

Social Media's Role in Human Trafficking

<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep225>

Robert J Marks:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your host, Robert J. Marks social media is being used to recruit for human trafficking. My colleague at Baylor, Pablo Rivas just got a \$300,000 grant from the National Science Foundation for identifying human trafficking recruitment on social media. The basic idea is this, we're all familiar with email where you get an email and it decides whether it's going to go into your spam folder or your regular folder. What Dr. Rivas is doing is much more sophisticated than that. He's going to be looking at social media and deciding whether a post has something to do with human trafficking, and I think that that's a very worthy undertaking. We're going to be monitoring this, and as he starts to get solutions, we'll keep you up to date on that.

So today we continue on the topic of human trafficking. Let me offer a warning that some of the things we'll talk about in this interview might not be suitable for younger kids, but I would encourage moms and dads to listen. The average age, according to a US government document I saw for beginning trafficking is 12 years old. I mean, this is just chilling stuff. By the way, I'm going to be offering some statistics and all of these statistics, if you want to find out more about them, we're going to provide links on the podcast notes. So today we're going to continue our conversation with Charlie Crockett. Charlie is head educational trainer for UnboundNow, a ministry that helps free victims of human trafficking. Charlie, welcome.

Charlie Crockett:

Thanks for having me out Bob.

Robert J Marks:

Great. Parents, we talked about Julia Walsh. She was raised in a great family. It sounds like she had a great upbringing in an upper middle class. Her family went to church. She was involved in all sorts of extracurricular activities, and she had loving parents, and yet she was a victim of human trafficking. I mean, that to me was just chilling. We're talking about the book by Julia Walsh, which we'll also post a link to on the podcast notes. What should parents know about the social media and human trafficking? What should they do and how could they become involved in their children's lives and kind of prevent what happened to Julia Walsh?

Charlie Crockett:

Yeah, I think a lot of the ways that you mentioned are still great ways to create a good relationship between... Any way that you're going to create a strong, trusting relationship between you and your child is going to be one of the best ways to prevent this. We know that now with the boom of social media, there are so many different places.

When we first started this, there were a lot less just kind of opportunities for social media. There were not as many apps, not as many platforms. And so we could kind of list out, here are the ones to look at. And now with the boom of all these different places, endless opportunities for social media, we've kind of shifted to thinking more, how do we educate on these kids on how to use this? And how do we keep trusting relationships between parents and kids or school counselors or mentors or whoever that has a trusting relationship, so when something is happening, someone does say something to you that you

can have a place to talk about that freely as soon as possible. That's going to be the number one kind of way to keep a child safe, is to educate them and keep a trusting outlet for them to talk about it.

Robert J Marks:

If I could expand on this a little bit, I heard a talk about the impact of social media on kids, not necessarily only human trafficking, but all of the other stuff, all of this other garbage that is poured into their brain. And this was exactly the way the guy emphasized that you should deal with this. You need to talk with your kids. I actually ask a question, now I'm embarrassed that I ask it. Well, can't you put tracking software on their phone to figure out what they're going to do and know what they're going to do at all the times? He said, "no, absolutely not." He said, "because as soon as your kid turns 18, if you're forcing them to do something, they're going to want to... If you prohibit something, it kind of encourages them to want to do it. And when they turn 18, they don't have to follow what you're doing anymore."

I even remember when I was a kid, there was this show on television shows my age. It was an old black and white weekly show called The Untouchables. And my mom said, "you can't watch this. It's just too violent." And even today, I think, Ooh, I really like watching The Untouchables because it was something that was prohibited. So, the communication with kids seems to be very important, and that's what that's emphasizing here. Is that right?

Charlie Crockett:

Absolutely. And I think there is going to be an element of safety where you don't just open your child up to everything all the time, especially as they're really young. Because we know that kids are getting recruited online early.

Robert J Marks:

Oh yes. That's the other thing that he did mention is, you do need to control the apps that they install on their phone.

