

# Not On Our Watch: Amplifying the Voices of Human Trafficking Survivors Through Photovoice

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I explore the lived experiences of women who endured human trafficking while experiencing homelessness in rural eastern North Carolina. Their journeys became the foundation for Not On Our Watch, a photovoice community-based participatory research project that I designed to amplify survivor narratives and expose systemic service gaps. Throughout this project, I witnessed firsthand how survivors are often silenced through systemic abandonment, particularly after displacement from foster care, domestic violence situations, or institutional systems. Many participants had previously endured domestic violence, human trafficking, or both, making their participation in this project deeply personal and transformative, both for them and myself. Not On Our Watch symbolizes the reclamation of agency through collective action, using photography and storytelling as tools for advocacy. By centering survivor voices, my research informs social work practices, policy reforms, and trauma-informed interventions to address vulnerabilities that place people at risk of trafficking.

**Keywords:** human trafficking, community-based participatory research, photovoice, survivor advocacy, homelessness, trauma

## Introduction

Homelessness and human trafficking are deeply interconnected crises, particularly in rural communities where support services are scarce. Throughout my work in rural eastern North Carolina, I witnessed firsthand how these issues overlap and how the absence of resources leaves many individuals—especially women—vulnerable to exploitation. Not On Our Watch emerged from this journey, a body of work that documents the lived experiences of women who have faced both homelessness and human trafficking. Through this reflection, I explore how *photovoice*, a community-based participatory research methodology (Israel et al., 1998), provided these women with a platform to share their stories, reclaim their voices, and expose critical gaps in services.

As I engaged in this work, I found myself asking: How does homelessness increase vulnerability to human trafficking? How do survivors navigate and resist these cycles of exploitation? Can participatory research, such as photovoice, serve as an advocacy tool to influence social services and policy? Through the personal narratives and visual storytelling of the women I worked alongside, I came to better understand how systemic abandonment and displacement perpetuate cycles of victimization—and, more importantly, how survivors resist and reclaim their agency.

This reflection shares two examples of the dialogue that emerged from Not On Our Watch—one from a person with lived experience as a service provider and another from a survivor who endured human trafficking while experiencing homelessness. In total, 12 women participated in this project. Of these 12, three were service providers, and nine were survivors who had been

exposed to sex trafficking while experiencing homelessness. The term *survivor* is used intentionally, recognizing that the trauma of human trafficking can last a lifetime, and that recovery is a process rather than a singular event. Herein, a survivor is someone who has endured trafficking and is no longer under the control of their trafficker, but their experiences continue to shape their journey toward healing. These women have demonstrated extraordinary fortitude and resilience, surviving terrifying and often life-threatening circumstances.

By centering survivor voices and embracing feminist participatory research, I reflect on the need for service models to evolve to truly meet the needs of trafficking survivors. This journey reinforced my belief that social work must go beyond traditional approaches, prioritizing survivor-led, community-driven interventions that amplify lived experiences. Ultimately, this work is both a personal and professional call to action—one that challenges us to create a more inclusive and trauma-informed response to the intertwined realities of homelessness and human trafficking.

If we want to learn more about the underlying reasons and contributing aspects of these persistent problems in our country, the unheard voices of people who have experienced homelessness and human trafficking must be heard in order to provide their lived experiences. The stories in this manuscript will hopefully give clients and the field of social work a lens to detect service gaps among various institutions—and new avenues to amplify these voices that must be heard.

### **The Origins of Not On Our Watch**

The title “Not On Our Watch” comes from a conversation with a survivor of sex trafficking and a woman who helped her escape from a trafficker. Imagine a young girl running for her life, staying in a cheap motel, and calling a number she saw in a gas station bathroom. A woman answers, and the young girl starts to cry. The woman asks only one question: “Where are you?”

The young girl has escaped from a hotel room where she was being held against her will by a man she considered a romantic partner. Thirty minutes after her call, she is in a safe house. Here the woman says to her, “Not one more night of abuse, not on our watch.” This moment captures the heart of this project—an insistence that no one should endure trafficking or homelessness without intervention, support, and a path forward.

