



WEDGWOOD'S MANASSEH PROJECT

Human Trafficking: Vulnerabilities are not Weaknesses

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Vulnerability is not a personal failure – it is part of the human experience and can shift depending on circumstances. While everyone experiences vulnerability at different points in life, some individuals and communities face heightened risk due to systematic inequities, limited access to resources, or gaps in support. Vulnerability helps explain exposure to risk; it does not define a person's worth, identity, or choices. The following are examples of vulnerabilities a child may experience that can increase their risk of trafficking. *(This is not an exhaustive list)*

VULNERABILITIES

- Abuse (96%)
- Mental health challenges (93%)
- Runaway or unhoused (69%)
- Poverty (83%)
- Substance use (93%)
- Lived with someone who experienced mental health or substance use challenges (93%)
- Other family/household instability (96%)
- Loneliness or isolation
- Lack of consistent supervision or support
- Desire for belonging, love, or validation

VULNERABILITY AND RISK

VULNERABILITY HELPS EXPLAIN RISK – it does not define a person's worth, character, or choices. Traffickers deliberately target and exploit existing vulnerabilities, taking advantage of unmet needs and unequal power. When we address vulnerabilities, we reduce risk and disrupt pathways to exploitation.

Rather than blaming or shaming – *responses that often lead to isolation* – understanding vulnerability allows us to respond with empathy and clarity. It shifts our perspective from individual fault to broader social, economic, and institutional conditions that enable trafficking in the first place.

REFERENCES

The Polaris Project (*known for the National Human Trafficking Hotline*) conducted a nation-wide study of nearly 500 survivors of labor and sex trafficking to better understand the complexities of trafficking. The study sought to understand childhood experiences and early vulnerabilities that traffickers often exploit. The percentages listed next to vulnerability reflect the survivors who reported experiencing that challenge in childhood. These findings highlight how common certain risk factors can be and underscore the importance of early awareness and supportive intervention in our communities. (polarisproject.org/national-survivor-study/)