



Exiting Exploitation:

Motivations, Helps and Hindrances

Executive Summary

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July 2025

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// Introduction

There is a perpetual question—perhaps stated rhetorically—when it comes to sexually exploited persons, particularly against the violence, degradation, criminality, and potential mortality in the trade. And that question is: ***“Why doesn’t she just leave?”*** Few studies have endeavored to tackle that question, seeking to provide an under-standing of the factors that might keep a person in exploitation, and what state of being, mindset, relationships, circumstances, or prompting events lead to exit.

This 2025 study sought to identify the motivations, hindrances and helps that facilitate a victim’s successful and permanent exit from sexual exploitation.

// Methodology

The Institute for Survivor Care and a team of 5 trafficking survivors developed the survey instrument that was sent to 220 trafficking shelters nationally as well as survivor networks and known public figures who are trafficking survivors. To ensure safety, anonymity, and access, participant’s status as a survivor was not required to be evidenced. Respondents received a \$15 gift card for contributions to this study.

// Demographics

Respondent Demographics

We received 189 Survivor responses, all female between 14 and 64 years of age. The average age was 38.6, with most being between 30-49 years.

18.6 years	average age at initial exploitation generally (N=189)
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63%	were under the age of 21 when initially trafficked
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14.6 years	average number of years in exploitation
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33.5 years	average age at final exit from exploitation
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Familial Trafficking Subset

107 responses **(56%) reported having been trafficked by a family member**. The familial subset showed a much younger pattern:

9.4 years	average age of initial (familial) exploitation
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18.7 years	average age at exit from exploitation
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39%	had other family member(s) who were also sexually exploited.
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45%	had at least one family member who was engaged in sexual exploitation as a perpetrator.
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Average age at initial exploitation



Average age at exit from exploitation



// Pathways to Exit

Survivors were asked how they exited based on 4 options: I decided; I was rescued; I was arrested; I had a major life event. Following are their responses.

Decision to Exit

60% reported that it was their decision to exit exploitation.

Prompts to that decision included:

- 65.2% Being tired—and tired of it—was the most common motivator for exit.
- 54.5% “I saw an opportunity.” This response took many forms, from seeing a billboard advertisement, to being offered shelter placement.
- 37.7% “I was physically hurt” (chronic medical condition, pregnancy, overdose) were some of the experiences that motivated exit.
- 37.7% “I had a spiritual encounter” was also a prompt for exit.

Children were identified as both the reason a woman felt she had to stay in exploitation, and also as a motivation for exiting.

“When I lost custody of my son, it was always the main reason for me to get help. If I didn’t lose custody of my son I probably would have never gotten help.”



“I HAD AN ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS. HE SHOWED UP IN MY COUSIN’S DINING ROOM AND HE TOLD ME TO MAKE PEACE WITH HIM THEN HE WAS GONE. IT WAS CRAZY!”

“I’M TIRED OF BEING ADDICTED TO DRUGS AND TIRED OF BEING CHASED.”



// Pathways to Exit

Rescued to Exit

38.9% indicated that their means of exit was through rescue. Two-thirds reported taking some action that led to getting help, such as making a phone call or reaching out for services.

Over 69% found the word “rescue” to be a favorable and apt descriptor for their exit.

Arrested to Exit

27.9% indicated that getting arrested, even incarcerated, was part of their exit. 62.1% of those reported incarceration turned out “for their good,” in that it gave them time away from the stressors, relationships and substances that lead to a clearer decision to exit.

Life Event as Exit

53.2% I saw an opportunity to get out and I took it.

53.2% I feared for my life.

41.8% I was seriously considering (or attempted) suicide.

27.6% I had a spiritual experience.

26.9% I witnessed something bad, and it shook me.



// Helps to Exit

What help did you most need?

- 72.5% A safe place to stay for a few nights
- 66.7% Relational Supports (someone to talk to, prayer, encouragement to exit)
- 56.7% Transportation out of their current location
- 52.4% Detox/Sobriety supports
- 39.0% Medical attention

Where did you look for help?

- 38.0% I looked for a program in my area or anywhere
- 20.2% I called someone in my family or a friend.
- 12.8% I called or went to a church.
- 12.8% I called a different hotline or rescue hotline
- 12.3% I called the Human Trafficking Hotline
- 10.4% I contacted the police.

“At first, when the detectives were trying to get me out of the life. I was extremely resistant and loyal to my trafficker. I originally thought that I paid my own way through prostitution, supported myself and my housing/food needs and my drug habit. It was not until further down the road when a female detective sat down with me and I had an honest conversation about what was going on and realized I was being trafficked. I believe God sent this detective to me to rescue me.”

“Getting arrested didn’t save me from trafficking, but it did help me realize that my life was unmanageable and that I desired help so deeply!”

