

UNDERSTANDING VULNERABILITY

SERVING & PROTECTING SURVIVORS WITH DISABILITIES

At least one billion people – 15% of the world’s population – have some form of disability. Nearly 240 million these individuals are children. In the United States, at least 61 million individuals, or more than one in four people, are living with disabilities. People with disabilities are a highly diverse group with a wide variety of life experiences. They live in every community across the globe but often face stigma, discrimination, misperceptions, cultural prejudices, and social isolation.

For many reasons, individuals with disabilities experience a severely heightened risk of mistreatment, abuse, and exploitation. Children and adolescents with disabilities are three to four times more likely to encounter physical and sexual violence and neglect than other children. In addition, about 68% of girls and 30% of boys with intellectual or developmental disabilities will experience sexual abuse before reaching their 18th birthday.

A large portion of the vulnerability of people with disabilities to mistreatment and exploitation can be attributed to a distinct lack of awareness, understanding, and support for their protection. It is well-known in the anti-trafficking movement, for example, that people with disabilities are far more likely to experience sex trafficking, but this topic is not often addressed. However, understanding the wide variety of disabilities and how to best support and protect these individuals is a critical component of our work in combatting trafficking in the United States.

UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY

The term “disability” has a complex, multi-faceted definition due to the diversity of the conditions, abilities,

and experiences of people who have disabilities.

According to the World Health Organization, disabilities can be described through three dimensions: impairment, activity limitation, and participation restrictions. In essence, a disability includes any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for an individual to complete certain activities (activity limitations) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions).

There are many types of disabilities, and two people with the same type of disability may not be affected in similar ways. Some disabilities can take a very long time to identify, while others are more easily recognizable. Certain types of disabilities may affect an individual’s vision, movement, thinking, remembering, learning, communicating, hearing, mental health, or social relationships. Many people experience multiple disabilities at the same time.

The causes of disabilities are just as varied as their types. Some disabilities may be related to conditions that are present at birth even if they do not cause symptoms until later in life. These disabilities include problems with cognition (such as memory, learning, and understanding), mobility, vision, hearing, behavior, and other areas. The causes of this type of disability may be related to genetic disorders, chromosomal disorders, or the mother’s exposure to infections or substances.

Other disabilities may be associated with developmental conditions that become apparent during childhood, such as autism spectrum disorder and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Serious injuries, like traumatic brain injuries or spinal cord damage, can also

cause certain disabilities. Others may be connected to a longstanding condition like diabetes, which can lead to vision loss, nerve damage, or limb amputation.

By definition a disability is based on impairment, which describes the absence of or significant difference in a person's body structure or function or in their mental functioning.

- **Structural impairments** are significant problems with an internal or external component of the body, such as nerve damage or amputated limbs.
- **Functional impairments** describe the partial or complete loss of function in a body part, such as chronic pain or joints that do not move easily.
- **Cognitive impairments** are derived from problems in the structure of the brain that result in difficulty with certain mental functions, such as remembering, solving problems, or paying attention.
- **Visual impairments** describe problems in the structure of the eyes, damage from injuries, or degeneration that causes them not to function properly and results in partial or complete loss of vision.
- **Aural impairments** are derived from problems in the structure of the ears, damage, or degeneration such that they do not function properly and result in partial or complete loss of hearing.

Depending on the type, severity, and combination of disabilities for an individual, they may experience mild to severe challenges in functioning. Impairment results in some level of activity limitations or participation restrictions, or a mix of both. Activity limitations describe the difficulty an individual may have with personal movements, tasks, or cognitive functions, such as learning and applying knowledge, managing self-care tasks, mobility, or managing domestic life. Participation restrictions hinder a person's involvement in life situations and engagement in social roles, such as employment, education, or relationships. These could include having

trouble with managing interpersonal tasks and demands, moving through public environments, establishing and managing interpersonal relationships, engaging in education or employment, managing finances, or engaging in other aspects of society.

By providing accommodations and support that decrease or eliminate the activity limitations and participation restrictions people with disabilities experience, we can empower them to participate in as much of everyday life and community as they are able.

VULNERABILITY OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Individuals with disabilities experience increased vulnerability to mistreatment, neglect, abuse, and exploitation. According to the U.S. Department of State's 2016 Trafficking in Persons Report, people with disabilities make up one of the most vulnerable populations in the country to human trafficking, particularly to sex trafficking. Often, the vulnerability of people with disabilities to sex trafficking involves a combination of physical cognitive, social, and financial challenges that an exploiter sees as an opportunity for exerting control.

An individual's physical vulnerability to trafficking depends on the type and severity of disability they experience. A person facing challenges with autonomous bodily movement may be fully reliant on someone else to help them dress or eat. If a person needs assistance with moving from one location to another, such as someone who uses a wheelchair or finds it difficult to walk, they may be unable to choose to leave or go to a safer place. Individuals who require a significant level of physical assistance are highly vulnerable to others assaulting them, abusing them, or trafficking them because they cannot protect themselves from the attack. In particular, children with physical disabilities may have a harder time understanding the difference between appropriate and inappropriate physical contact because they are used to being touched by caretakers and may be desensitized to it. People with physical disabilities are especially vulnerable to forceful physical abuse, sexual abuse, and exploitation

because they are unable to defend themselves, leave the situation, or move without assistance.

