

JUNETEENTH 2023

A CELEBRATION & A REMINDER

Waiting for the clock to bring in the first hours of 1863, millions of enslaved and free Black Americans gathered across the country to hear the news that the Emancipation Proclamation had taken effect. While they celebrated the New Year, their prayers were answered as all enslaved people in Confederate States were declared free. The news spread quickly across the South as Union soldiers, many Black themselves, read copies of the Emancipation Proclamation in city streets and on plantations.

Despite their efforts to spread the good news across the country, not all Black Americans celebrated their freedom that night. In fact, many would not experience their emancipation until the Confederacy fell. In Texas, the westernmost Confederate state, Black people remained enslaved for more than two years after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect. On June 19th, 1865, Union troops arrived in Galveston Bay and declared that the 250,000 Black people in the state were free from slavery by executive decree, and the celebrations finally began — soon to be called “Juneteenth”.

Long celebrated in Black communities across the United States, Juneteenth was recognized as a national holiday in 2021. For many Black Americans, Juneteenth represents true independence, more so than July 4th. Picnics, barbeques, parades, and celebrations of Black achievements and works are often included in Juneteenth festivities, all a reminder of the long journey to freedom from exploitation.

For those of us at Safe House Project, Juneteenth is certainly a day for celebrating, but it also reminds us of the work to be done in our nation today. As we remember the atrocity that was American slavery and rejoice in its absence, we also remember the people in our nation today experiencing a different injustice — sexual exploitation through trafficking.


There is a lot of work still to be done for people of color in the United States today, including a disproportionate vulnerability to sex trafficking. Although the reasons are unclear, at least 40% of identified female or minor trafficking victims are Black, even though only 13.6% of the population of the United States is Black.

Clearly, there are factors at play in the trafficking industry leaving Black people vulnerable to exploitation.

The road to freedom for Black Americans was by no means an easy one, and the same is true for those exploited by sex trafficking. In reality, emancipated Black people have faced a host of challenges even after being declared free, including segregation, continued racism, and other financial and social disadvantages. Survivors of sex trafficking face similar barriers to true freedom and healing, including severe mental health conditions, difficulties with employment, and other complications of trauma. For the large number of trafficking survivors who are also people of color, these challenges may have an even greater effect on a survivor’s well-being.

So what can we do to face these problems head-on? At Safe House Project, we believe that the first step is to recognize the existence of these issues and then look for solutions that address their sources. While each case is individual, the sources of vulnerability for many Black victims of sex trafficking may include disproportionate rates of runaway or missing kids, foster children, impoverished families, and homelessness.

- Of children reported missing in the U.S. between 2016 and 2020, 31% were Black, compared to 14% of the total population. 80% of kids went missing from state custody.
- 1 in 6 of the more than 25,000 runaway or missing children in 2022 were likely victims of child sex trafficking. 18% of kids who had run away from child welfare services were likely victims of child sex trafficking.
- 23% of children in foster care in the U.S. are Black, again in contrast to 13.9% of the population.
- 18.8% of Black families lived in poverty in the United States in 2019, which is (and has been for years) the highest poverty rate for any racial demographic in the U.S.
- More than 40% of all Americans who access services in a homeless shelter are Black. This population is significantly higher than other populations and has been increasing since 2008.



Fighting for freedom from exploitation in our nation today will require intentional action from each one of us. Just as courageous men and women of all colors demanded change in the era of American slavery and refused to back down, we must take up the challenge to eradicate sex trafficking in our communities. We need to recognize that when we tolerate injustices around us, we allow them to continue to exist. On this year's June 19th, the anniversary of freedom for so many Americans, it is time to both celebrate past successes and recognize the opportunity to fight for a future without exploitation, without oppression, and without sex trafficking.

