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# Survivor Insights

The Role of Technology  
in Domestic Minor  
Sex Trafficking

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JANUARY 2018

In collaboration with Dr. Vanessa Bouché,  
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Science, Texas Christian University



## Executive Summary

“ I felt like a slave working for someone, getting beat and not getting paid, not having control over my own life.

— Survey Respondent

## STAT HIGHLIGHTS

260

Survivors of DMST

1 in 6

Trafficked under the age of twelve

75%

Of those who entered the life in 2004 or later were advertised online

In an effort to strategically inform technology initiatives for combating domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST), Thorn partnered with Dr. Vanessa Bouché at Texas Christian University to survey survivors about their experiences. The survey focused on understanding what role technology played in a victim's recruitment into, time while in, and exit from DMST.

Two hundred and sixty survivors of DMST, through 24 survivor organizations, spanning 14 states, completed the survey.

The majority of participants identified as female (98%), 2% as male, and 1% as "other".<sup>1</sup> Sixty-seven percent identified as heterosexual, 25% bisexual, 5% homosexual, 2% "other", and 1% "don't know". Among those identifying race (n=243), 45% reported African American, 27% Caucasian, 21% Hispanic, and 8% "other".

## Two central themes emerged from survey responses:

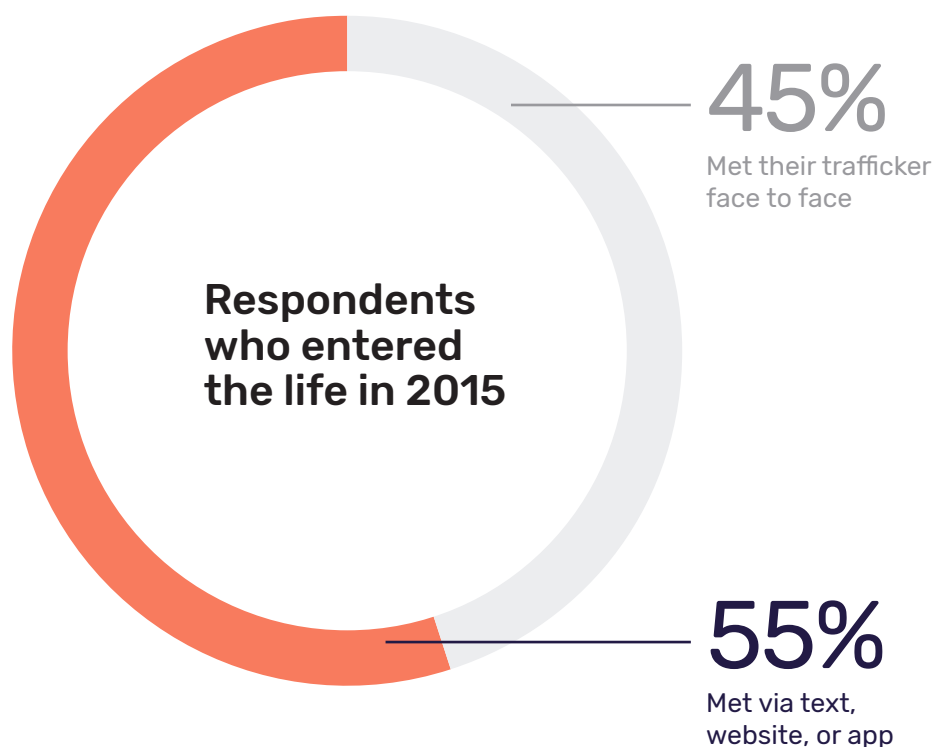
- 1 Technology is playing an increasing role in grooming and controlling victims of DMST.
- 2 Less familiar forms of DMST, including those trafficked by family members or without a clear trafficker, emerged in the DMST landscape. However, consistent in all types of DMST observed are common experiences of childhood abuse and neglect.

These themes suggest an important understanding about the nature of DMST and the role of technology. The need for human connection, and the vulnerabilities that arise in the absence thereof, are central to the recruitment, control, and recovery of DMST survivors. Use of technology is likely to continue to increase; however, technology is unlikely to extinguish the human element of DMST.

