

The International Journal for Direct Support Professionals

Human Trafficking and People with an Intellectual Disability Staying ‘As Safe As Possible’

By: Brandon Chase

Human trafficking has become a common topic for political and humanitarian discussion in recent years. Globally, according to A21, an international non-profit organization, human trafficking affects millions of people every year. However, human trafficking is not just an international problem; it is a local problem that can affect anyone – people with intellectual disabilities included. Statistically, people with a disability are four times more likely to fall victim to violent or sexual crime (Perreault, 2009).

As direct support professionals, one of our main objectives is to keep those we support safe from harm and mistreatment. This article seeks to assist by explaining what human trafficking is, discussing why people with an intellectual disability are at risk, and providing a resource to keep people *As Safe As Possible*.

What is human trafficking?

In its most basic sense, human trafficking can be understood as a form of exploitation – where a trafficker will manipulate and take advantage of victim(s) to profit from their labour. To better understand, human trafficking can be seen in three parts: the act, the means, and the purpose.

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The Act refers to “what” is done to a person, which includes:

- The recruitment of a person in order to exploit them.
- The transferring or transporting of a person in order to exploit them. In some cases, a person may travel normally (by bus, by train, by airplane) with legitimate documents. In other cases, the trafficker may force the person to travel in an illegal or unsafe manner, such as in the trunk of the car or with a fake passport.
- Harboring or receiving. This happens when a trafficker houses or hides a person in order to exploit them.



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The Means or “how” a trafficker gains control (will include at least one of the following, though usually, many of the following happen) includes:

- **Grooming:** Grooming is very common, and it looks a lot like ‘a perfect relationship.’ Whether it is a ‘perfect’ friendship, or a ‘perfect’ romantic partner, the trafficker will pretend to be the most amazing person in your world. They will often offer gifts, money, and a great lifestyle. They will seem to understand you in a way that you thought no one ever could. They will convince you that they know what is best, and you should do what they want.
- **Violence or threats of violence:** Violence and threats are powerful ways for a trafficker to create fear in a person and make them agree to do something they would not otherwise do.
- **Coercion:** Traffickers will often use fear to gain control. A trafficker may lead a person to believe they will never be able to see their family again if they do not do what the trafficker wants. Another example is a trafficker convincing a person that they will be in a lot of trouble with the police or another authority figure if they do not do what they are told.
- **Deception:** A trafficker may deceive a person by offering them a really great job – one that pays well, maybe as a nanny – in another place. When they arrive, the person will learn that the job is something much different, something they never would have agreed to do.
- **Abuse of power:** Sometimes people in power can be traffickers, using their power to exploit someone.

The Purpose or “why” it is done includes:

- **Sexual exploitation:** People can be trafficked to do all types of sex work, including prostitution and pornography. The trafficked person will be forced to hand over the money they earn to their trafficker.
- **Forced Labour:** Traffickers will sometimes force people to do unsafe work and pay them very little, if at all. The trafficker will often tell the worker they owe a big debt, such as a recruitment fee. It will be almost impossible for the worker to pay back the recruitment fee. Sometimes these people work at regular jobs alongside people who are not being trafficked, such as in construction or in greenhouses.
- **Domestic Servitude:** Some people will be trafficked to become servants who cook, clean, and run a whole house. They will be expected to be available at all hours, day and night, and will barely get paid, if at all.
- **Forced Crime:** Some people will be forced to commit crimes, such as bank fraud, and selling or delivering drugs for someone else’s gain.

Five factors that put people with an intellectual disability at risk

1. Isolation

- Some people may live alone with few social ties and receive minimal funding for supports. Others living with family or in a residential setting also may experience limited contact with others. These weak social ties and minimal lasting relationships contribute to a deepened desire for social connections and a sense of belonging, resulting in a *propensity to be easily influenced* by a potential ‘friend’ (Kuosmanen & Starke, 2011). During the recruitment process, it is common for a trafficker to pose as a ‘boyfriend’ or ‘girlfriend’ to create an emotional attachment (Nagy, 2018). The trafficker can recruit a person with an intellectual disability by preying on a desire to have a lasting relationship.
- Isolation can also contribute to a lack of resources. The person may not be aware of who to contact if they suspect that they are being exploited or victimized.

2. Poverty

- Studies have shown that people with intellectual disabilities are at significantly greater risk of living in poverty. This is largely due to a lack of employment opportunities and exclusion from the workforce (Emerson, 2007). Due to this exclusion, those residing in Ontario, Canada receive their income from the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), which currently (as of September 2019) amounts to \$1169 monthly for “basic needs” and “shelter.” This represents an annual income of \$14,028, which is far below what is considered “low income” (\$22,133) for a single person living in Canada (2018).
- A recent study of the sex trafficking of girls with an intellectual disability reported that one of the first steps of the recruiting process is that the trafficker would “take care of the girls, giving the girls small amounts of cash...” (Reid, 2018, p. 119). Over time, victims are made to feel economically dependent on their trafficker.

3. Dependency

- Many people with an intellectual disability become dependent on support staff, medical professionals, and others to meet their social, emotional, and health care needs. As a result, people may have a learned response to comply with those in positions of power due to their dependence on them. Therefore, they may have normalized an unequal power dynamic in their relationships, which could carry over into their relationship with a trafficker.
- Statistically, people with an intellectual disability are victimized by people they know, including care providers, acquaintances or neighbours, and family members (Perrault, 2009).