People with cognitive disabilities experience vulnerability to abuse or exploitation in a variety of ways. Those with communication barriers, such as limited speech or an inability to speak, may find it difficult or impossible to describe their experiences to other people, which is a primary reason traffickers target them. Individuals who are restricted in their ability to understand other people's speech may not be able to understand what an abuser or trafficker is asking of them, leading to additional mistreatment. Other people with cognitive disabilities may struggle to understand appropriate physical or emotional boundaries, which can leave them vulnerable to relationships that escalate to abuse and exploitation as seen in the [boyfriending tactic](#) used by traffickers.

Additionally, individuals with more severe cognitive disabilities simply may not have access to the education they need to understand when a relationship is sexually inappropriate or exploitative. Even if they do have access to sex education, some individuals with cognitive disabilities are unable to understand it or even distinguish the difference between normal physical contact and sexually motivated contact. People with cognitive disabilities are particularly vulnerable to coercion, manipulation, and the escalation of relationships into abuse and exploitation.

Unfortunately, many people with disabilities of all kinds experience high rates of social isolation and loneliness. The extent of this isolation depends on many factors, including the severity of their disability, their ability to communicate and interact effectively, and the willingness of their caretakers to facilitate social interactions. For most people with disabilities, the isolation they experience is not by their choice but rather because they find it difficult to interact with others or other people are unwilling to put in effort to communicate with them. Because of this, many people with disabilities are incredibly lonely and have few opportunities to make friends. Traffickers often take advantage of this desire for community and pose as a friend or significant other to foster trust with the individual,

later escalating the relationship to exploit that trust. People with disabilities can often be eager to please others, due to loneliness or a conditioned dependence on a caregiver, which makes them particularly vulnerable to manipulation and deceit.

Individuals with disabilities are also often vulnerable financially. If someone with disabilities depends on a caregiver to provide for them financially or manage their government disability benefits, they are especially vulnerable to that person stealing from them without their knowledge. In [some cases](#), these caregivers have been known to take money even with the individuals' knowledge because they were unable to report the crime or stop them. Many people with disabilities cannot independently control their finances and have no choice but to allow someone else to have access to their finances.

Depending on the type and severity of their disability, many people are vulnerable in several areas to exploitation at the same time. Individuals with multiple disabilities have compounded vulnerabilities and have a greatly increased risk of being targeted by a trafficker.

SERVING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

To successfully combat trafficking in the United States, the anti-trafficking movement must consider the vulnerabilities and specialized needs of people with disabilities. Too often, these individuals are ignored, silenced, or excluded from the conversations and initiatives of the movement even though they are heavily represented in the survivor community. This is a reality that will take conscious effort to change.

Educating the primary caregivers and supporters of people with disabilities is a crucial step to building an effective response to trafficking. As the first line of defense for many individuals with disabilities, this key group needs to be equipped with the tools and resources they need to recognize the signs of abuse, report it, and prevent it from happening in the future. Currently, one of the most

significant struggles for parents of people with disabilities is simply that they do not know all of the things their child could be vulnerable to. Many caregivers have no specific understanding of what abuse and exploitation would look like in their situation and therefore have very little ability to protect against it. To address this knowledge gap, it is critical to build and promote a platform with extensive resources, training, and information that is available to caregivers for people with disabilities. Through this, they can learn practical ways to best empower people with disabilities while also protecting them from exploitation. This resource platform could also serve as a community-building tool, providing caregivers and individuals with disabilities with much-needed support and relationships.

For members of the anti-trafficking industry, elevating the voices and experiences of people with disabilities is a necessary step to building a more equitable movement. For example, making a distinct effort to include survivors with disabilities in conversations, roundtables, and conventions around human trafficking will go a long way in expanding the inclusivity efforts of the anti-trafficking movement. Since these survivors make up such a large portion of the survivor community, it is time that their voices and experiences are heard as well. Without them, the movement as a whole will continue to serve survivors with disabilities at a level below what they deserve.

However, creating spaces for survivors with disabilities should go far beyond simply including them in conversations. Doing so may involve greater efforts to make accommodations and seek out survivors who are willing to speak, but these efforts will certainly be worthwhile as they contribute to a more effective response to trafficking. It is our hope at Safe House Project that the anti-trafficking movement will take this step out of a genuine desire to serve all survivors with excellence.

For additional resources concerning survivors with disabilities, please visit:

- [Safe House Project – OnWatch Training](#)
- [National Human Trafficking & Disabilities Working Group](#)
- [Restoring Ivy Collective](#)
- [The Arc](#)