<sup>1</sup> Does not total to 100% due to rounding.

## Role of technology is increasing

Not surprisingly, use of technology by traffickers, victims, and buyers is increasing. The Internet and cellular technology offer individuals the opportunity to stay connected around the clock and from any distance, and it offers access – to information, goods, and people – that previously was out of reach. These same benefits support its growing popularity in DMST.



**RECRUITMENT AND GROOMING.** Across the sample, most traffickers continue to meet and groom victims through face to face contact. However, respondents who entered the life in 2015 noted much higher uses of technology in this process. Across the sample, 84% reported meeting their trafficker for the first time face to face, but **only 45% of those entering the life in 2015 reported meeting their trafficker face to face. The remaining 55% reported use of text, website, or app.** Similarly, 85% of the entire sample reported their trafficker spent time with them in person to build a relationship. By comparison, only 58% of those who entered the life in 2015 reported time in person as the means for building a relationship. Of those whose trafficker used technology in this process, 63% reported communicating online and 25% reported communicating via phone call.

Importantly, 2015 data deviated from the rest of the sample; therefore, continued investigation into the use of technology in meeting and grooming victims is required. However, the findings do show that while meeting in person was the singular dominant method of developing a close relationship in the past, it is now a dominant method while technology-based modes of communicating are increasing in usage.

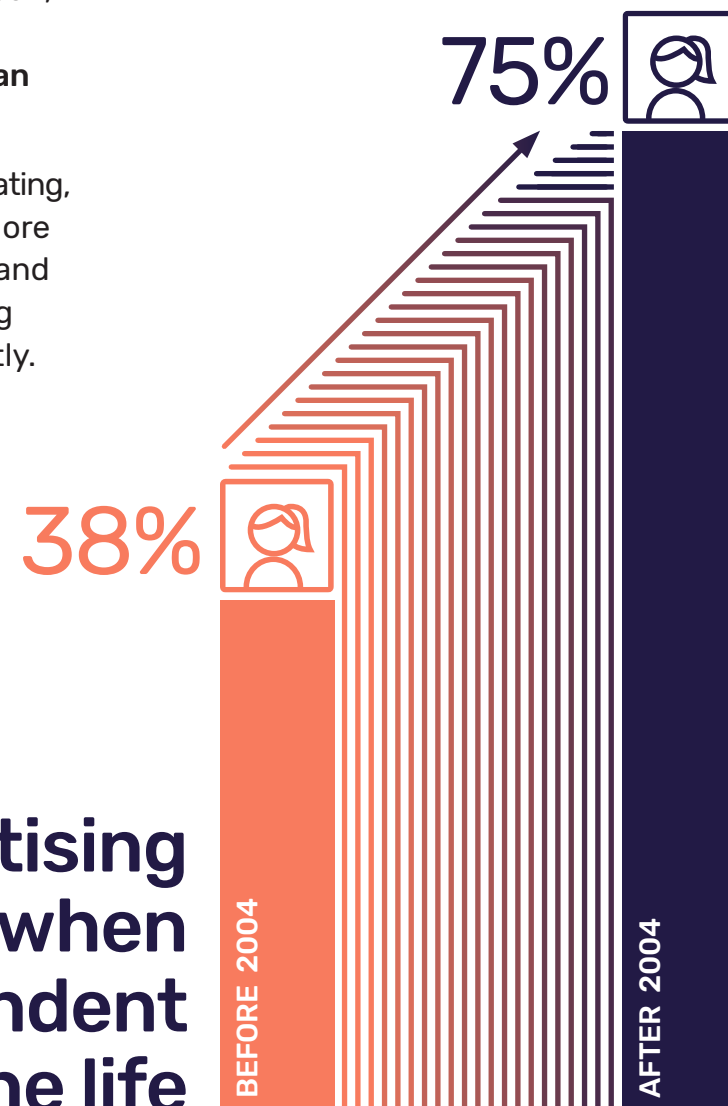
**EXPERIENCE IN THE LIFE.** While in the life, most victims do have access to the Internet and 90% of those report using social media. Victims are using social media to communicate with family, friends, traffickers, and buyers. Interestingly, findings suggest **monitoring of both Internet and cell phone use is decreasing.** The most popular websites accessed by victims were Facebook, Backpage, Craigslist, Instagram, and Google.