4. Increased Access to Technology

- Over the past several years, increased opportunities have arisen for people with an intellectual disability to access technology. At Community Living Essex County, for example, people supported could receive “smart support technology” – access to tablets and computing to facilitate independence (i.e., through scheduling apps). This has proven to be tremendously beneficial. However, increased access to tablets and internet also means increased access to social media. Many traffickers gain access to victims through social media and, with an influx of people with intellectual disabilities accessing the internet, this puts them at risk of exploitation.

5. Social Prejudice

- Based on a disability, family, friends, and other members of the public may not believe a person who reports victimization (Polaris Project, 2018). This may also contribute to a lack of willingness to report victimization at all. This is especially true for victims with disabilities that affect intellectual, cognitive, or communication functions, or those individuals with a ‘dual diagnosis.’ It may require police or social services to add their supportive voices before a victim’s experience and needs are addressed properly.

Considering the aforementioned risk factors, here are some key questions for direct support professionals that could provide insight into whether the person or people they support may be involved in human trafficking or exploitation:

- Is a friend, another person in your life, or boss taking all or some of your money?
- Do you live with your boss?
- Are you afraid to say ‘no’ to a friend, significant other, or boss?
- Has someone taken your ID and will not let you access it?
- Have you been hurt or threatened if you tried to leave?
- Can you not come and go as you please?

If the answer to any of these questions is ‘yes,’ we are excited to inform you of a valuable training resource designed to keep the people you support *As Safe As Possible*.

Keeping people ‘As Safe As Possible’

Given the inherently fragile nature of crimes of human trafficking, the unfortunate reality is, once someone is lured into trafficking, it is very difficult for them to escape. Awareness and prevention, therefore, are the best ways to stay safe. In Ontario, Canada, Windsor/Essex County has been recognized as being at the forefront in the fight to combat crimes of exploitation and human trafficking against vulnerable members of the community. Community Living Essex County, working in collaboration with the Ontario Provincial Police, Windsor-Essex Children’s Aid Society, and Legal Assistance of Windsor builds on this work through the *As Safe As Possible* project by developing and implementing innovative, flexible, plain language training modules for both people with an intellectual disability and professionals in the justice system.

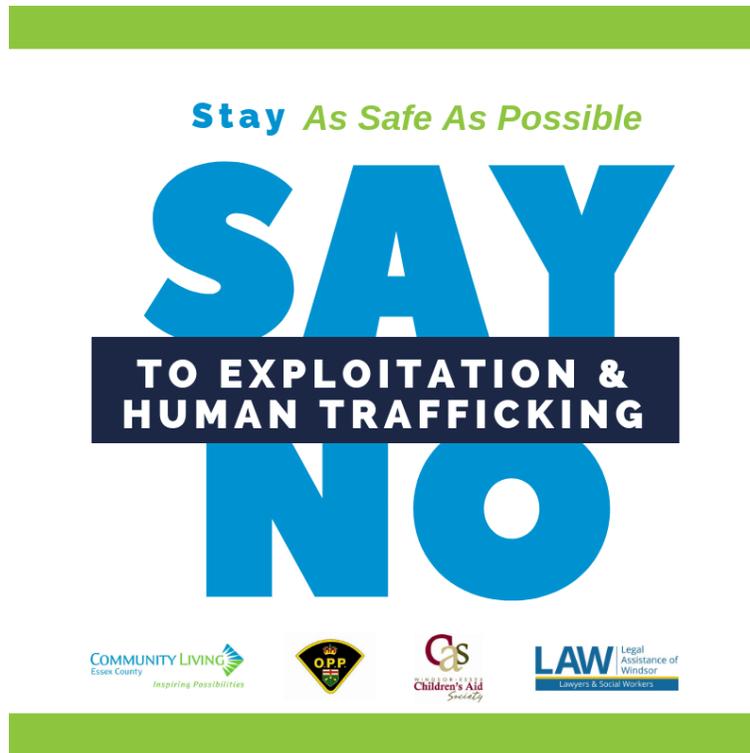
The goals of *As Safe As Possible* are to:

- Empower people with an intellectual disability to avoid victimization through education about exploitation and human trafficking.

- Educate police, justice personnel, and other community members about the abilities and needs of people with an intellectual disability and how to successfully support them to obtain justice.

Training is provided in-person, through ‘class style’ training sessions, and through online modules. We encourage direct support professionals to access the public training module online with the people they support. Although the training is meant for the people supported, the learning experience can be shared with, and facilitated by, the support professional. For more information and to access the training modules, please visit:

www.communitylivingessex.org/asap.



“Amazing, great resources, and information.”

“I now have a tool to help the individuals I support.”

“It was fun!”

“I enjoyed how easy the language was for people to understand.”

About the author

Brandon Chase, Project Manager of As Safe As Possible and Manager of Supports with Community Living Essex County, has been with the organization since 2014 and has a total of six years of front-line support experience in a variety of different roles. He graduated with a Master of Criminology from the University of Windsor in 2012, has published in several peer-reviewed scholarly journals, presented at international conferences and symposiums, and taught Sociology at the university level. Brandon is passionate about social justice, equality, and inclusion – all of which are integral components of Community Living Essex County’s mission and vision.

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