// Hindrances

Retention

Primary factors that kept these victims in exploitation included:

- (1) a fear-based, relationship with her trafficker, (64.2%)
- (2) dependency on substance use, (61.5%)
- (3) limited economic options, or the lure of “easy money”
- (4) relational ties with individuals in the sex trade.

- Relational ties and distorted beliefs about those relationships kept these women in exploitation.

72% reported a belief in spiritual forces in some manner and 47% reported being convinced that evil forces kept them in exploitation.

- Digital exposure was mentioned often as a condition that prevented victims from envisioning a new life.



“I WAS FINANCIALLY DEPENDENT ON EXPLOITATION TO SUPPLY MY DRUG HABIT, PAY FOR HOTEL ROOMS, ETC. I HAD NO FAMILY AND NO WHERE ELSE TO GO. ALSO, BECAUSE OF MY DRUG ADDICTION, I COULDN'T JUST GO GET A JOB BECAUSE I WAS UNEMPLOYABLE.”

“MY SMUT IS ALL OVER THE INTERNET, LEADING ME TO BELIEVE I COULD NEVER HAVE A REAL CAREER, RELATIONSHIP, OR HOW TO EXPLAIN TO MY FUTURE CHILDREN MOMMY IS ALL OVER THE DARK WEB IN HIDEOUS WAYS.”



“They were my family & it was really all I knew. Also, I really thought they loved me and that something was just wrong with me.”

// Re-Entry

This sample had a re-entry rate of 2.6 times prior to final exit. 15% reported that they never returned following initial exit. We asked at the end of the survey if they thought returning to exploitation was a risk for them today and they replied:

68.2% No, Absolutely not

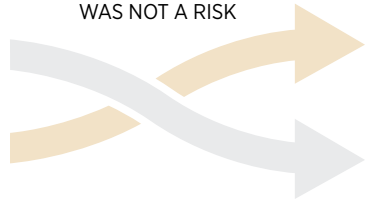
19.3% I highly doubt it

7.4% I'm not sure

5.1% Yes, there's a risk

68.2%

SAID RETURNING
WAS NOT A RISK



// Outreach: Survivor Recommendations

Be Online



"I WOULD RESPOND TO EVERY AD ON SITES THAT TRAFFICKERS ADVERTISE GIRLS OR GIRLS ADVERTISE THEMSELVES WITH THE STATEMENT. THERE IS HOPE YOU CAN GET OUT. CALL US OR SOMETHING TO THE EFFECT.

Be in the "Dark Places"

"Hit the pavement and look for victims."

"I'M NOT SURE BECAUSE I WAS ALWAYS IN A HOTEL ROOM. MAYBE THEY CAN DRIVE AROUND BAD HOTEL AREAS. YOU CAN ALWAYS TELL WHO NEEDS HELP."

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"LOOK FOR THE WEAKEST INDIVIDUALS IN COMMUNITY THAT GROUPS WOULD TEND TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF."

Be in incarceration facilities

"THE PRISON ARE FULL OF WOMEN DOING SHORT TERM SENTENCES THAT ARE VICTIMS AND END UP GOING RIGHT BACK TO THEIR TRAFFICKER AFTERWARDS."

"FIND VICTIMS WHO ARE CURRENTLY LOCKED UP FOR PROSTITUTION OR ANYTHING TO DO WITH IT... SOLICITING, LOITERING, ALL THE CHARGES AND REACH OUT TO THEM WHILE THEY ARE IN JAIL. THATS WHEN WE NEED IT THE MOST."

"Have more programs in jail that help women. For me serving time makes you reach out for help after being in there for a few months. The first day ain't gonna do it."

In Outreach

“There needs to be more awareness of the shelters, programs, and services you provide. Women need to know that there is hope and help out there.”

“LESS FLUFFY LANGUAGE, MORE TALK ON THE VALUE OF THE RECOVERY PROCESS AT ANY AGE, ACKNOWLEDGEMENT FOR NOT ONLY NEEDS BUT WANTS FOR SURVIVORS WHEN THEY ENTER CARE, LESS MORAL HIGH GROUND AND MORE COMPASSION WITHOUT PITY.”

To Service Providers

“BE TRAUMA INFORMED WITHOUT JUDGEMENT AND ALSO INFORM VICTIMS THAT THEY HAVE A CHOICE IN THE MATTER.”

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// Summary of Observations and Recommendations



Beyond a dependent or romantic attachment to the exploiter (60.8%), survivors reported finding supportive relationships with customers (50.8%) and other victims (36.5%). Advocates and service providers must appreciate that exiting means the severance of almost all her relationships. Establishing many new and healthy relationships is vital to sustained exit.



“TEACH ME HOW TO BUILD A COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT AND RESOURCES THAT WILL STICK WITH ME FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL YEARS, CAUSE TWO YEARS IN I STILL HAVE FAR MORE NEEDS AND TRAUMA THAN I THOUGHT I WOULD.”