### **A Town of Contrasts**

To understand the realities of homelessness and human trafficking in rural North Carolina, I will briefly reflect on the community where this journey took place. This small coastal town presents a stark contrast between affluence and poverty—a waterfront lined with luxury yachts, fine dining, and boutique shops stands in direct opposition to park benches occupied by people experiencing homelessness, abandoned homes, and closed businesses just a few blocks away. The economic divide is palpable, and the visibility of homelessness is unavoidable, yet largely ignored by those in positions of privilege.

As I walked through the town, I noticed how this divide manifested along racial and class lines, highlighting a history of systemic disinvestment in certain neighborhoods. Many homes were left in disrepair, and entire streets bore the markings of neglect. The contrast between wealth and hardship became even more pronounced when I began working directly with people experiencing homelessness.

Within this town, there was only one soup kitchen and a single shelter, both of which struggled to stay operational due to inadequate funding. The shelter itself had suffered significant structural damage from repeated floods and hurricanes, yet little had been done to repair or improve conditions. Despite these challenges, long lines of individuals—many of them families—waited outside daily for what might be their only meal of the day. Local residents I spoke with confirmed what I was seeing: There were few, if any, local services for people experiencing homelessness. Instead, many relied on informal survival strategies, such as camping in wooded areas or squatting in abandoned homes.

My observations were reinforced by national- and state-level data. According to the 2019 American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, this town had a population of 9,571, with 22 percent of residents living in poverty at the time of this study. Additionally, in 2019, social workers found that at least 20 people were experiencing homelessness on any given night in this community (U.S. Census Bureau). These observations illustrate the scope of the crisis and highlight the lack of adequate resources to address homelessness in rural areas.

Understanding the barriers that people experiencing homelessness—particularly women—face in accessing services became central to this study. This gap in resources not only exacerbates homelessness but also increases vulnerability to human trafficking, a reality that many of the women in this study had experienced firsthand.

### **The Hidden Crisis of Homelessness and Human Trafficking**

When I first began working with people experiencing homelessness in this rural area, I noticed that most of the people I met were men. However, I couldn't help but ask—where were the women? This question led me to a domestic violence shelter on the outskirts of town, where I met a group of women who had experienced both homelessness and human trafficking. Through conversations with them, I learned that most women in these situations avoided traditional shelters, soup kitchens, and social services out of fear. Many feared encountering a former abuser or trafficker, while others worried about having their children taken away if they sought help.

It was through these conversations that I began to fully understand the hidden nature of homelessness and trafficking—how the fear of being seen often kept women isolated and vulnerable. This invisibility serves as both a survival strategy and a significant barrier to accessing resources, leaving many women trapped in cycles of coercion and exploitation.

The scale of human trafficking in the United States reflects these hidden crises. According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, in 2020, North Carolina ranked ninth highest in reported

human trafficking cases with 259 cases that year. Nationally and statewide, adult women composed the majority of identified human trafficking survivors. While human trafficking is a nationwide crisis, research indicates that sex trafficking poses an especially severe threat in rural areas, where limited resources, geographic isolation, and economic instability further heighten vulnerability (Aguirre et al., 2017).

Although human trafficking encompasses various forms of forced labor, the women in this study were exposed specifically to sex trafficking, a reality deeply intertwined with their experiences of homelessness. Federal law defines sex trafficking this way:

The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purposes of a commercial sex act, in which the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age. (as cited in Tony-Butler, 2023, p. 3)

The survivor narratives from this study confirm that trafficking is not an isolated crime—it is woven into the structural realities of homelessness. Women without stable housing become easier targets for traffickers, often forced into exploitative situations where their choices are severely constrained. The intersection of homelessness, gender-based violence, and systemic abandonment creates a pipeline into trafficking, reinforcing cycles of displacement and exploitation. Recognizing this connection is critical to breaking these cycles and advocating for survivor-centered, trauma-informed interventions.