Online advertising is increasing while advertising on the street is decreasing. Prior to 2004, the predominant forum for advertising was on the street (78%) and only 38% were advertised online. By comparison, **for those who entered the life in or after 2004, street advertising had dropped to 61% and online advertising had increased to 75%.** The most frequently reported platform for online advertising was Backpage. The next most popular sites included Craigslist, RedBook, SugarDaddy, and Facebook.

Online advertising was also associated with an increased number of buyers per day. One in seven respondents who were advertised on the street reported more than 10 buyers per day. By comparison, one in four respondents who were advertised online reported **more than 10 buyers per day.**

By using remote means of communicating, traffickers are able to engage with more victims and buyers simultaneously and around the clock, thereby expanding their reach and influence significantly.

## Online advertising based on when respondent entered the life





## Less familiar trafficking experiences and shared vulnerabilities

Survey responses underscored numerous social factors that influenced respondents' experiences while in the life, and later on their road to recovery. Adverse childhood experiences increased vulnerability of exploitation. Recurring victimization by those in positions of trust bred distorted views of self-worth, love, and security.

The survey found that the median age entering the life was 14 years old. This corroborates other research on DMST showing that the average age of entry

into commercial sexual exploitation is roughly 12 to 14 years old. While **the most frequently reported age of entry into the life was 15, one in six participants reported being trafficked before the age of 12 with the youngest victims less than 1 year old.**

Respondents described a range of trafficking experiences in the life including the following general categories: familial, non-familial, or no trafficker. The survey found that in some cases children may be born into sex trafficking, or be forced into it as a toddler. Sex trafficking of those that are younger than 10 years old when they entered the life is perpetrated

almost exclusively by family members, often a father or stepfather. This early entrapment in the life colored their understanding of individual value or purpose with one respondent stating it was explained to them as *"what all little girls and boys do for their parents"*. Another underscored that being trafficked by a family member made escape seem impossible, stating *"I could never escape. I never have anyone to turn to. I didn't have a choice. I was born into this."*

## Participants' age of entry into the life

<1 Youngest age reported

12

15 Most frequently reported age

ONE IN SIX WERE  
UNDER THE AGE OF 12



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Respondents who entered the life after age 11, were most likely to be trafficked by strangers, followed by people in their social network. In some cases, respondents reported a trafficker's offer of food and shelter was their first step into the life. In other cases, a trafficker's promise of love and wealth helped to earned their trust.

Even among those that were not trafficked by their own family, the survey results reveal that many DMST victims experienced some form of childhood abuse and neglect, reporting high rates of verbal, physical, or sexual abuse. Given these adverse childhood experiences, two out of three participants had experiences with either foster care or juvenile detention. These environments likely increased exposure to negative influences including traffickers or other victims of DMST that used their access to recruit new victims.

Throughout the report there are some significant differences between those who had a trafficker while in the life and those who reported that they did not. Nineteen percent of participants reported that they did not have a trafficker. It is likely a trafficker existed in some of these cases, but was not recognized as such by the respondent. Analysis of responses found that 42% of these respondents were subject to physical and psychological coercion by someone in relation to DMST. Others reported engaging in survival sex for access to food, drugs, or other needs.

Those reporting no trafficker appeared to have significantly more freedom, evidenced by having fewer buyers per day, being able to use their phones more frequently, having unmonitored Internet access, advertising less, and being less likely to say that they wanted help exiting the life.