Familial trafficking proved prominent in this study. The anti-trafficking field must balance the narrative of “stranger danger” with the reality of abuse that stems from within the home and acknowledge the unique bonds and betrayals associated with familial abuse.



The relationship of victims to their children continues to factor prominently in a woman's decision to stay (mostly predicated on economic dependency) or leave (notably voiced as wanting to provide better for them).

“MY CHILDREN HAVING A BETTER LIFE IS THE BIGGEST MOTIVATION.”



Tenure in exploitation was 14.6 years with an average exit at 33.5. These findings challenge the stereotype of trafficking victims that dominates media, awareness programs, or our sympathies. Awareness efforts need to convey these realities.



The appeal of “fast” or “easy” money was a stated temptation. Without the education or skills that would make them competitive in other fields, survivors will resort to whatever helps them meet their economic and material needs. We must ensure that the exited survivor is building towards economic independence and financial stability as a protective factor.



A significant number of respondents interpreted their exploitation and/or exit in spiritual terms. As well, many respondents offered comments that framed their rescue and recovery as orchestrated by God. Those facilitating services should ensure that faith conviction and views are honored and supported.



59.2% reported that getting arrested and incarcerated was instrumental in their exit. That time away from the circumstances, pressures, and relationships of exploitation allowed them to achieve sobriety and think about their futures. Federal, state and local governments should ensure that incarceration services are equipped with victim identification tools, services information and referral resources for trafficking victims.

"I KNEW THAT LIFE WASN'T FOR ME BUT BE ADDICTED TO HEROIN/FENTANYL KEEP ME THERE... I NEEDED OUT AND GETTING LOCKED UP 3 TIMES HELPED ME STRAIGHTEN UP"



Advocates should continue to combat the harms of digital content and seek remedies for victims. Service providers should be versed in both the psychological burdens and legal recourses that survivors may have against this type of exposure.



Outreach and shelter programs should examine their marketing efforts to improve communications to those in active exploitation. Messaging needs to be aligned with what victims are saying they most need to make that critical decision to exit.



Victim advocates, family members, and church-affiliated persons were the top three most encouraging persons. We need to ensure that those individuals are equipped with information about services and programs.

// About the Institute for Survivor Care

For 13 years prior to founding The Institute for Survivor Care, we operated The Samaritan Women, one of the first restorative care programs for minor and adult survivors of domestic sex trafficking. This experience working directly with survivors has proven to be an immeasurable asset to the work we do today.



The Institute for Survivor Care's vision is that *any survivor—anywhere in the nation—would have access to qualified, compassionate care*. We influence both policy and practice through the development of research, training, tools, and collaborations that uphold a Biblical worldview.

// Key Activities

Training

- We serve start-up nonprofits with training and mentoring as they prepare to serve victims of exploitation.
[INSTITUTEFORSURVIVORCARE.ORG/ROADMAP-TO-SHELTER-PLANTING](https://instituteforsurvivorcare.org/roadmap-to-shelter-planting)
- Our ShelterU online learning platform offers over 100 courses to equip staff and volunteers in direct care.
- EquipU is the Institute's online learning platform for allied professionals who serve survivors in non-residential settings such as law enforcement, medical, child advocacy and churches.
[INSTITUTEFORSURVIVORCARE.ORG/EQUIPU](https://instituteforsurvivorcare.org/equipu)
- In 2025 we launched a professional certification program specifically for survivors, to equip them to engage in the field as Peer Support Specialists.

Research

- The Institute publishes 4-6 national studies a year on topics that advance our national understanding of survivor needs, support decision-making for shelter leaders, or inform federal or state policy.
[INSTITUTEFORSURVIVORCARE.ORG/RESEARCH-LIBRARY](https://instituteforsurvivorcare.org/research-library)
- In 2025 we will publish the first annual report on national survivor data and shelter outcomes.

Tools

- The Institute has created a National Case Management System that provides shelters with a standardized tool for collecting and reporting on survivor demographics, needs, interventions, and outcomes.
- Our National Shelter Landscape houses detailed information about active service providers. This data is used for research and for facilitating survivor placement into programs.

[INSTITUTEFORSURVIVORCARE.ORG/SHELTER-MAP](https://instituteforsurvivorcare.org/shelter-map)

Community

- The Institute hosts the National Christian Conference on Sexual Exploitation each year to unite organizations, and fortify them for this work. [EXPLOITATIONCONFERENCE.ORG](https://exploitationconference.org)
- We also host an annual retreat for shelter leaders, to offer encouragement, peer support, and reflection on the major issues impacting the field.

// Donate

The Institute is supported through charitable donations, with 80% of each dollar donated going directly to programs. If you would like to invest in this work, we invite you to give at [INSTITUTEFORSURVIVORCARE.ORG/DONATE](https://instituteforsurvivorcare.org/donate) or contact Patricia Livingston PLIVINGSTON@INSTITUTEFORSURVIVORCARE.ORG to discuss other ways we might partner in this work.

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To access the full report, download here:

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