trafficking in the U.S., with the Kern County District Attorney indicating that her county has the highest incident rate out of any county in the nation.⁸ Regions within the San Joaquin Valley have some of the most detrimental rates of human trafficking in the United States, yet this region has some of the least amount of resources.

San Joaquin Valley-Based Healthcare Providers Are on the Frontlines

Attempting to dismantle human trafficking takes substantial amounts of funding, resources, and public education, but arguably the most important front-line workers for aiding human

trafficking victims do not have adequate resources nor education to provide resources that are needed. Health care providers are uniquely positioned to combat human trafficking in the San Joaquin Valley, yet this region lacks overall workers and has lower educational sources for anti-human trafficking initiatives. It is estimated that upwards of 90% of human trafficking victims received medical care during the time period they were being actively trafficked, yet more than half of victims were not adequately screened nor asked about their status of inter-personal violence or previous and current history of being a victim, with both being interconnected topics. Even with the high prevalence of reported incidents seen in medical environments, health care providers still lack proper education to identify victims. Research conducted at NYU assessed healthcare provider's self-confidence and professional development skills surrounding the topic of human trafficking in pediatric settings, and less than 48% of healthcare workers could accurately identify a child victim of sex trafficking. In addition, only 42% were able to differentiate between sex trafficking victims and generalized child abuse, indicating a lack of educational sources and information for frontline workers attempting to help and rescue victims.⁹

Front-Line Healthcare Workers are Understaffed and Undertrained

Issues pertaining to health care providers efficacy in identifying human trafficking victims do not stop at a lack of resources and information for healthcare providers. Major employment issues regarding healthcare workers lead to detrimental outcomes for this region. The San Joaquin Valley has faced a lack of medical providers for decades, with recent numbers showing a growing decrease in current full-time employees and increasingly low retention rates. Areas within this region ranked last for currently licensed MDs and RNs per 100,000 people within the entire State of California, with DO's being tied for last.¹⁰ Medical provider's self-reported

efficacy in identifying victims has also been historically low. Only general practice providers (family medicine, emergency, and pediatrics for example) are mandated to receive training to identify and aid potential victims, showing great discrepancies between a small handful of trained providers, and all potential providers a victim could encounter. Although the State of California has been implementing laws to help bridge the gap, much work is still needed.¹¹ All providers across the nation have reported high rates of unfamiliarity with human trafficking topics as well, denoting a need for massive change for higher levels of trained providers and where that training comes from. The San Joaquin Valley not only faces issues with lack of resources for medical providers to adequately identify and help victims of human trafficking but also has a major lack of healthcare providers that are positioned in medical settings across the Valley. Life expectancy, adequate medical care, and health outcomes are already severely impacted by shortages of healthcare providers in rural communities. When victims need care regarding physical injuries and mental health-related manifestations due to the detriments of human trafficking, the few providers who are in the region will more than likely be ill-equipped to help.^{4, 11}

Reporting for Human Trafficking is Undeveloped

Reporting and incident rates for human trafficking across the San Joaquin Valley are nuanced, with city and county data being incredibly difficult to find. Individuals looking for information in their local communities regarding incident prevalence will discover data is strenuous to find. At the forefront of these issues, not much data is published locally by government or public agencies for numerical data. Local law enforcement agencies and medical centers do not release a majority of data for the public to view, since these agencies face legal repercussions from releasing certain types of identifiable information, like geographic location and ethnicity which are imperative to anti-human trafficking efforts, due to HIPAA and Marsy's Law for health care

providers and legal agencies, respectively. This means none of the main contributors to antihuman trafficking initiatives, legally or medically, are allowed to state the incident rate of victim encounters. Main data sources for all incidents or “hits” of human trafficking come from local non-profit organizations, which also raises concerns for data collection and true occurrence rates. Non-profit organizations like Without Permission (WP) and the Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission (FEOC) based out of Stanislaus County and San Joaquin Valley southern counties respectively, both operate for the sole purpose of ending human trafficking, but both non-profits operate separately. This issue does not stop with these organizations either, with every antihuman trafficking non-profit locally, statewide, and nationally reporting their own numbers and using their own definitions of what “hits” of human trafficking are. Due to these issues, the actual incidence rate of human trafficking in the San Joaquin Valley are more than likely higher than information currently reported. For example, the National Human Trafficking Hotline California Division published ~3,100 “hits” for human trafficking in 2023, but the Valley Crisis Center (Merced County) published over ~1,700 calls in 2023.^{5,6} This data, however, does not indicate that Merced County accounted for almost half of all incidents in California. This exhibits major issues with reporting and incident rates being published. Transparency surrounding human trafficking will never be correct if major discrepancies exist with reporting guidelines and definitions of human trafficking victims.¹²

Human Trafficking is a Community Issue

Human trafficking is a systemic and community issue, with considerable amounts of work needing to be done in virtually every category. Abolishing human trafficking will take vast amounts of time, resources, and funding; but change is much closer than community members

realize. Community educational resources must become readily available to residents of these communities. Information found within this research took over 200 hours to accumulate, and a majority of community members do not have that kind of time, let alone adequate internet access and technology to do so as well. Organizations across the Valley are also in dire need of adequate funding to create or heighten already existing anti-human trafficking initiatives for victims to access. Regarding resources for victims and accessible ways out of human trafficking, all healthcare providers should be mandated to receive human trafficking training regardless of specialty, which includes proper identification, mandatory screening questions for all patients, and up-to-date information on the proper individuals to notify when trafficking victims encounter such medical providers. Medical and healthcare-related accreditation agencies should also take steps to ensure CME and CE credits for healthcare providers are more accessible to providers outside of general practice specialties. Communities within this region are tightly knit, with all residents facing the same social, medical, and infrastructural concerns. Ample work needs to be done in all sectors for anti-human trafficking efforts to raise community-based health and bring an end to human trafficking in the San Joaquin Valley, but with sustained efforts over time, change can be closer than community members think.

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