Even after exiting the life, many do not characterize themselves as victims and may continue to romanticize their relationship with the trafficker. **Less than one quarter have seen their trafficker prosecuted and when asked if they would want to pursue prosecution of their trafficker, a strong majority (88%) reported they would not.**

## Recommendations

Findings of the survey support many initiatives currently underway to combat DMST such as supporting stable and loving homes, increasing awareness in the community, and expanding available support resources such as shelters and job training. These efforts play an important role in protecting vulnerable children and identifying traffickers, and should be sustained and grown when possible. In addition, survey responses suggest several opportunities for improved prevention, intervention, and recovery.

Prevention programs must be aimed directly at children and youth, and therefore require

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“It’s easy to get in and hard to get out.”

– Survey Respondent



examining those places where children and youth – especially the highest risk – are likely to be. Survey responses indicate most children were in school while in the life, and most had experiences with the foster care or juvenile detention systems at some point. **Schools were also noted by survivors as a key opportunity for intervention** noting, *“A teacher would have been the most helpful to either give me the number [of the helpline] or call for me.”*

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**Given the increasing use of technology for grooming victims and advertising to buyers, tech companies are uniquely positioned to combat DMST and engage with victims.** For example, findings suggest increasing use of social media and apps by buyers to communicate with traffickers and victims. Further examination of patterns in this process could help industry identify bad actors on their platforms. Tech companies could also deliver online help advertisements via platforms frequented by victims. For example, most respondents reported they never saw a helpline number while in the life, and those that did not see the helpline number

encouraged use of social media for placement. Improving visibility of resources such as helplines on platforms known to be frequented by DMST victims could increase opportunities for exiting the life.

Findings also indicate there may be investigative value in how a trafficker communicates with buyers. Younger victims with traffickers were significantly more likely to report the trafficker communicated directly with buyers (rather than the victim communicating with buyers). As such, factoring in who is communicating with buyers may facilitate investigative risk assessments and victim identification.

Respondents underscored the continued need for increased availability of support services when exiting the life, with particular attention on counseling services. For many, they are in areas with limited access to trauma-informed counseling services that meet their needs as survivors of DMST. One participant suggested that the creation of virtual counseling communities could fill this need.

Finally, acknowledging the quickly shifting landscape in any area involving technology, it is important to continuously review how technology is used by traffickers, victims, and buyers. Thorn plans to continue its efforts on this front and is reviewing methods for ongoing monitoring of technology trends in DMST.



## Closing Remarks

The stories shared by DMST survivors about their experiences offer critical insights into the world of DMST and must be included in any strategy to combat DMST. The 2016 Survivor Survey not only suggests traffickers are increasingly using technology to ensnare victims in the life and advertise minors for sex, it also highlights opportunities to use technology to protect those targeted by traffickers. However, technology alone will not be sufficient. While promising technological interventions can play a vital role in engaging victims and identifying traffickers, we cannot ignore the human element of trafficking. We must continue to address those abuses that make children vulnerable and empower them on their road to recovery.

This report was made in collaboration with Dr. Vanessa Bouche, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Texas Christian University. Dr. Bouché is currently a co-principal investigator on three federally-funded grants on human trafficking, two from the National Institute of Justice and one from the United States Agency on International Development. Her research has been published in the Journal of Politics, Journal of Public Policy, Politics & Gender, among other outlets.

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#### **THORN**

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Without the dedication of the following individuals, this work wouldn't have been possible: Leah Treitman, Melissa Stroebel, Brooke Istook, Kristy Kosak, and Sarah Potts.

Designed by Kelsey Lesko

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#### **THANK YOU**

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**Allies Against Slavery**

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**Breaking Free**

**City of Refuge**

**Coalition to Abolish Slavery & Trafficking**

**Covenant House**

**End Slavery Tennessee**

**Generate Hope**

**Grace Haven**

**Janus Youth**

**Journey Out**

**More Too Life**

**My Life My Choice**

**Phoenix Dream Center**

**Rebecca Bender Initiative**

**Recovery Agents of Hope**

**Redeeming Joy**

**Safe Harbor/Center for Youth Services**

**Saving Innocence**

**The Hope Project**

**The Link-Passageways**

**The Well House**

**There Is Hope For Me**

**Traffick911**

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