

Defining the emotional bond forced onto teen victims of sex trafficking

April 4 2019



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Rutgers researchers have defined the relationship that forms between

children who are sold for sex and the criminals who traffic them.

The discovery should make it easier for [law enforcement](#) and [healthcare providers](#) to identify [child victims](#), rescue them and help them reenter society. About 1 million children are victims of sex trafficking worldwide.

The paper, which will be published in the May-June issue of the *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, reviewed research on trauma bonding and sex trafficking from 1990 to 2017 and identified three tools traffickers use to force a psychological bond on their child victims: severe power imbalance; alternating brutal and seductive behavior; and [social isolation](#) that leads to the victim's perceived inability to escape.

"In sex trafficking of children, captivity is followed by this previously unrecognized process now identified as 'trauma coercive bonding,'" said Rosario V. Sanchez a Ph.D. candidate at Rutgers School of Nursing.

"During recruitment, the trafficker creates an emotional bond with the victim—then replaces it with primal terror. Unpredictable assaults and death threats alternate with occasional, false expressions of romance or kindness. Confused about what constitutes intimacy, safety and love, these children feel responsible for the abuse, protect the abuser and feel remorse, shame and guilt when the abuse stops."

Traffickers with multiple victims use isolation, favoritism and conflict to turn the victims against each other. This, combined with the shame of their forced sexual acts, causes victims to become more withdrawn and dependent on the trafficker. They view the trafficker as safe and trustworthy, but fear law enforcement, [health care providers](#) and even their own families.

The researchers found that trauma coercive bonding disrupts the child's social and emotional development and leads to physical and mental

health conditions that persist long into adulthood. These can include depression, anxiety, [substance abuse](#), self-destructive behavior, chronic stress which contributes to a host of other disorders and repeat victimization. Victims lose their identities and become emotionally vulnerable and unable to maintain relationships. All of these effects make returning to society difficult.

Understanding how this bond affects [children](#), whose psychological immaturity magnifies the power imbalance and makes them depend on the trafficker more over time, will help aid workers identify and rescue child victims, Sanchez said.

It will also help them better understand why many former victims continue to engage in risky behavior—such as agreeing to trade sex for money or favors, or returning to the trafficker—even after their return to a safe environment, Sanchez continued.

More information: Rosario V. Sanchez et al, A concept analysis of trauma coercive bonding in the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, *Journal of Pediatric Nursing* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.pedn.2019.02.030](#)

Provided by Rutgers University

Citation: Defining the emotional bond forced onto teen victims of sex trafficking (2019, April 4) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-04-emotional-bond-teen-victims-sex.html>

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