### **The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Survivors**

Amidst these powerful discussions on gender-based violence and trafficking, the world came to a halt as the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped society and forced new realities upon us. When the nation entered lockdown, the women's shelter closed, and we transitioned to virtual communication. The shelter's residents, survivors of domestic violence and trafficking, were relocated to undisclosed locations for their safety. Unfortunately, this separation meant we could no longer maintain daily conversations, leaving me to wonder about their well-being.

Even before the pandemic, the shelter was understaffed. After the shutdown, tracking participants became nearly impossible as service providers scrambled to place survivors in safe housing with limited resources. As a result, many women faced even greater isolation, navigating trauma without the support systems they had begun to trust.

By 2021, as vaccinations became available and the world started reopening, I returned to the community in hopes of reconnecting with the women I had met the previous year. However, the shelter I previously worked with was unable to facilitate contact with survivors. Around the same time, while teaching a class on community-based research, I met a graduate student who ran a nonprofit supporting young women affected by sex trafficking. We decided to initiate another photovoice project—this time focusing on women experiencing homelessness and trafficking, receiving assistance through the nonprofit.

The participants in this project included survivors seeking to escape their abusers and volunteers dedicated to helping them find safety. Due to security concerns, survivors chose to share their experiences anonymously. Recognizing that experiences vary based on race, class, gender, and other forms of marginalization, we turned to photovoice as a method to bridge gaps in language, literacy, and socioeconomic status. Through this approach, we aimed to document the lived experiences of people already disenfranchised by systemic inequities and human trafficking.

### **Methods**

The COVID-19 crisis introduced significant challenges to safe and ethical communication, particularly in a study involving survivors in hiding. Using community-based participatory research methods, we developed an alternative approach to data collection that minimized in-person contact while maintaining ethical research practices.

To protect participants' identities from traffickers, we relied on a trained liaison to conduct interviews and relay information to the research team. The liaison, trained through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative, interviewed participants about their photographs, documented their responses, and transmitted this information securely for analysis. This method allowed us to construct photo titles and captions while preserving participant anonymity.

To share the study's findings, we held an art exhibit in a community gallery frequented by participants. The exhibit provided a safe avenue for disseminating results, highlighting the additional barriers and struggles survivors face when attempting to share their experiences. However, despite the emancipatory potential of photovoice, the survivors' voices remained mediated, with their vignettes and photographs exchanged primarily through virtual channels. This study was Institutional Review Board–approved, with established protocols in place for handling adverse events. While the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shutdown were unforeseen challenges, our research framework incorporated measures to minimize risk.

To ensure participant safety, we implemented strict confidentiality measures throughout the study. Before each interview, the liaison explained that all collected information would remain anonymous, and participants were assigned pseudonyms to prevent any personally identifiable data from being recorded. The consent form emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary, allowing people to withdraw at any time without consequence.

To further safeguard participant identities, we established additional safety protocols. Participants were instructed not to include any identifiable information in their photographs, and we utilized a verbal consent waiver to prevent written documentation from linking people to the study. Additionally, a comprehensive resource list was provided, offering information on food, shelter, mental health, and physical health services to support participants' well-being. Any concerns raised by participants were documented verbally by the liaison on the consent script. These measures ensured that survivors could share their experiences safely, minimizing risks of exposure to traffickers or other threats.

## **Research Approach and Theoretical Framework**

This study was conducted by an all–female identified research team based in eastern North Carolina, consisting of myself, two graduate assistants, community partners, and one photovoice participant. Our research approach was grounded in feminist epistemologies, particularly intersectionality and standpoint theory. Intersectionality acknowledges that individuals’ social positions shape their perspectives, with marginalized groups experiencing unique forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Etengoff, 2020). Similarly, feminist standpoint theory asserts that knowledge is socially situated, and that women with lived experience can provide a clearer and less distorted understanding of systemic inequalities than those who are not marginalized (Harding, 1993). These theoretical frameworks guided our interpretation and analysis of the data, ensuring that the voices and lived experiences of survivors remained central to our findings.

