



Pandemic puts trafficking victims at higher risk

**Excerpts of remarks by U.S. Congressman Chris Smith of New Jersey,
The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's Special Representative on
Human Trafficking Issues
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President Tsereteli, Secretary General Montella, and all my distinguished colleagues on this webinar, it is good to see you and I hope that everyone is staying healthy.

As lawmakers, all of us are focused almost exclusively on combating the coronavirus pandemic and seeking ways to mitigate its horrific impact.

The United States has about a million confirmed cases of COVID-19 with over fifty-five thousand deaths. My state of New Jersey alone has well over one hundred thousand confirmed cases with over 6,000 dead.

Your constituents in each of your countries, like mine, have suffered enormous devastation and loss.

And now we know that the pandemic puts human trafficking victims at higher risk.

As the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly [Special Representative on Human Trafficking Issues](#), and prime author of [five U.S. laws](#) to combat this exploitation

including the landmark [Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000](#), I strongly believe we need to be seriously addressing:

- increased victim vulnerability—higher risk—especially for women and children,
- the situation of both current victims and survivors of trafficking,
- the heightened insecurity of victims in 2020 and beyond as government and philanthropic resources will likely be diminished,
- ensuring a sustained and robust criminal justice response during and after the pandemic, and more.

First and foremost, we must renew and reprioritize the fight against human trafficking.

Traffickers are not shut down—they haven't gone on a holiday.

Victims still need to be rescued.

Survivors still need assistance.

Vulnerable people have been made even more vulnerable by both the virus and its deleterious impact on the global economy.

When things start to open back up, traffickers may even have an easier time finding, deceiving, coercing and exploiting victims.

New patterns of exploitation are already emerging due to increased online activity, greater use of social media, and social distancing practices. This makes it even more clear that we need to take into account how new technologies affect our efforts to combat human trafficking.

Teleworking and social distancing practices appear to be changing some of the dynamics of trafficking for sexual exploitation, shifting to and increasing various forms of trafficking online. For example, there is disturbing evidence of an increase in demand for online pornography and therefore an increase in the potential for online sexual exploitation of trafficking victims.

According to U.S. Ambassador-at-Large to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons [John Richmond](#), with whom I spoke at length on Friday, the pandemic has made the “vulnerable more vulnerable”.

He said there are anecdotal reports from several countries within the OSCE, that online child sexual abuse and access to websites that host such exploitation have increased.

He noted that traffickers appear to be shifting labor trafficking victims into work related online commerce, and sex trafficking victims to online sexual exploitation.

Sex buyers are quarantined like everyone else and are turning to online venues. Sites are hosting videos of trafficking victims, sexual abuse of children, and rape.

Because of the pandemic, victims are likely to be facing increased abuse and are less likely to be rescued. Victims may be quarantined with their traffickers, and, as a result of quarantine and social distancing practices, are now less likely to come into contact with people who might assist or rescue them.

How many victims and survivors are homeless?

Law enforcement everywhere has shifted its attention to coronavirus response including assisting the heroes providing healthcare.

How many traffickers are today evading investigation, arrest and prosecution?

Survivors may find themselves out of legitimate work. The economic repercussions of the pandemic and resulting shutdowns and quarantines have resulted in job loss for many, including trafficking survivors.

NGOs and shelters are being impacted by the pandemic, as shelters must decrease the number of people they can house in accordance with government

social distancing guidelines, and NGOs appear to be facing significant losses in funding and staff who themselves are quarantined or sick.

This can leave trafficking survivors more vulnerable than ever to being re-trafficked.

Prison releases are a concern. While it makes sense to reduce the prison population of some nonviolent inmates to slow the spread of the coronavirus, it also means that accused—even convicted—traffickers may be released. This is frightening news especially for survivors, as they often fear retribution from their trafficker.

I am also concerned that with many schools closed, children are spending more of their time online, where they are vulnerable to being groomed by sexual predators and lured into trafficking situations or into providing sexually explicit images of themselves.

We must make it a top priority to educate children to keep them safe online, which as you know was the topic of the [resolution I authored and was adopted at last year's Annual Session in Luxembourg](#).

The resolution focused on educating students and teachers on how to identify and avoid human trafficking.

As you Mr. President remember from [the event I chaired in Luxembourg](#), NGOs, that included the [Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives](#), [A21 Campaign](#), [Just Ask](#), and others like [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#), have developed age-appropriate school courses to educate students on how to avoid trafficking traps, and how to educate teachers as well.

We, as lawmakers, need to be aware of how new technologies are being used in financial transactions including cryptocurrencies to hide their nefarious activities from the eyes of law enforcement.

I had planned to introduce a resolution on this issue in Vancouver, looking at measures we could take to address this and to enable our law enforcement to better investigate—and prosecute—trafficking cases involving cryptocurrency

use. I will continue to work on this issue and introduce it in the Parliamentary Assembly when possible.

Bottom line, Mr. President, the COVID-19 pandemic has put trafficking victims at higher risk. We must respond.