# **SEX TRAFFICKING:** A Story Behind the Stats

## To understand the stats, we need to understand stories of vulnerability.

## WHAT IS SEX TRAFFICKING?

A crime in which individuals are forced to perform commercial sex acts for the profit of others through force, fraud, or coercion. Sex trafficking has been documented in all 50 states.

Up to 84% of trafficking victims experienced childhood sexual abuse.

## WHO IS VULNERABLE?

Traffickers leverage their victims' vulnerabilities to create dependency. Risk factors include relocation, substance use, mental health concerns, and marginalized youth. On average, the first instance of sexual exploitation occurs during adolescence.

**Less than 1%** of sex trafficking in the US is stranger abduction: most victims are trafficked by someone they know and trust.

Traffickers often use psychological tactics like grooming, gas lighting, and isolation instead of physical restraints to keep people in the life of trafficking.

Women who come to Wings of Refuge are referred through a local and national network of agencies and advocates such as hospitals, social services, law enforcement, and the National Trafficking Hotline.

Wings of Refuge

*This story combines real survivor stories into a single narrative.*

"Molly" came to Wings of Refuge with little more than the clothes on her back. She was a survivor of **sex trafficking** and needed a safe place to recover and start a new life.

**Molly grew up in Iowa.** When she was 9, her parents got divorced and Molly and her younger sister moved in with their mom. Soon, her mom's new boyfriend started spending time with them and bringing fun gifts. Unfortunately, those gifts were used to build trust and distorted affection with Molly that eventually led to **sexual abuse.**

### IOWA

Iowa receives approximately 9 trafficking reports per 100k people. Human trafficking is notoriously underreported, leading to an estimate of only 1% of survivors being identified. **45%** of the survivors who have come to Wings of Refuge have been from the state of Iowa.

By the time Molly turned 17, **she was desperate to get away from home.** She met a guy online who said all the right things and she quickly fell in love. A few months later, he said that his job was relocating him to the West Coast and it sounded like the life she had always dreamed about! **She was excited to run away with him,** but in the process she was isolated from family and friends. After they left, she learned that he had lied about his job, age, and intentions. He forced her to have sex with others for money. But he said he loved her and it was only until he saved up enough money for them to be together.

**She didn't know she was being trafficked** because all the images she saw about human trafficking were people chained, locked in a basement, or being controlled by a pimp on a street corner. That wasn't her story – she chose to go with her boyfriend, didn't she? One day after another brutal beating, Molly finally realized that she had to run. Even though her boyfriend had convinced her that if she sought help, she'd be arrested and he'd go after her sister, she knew she had to take the risk. She hoped she'd find refuge in the hospital.

Molly got connected to **Wings of Refuge** and spent time at the restoration home finding freedom and support to process through her trauma, overcoming what made her vulnerable to being trafficked in the first place, and practicing healthy life skills that empowered her to take the next step toward independence and new life!