## **Qualitative Data Analysis**

Our qualitative data analysis followed an iterative, multi-stage, and collaborative process between researchers and participants. To begin, team members created memos to document reflections on emerging themes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on recurring patterns in participants’ narratives.

To identify core themes, participants individually named the five most common themes that emerged from the photovoice activity. The research team then conducted a pile sort of these participant-named themes to develop broader cross-cutting themes that captured shared experiences. Following this, axial coding was used to further analyze transcriptions, link subcategories, and organize data into three overarching categories: individual themes (personal survivor experiences), program themes (experiences within support programs), and interconnected themes (broader systemic issues). Through this systematic coding process, we synthesized and integrated data across different study phases, ultimately constructing a comprehensive understanding of the survivors’ experiences.

Please note that photograph captions and titles are reported verbatim to honor participants’ original expressions. The following examples represent two major interconnected themes: abandonment and displacement. When shown together these photographs represent two standpoints, one from a service provider and one from a survivor with lived trafficking experience.

The first photograph was taken by a licensed clinical social worker who volunteers to assist survivors of human trafficking. The participant herself titled the photograph “Prone.” When asked about the meaning behind the title, she explained that the word “prone” functions both as an adjective and a verb. To explore its precise meaning, we looked it up together in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.), which defines prone as (1) “having a tendency or inclination: being likely—often used with ‘to’” and (2) “having the front surface of a body facing downward: lying with the chest and stomach positioned downward.” She elaborated that

survivors of human trafficking are not only forcibly placed in unwanted spaces by unwanted people but are also prone to circumstances beyond their control.

Her explanation sets the stage for the second photograph, which recounts a survivor's experience of transitioning from a foster home to a trafficker's house. The service provider emphasized that when victims age out of foster care with nowhere to go and no one to rely on, they become particularly vulnerable—prone to being coerced or forced into sex trafficking.

**Figure 1**

*Prone*



*Note.* “As a psychologist, people most often think of my work as involving ‘traditional’ therapy, where clients come into an office, sit on a couch, and talk. But what happens when girls and young women cannot get to the couch? When they quite literally have no transportation, no insurance, no idea where to even start with navigating the complexities of getting into the mental healthcare system, or when they just emotionally are not yet in a space to be able to sit and talk about the layers upon layers of trauma they have lived? What happens when their parents, romantic partners, or traffickers actively prevent them from obtaining services? Or when they are still being sexually exploited on couches around our city every night?”

The second photograph was taken by a survivor of trafficking and is titled, “I am not a piece of trash.” When asked what the title meant, she described suddenly being without a place to live and having to pack up all her clothes and personal items into large black plastic trash bags. She went on to describe her experience of how she was sold into sex slavery once she aged out of the foster care system. A memo from the interview recounted the story as follows:

The foster parent put all her belongings into black plastic garbage bags and placed them in the yard. With no one to call and nowhere to go, she reached out to an old friend for help. Unbeknownst to the friend, the person they connected her with was a human trafficker. This individual took her into their home, provided food and shelter, and expressed affection, making her feel loved and cared for. Over time, she developed a romantic attachment to this person, believing she was in love and willing to do anything for them. Eventually, she was coerced into working in strip clubs and performing sexual acts for money, which she was required to hand over to her trafficker. She described the sex trafficking industry as highly organized and recounted encounters with powerful individuals, including police officers, politicians, and other figures of authority. In one instance, she had a court date for a child custody battle involving a child she had with her trafficker—only to realize that the judge overseeing her case had been one of her clients just a week prior. She also shared the devastating story of another young woman in the home who had been sold into sex slavery by her foster parent, who was struggling with drug addiction, in exchange for a pizza. One night, after enduring too much, she made a desperate escape. Seizing an opportunity while in a client’s hotel room, she fled in the middle of the night and ran for her life.

**Figure 2**

*I am not a piece of trash.*



*Note.* “Two weeks before graduating, I was kicked out of my home. Every single item I owned was placed in black trash bags and put on the front porch. I had no place to go and no transportation. Today, I have a place of my own and am working full-time. I am fighting to create the life I once dreamed of.”

### **Discussion: Framing the Bigger Picture**

These two photographs, when viewed together, provide a glimpse into a larger narrative—like two puzzle pieces pointing toward a more complete image. From the perspective of a service provider, we hear the frustration of a social worker who wonders what happens when a client leaves their office and must navigate life on their own. From the standpoint of a young woman transitioning from one precarious situation to the next, we hear the voice of someone filled with hope despite enduring harrowing circumstances.

Many participants in this study shared experiences of aging out of the foster care system and subsequently being exposed to human trafficking. They described feeling out of options, abandoned by caretakers, or displaced from institutions such as prisons or the military. I define *displacement* as having no place to go after becoming dependent on an institutional system, and *abandonment* as being suddenly left to care for oneself as a youth after previously relying on an adult. Through this research, we identified critical gaps in services and areas for further investigation, particularly in addressing vulnerabilities that lead to trafficking.

### **Implications: Practice and Research**

The findings in this study reflect broader national and state-level statistics. According to the North Carolina Coalition Against Human Trafficking (NCCAHT, 2023):

Only 6% of all children in the US experience the legal foster care system, but there have been multiple anti-trafficking reports indicating a disproportionate number of children who experience trafficking have also been involved with child welfare—between 50% to more than 90% of those recovered from trafficking. (para. 2)

To fully grasp why such a small percentage of American children are so highly vulnerable to trafficking, we must examine the systemic risks they face. According to Polaris Project (2020), the most frequently reported vulnerabilities for sex trafficking include substance use, runaway/homeless youth status, insecure housing, mental health struggles, and recent migration or relocation. Each of these vulnerabilities is closely linked to the foster care system, and none should be seen as the fault or responsibility of the youth themselves.

Addressing these vulnerabilities requires a coordinated effort among various sectors, including community and faith-based organizations, direct service providers, government agencies, law enforcement, and professionals in training and education. These groups must work collectively at the local level to tackle the intersection between foster care and human trafficking. Research indicates that foster youth face unique challenges that increase their susceptibility to traffickers, including a lack of community and familial support, frequent relocations that disrupt education, and prior trauma that may impair their ability to recognize abuse. Additionally, many foster youth develop a deep distrust of “the system” due to previous negative experiences, making them less likely to seek help. A strong desire to fit in can further make them vulnerable to traffickers’ manipulation (NCCAHT, 2023). Understanding the tactics used by traffickers is crucial in explaining why current and former foster youth experience exploitation at such

disproportionate rates. Therefore, prevention and intervention efforts must be informed by survivor experiences and grounded in comprehensive, trauma-informed care to effectively address these systemic risks.

### **Conclusion: A Picture of Survival and Resistance**

Photographs capture moments that words alone cannot convey. They reveal stories of survival, resilience, and systemic failure, offering an unfiltered glimpse into lives too often overlooked. The images and narratives shared in this study are more than just research findings; they are testimonies of endurance, exposing the stark reality of homelessness, human trafficking, and the vulnerabilities faced by foster youth.

These photographs are not just images of suffering; they are symbols of resistance and hope. The same survivor who once stood on a doorstep with nowhere to go now has a place of her own, a job, and a vision for a better future. “Today, I am fighting to create the life I once dreamed of,” she said. Her words remind us that while trauma leaves deep scars, survival is an act of defiance, and healing is possible with the right support.

If we are to disrupt the cycle of vulnerability that places so many young people at risk, we must be willing to listen, learn, and act. The intersection of foster care and human trafficking is not just a statistic—it is a lived reality for thousands. Social workers, service providers, policymakers, and communities must recognize these warning signs and work together to ensure that no young person is left without options, without support, or without a way forward.

This is why Not On Our Watch is more than a research project—it is a call to action. The voices captured in these photographs demand more than passive acknowledgment. They call for meaningful action, policy change, and unwavering advocacy. The question is not whether we can make a difference—it is whether we will. As we hold these stories in our hands, much like the images taken by survivors themselves, we must decide what we will do next.

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