Charlie Crockett:

Absolutely. And just be aware of them for sure. Just be aware of them for sure. But that trusting relationship, keeping an outlet open for them, that where they feel that they can trust you, they feel that they can talk to you, is the most important thing for sure.

Robert J Marks:

Okay, so social media, what's going on in social media? How can my teenager be attracted into human trafficking with social media? Just by something that people write down.

Charlie Crockett:

The best way that I've found to describe this to people, because really, I mean, again, the indication for most people, especially in the United States, is that the thought of human trafficking is someone getting kidnapped, picked up off the street in a white van. And as a result of that thought process, that's what we're looking for. And that's a lot of how parents are often teaching their kids is avoid white vans, avoid people offering you candy and you'll be fine. Don't talk to strangers in person and you'll be fine. And so what's happening is that these kids are going on social media, they're going on these platforms, and

they don't have any guards up. They don't have their senses going because as long as they don't see any white vans or candy or strangers trying to talk to them on the street, they think they're safe.

And so what's happening is if you're a trafficker, pre-internet, pre social media, the way that you're going to try and recruit a victim is you're going to go out, drive around and look for people's vulnerabilities. You're going to scan for those, and then you're going to try and take advantage of those. So if you see someone that's ran away from home, you're going to see that they need food, money, place to stay, relationships, things like that. But now with all social media, it's not productive for traffickers to go out and drive around anymore.

Now all they can do, all they have to do is stay at home, make say an Instagram account, and then scan profiles. And typically on these profiles, kids are posting about their vulnerabilities. They're posting about how they just broke up with their boyfriend or girlfriend. Yeah, trouble at home. And so traffickers can message them freely as often as they want. And as a result, we're seeing kids starting to build relationships online, starting to talk to people, strangers, they don't know, and it's just becoming normal too. And so kids have their guards down and that's where all these relationships are starting off.

Robert J Marks:

I see. So what is it specifically the traffickers look for? Could you lead us through, I don't know, the sequence of steps that a trafficker would use to get somebody committed to human trafficking?

Charlie Crockett:

So it's really going to be the primary thing that they're going to try and offer is going to be relationship. The reason for that is because it's a vulnerability that's shared amongst all people. It's something that they don't have to even know a whole lot about you to know that that's something you desire, whether it's friendship, whether it's a romantic relationship, someone who doesn't have a strong family relationship, anything like that, that's what they're going to try and offer you. It's a vulnerability that guys, girls have across ages, across cultures, across whether your family makes a lot of money or not. People want that, right? And so that's the first thing, the main thing that they're going to offer.

It could also be, you know, see somebody that they come from a lower income neighborhood or family or background, and they can offer them money or a fancy lifestyle. We're seeing a lot of kids getting calls, or not calls, but more messages, offering to be their sugar daddy or something, offering to pay them a lot of money or offer them fancy vacations or a fancy lifestyle that they maybe don't have. And so various different things. They just kind of identify places where these kids have lack either in a desire they have or a need, food, water, shelter, things like that. And then offer that to them, is really their goal.

Robert J Marks:

So yeah, I know also a lot of these recruitments come during the teenage years when the hormones began to kick in. My daughter, one day, she just changed when she became a teenager, she just became rebellious and she was really, really rough to deal with. And I think anybody that's had a teenage son or daughter knows what happens here. It got so bad. My wife and I joke that we might have to call in an exorcist, but then one day when she was, I don't know, 18 or 19, she came to us and she says, boy, did I screw up? I have a loving home. I have loving parents, and I'm sorry for everything I did. One thing she told me, Charlie, which I pass on to other parents, which kind of surprised me. I used to give her advice. I would say, first of all, don't make any irreversible mistakes.

Don't make mistakes that you can't undo. And she would sit there and she would roll her eyes and not say anything. But when she did have her rebirth, when she came back to us, she said, "dad, I want you to

know that when you were talking to me and I was looking like I wasn't listening, I was listening." So she was listening all the time. So I tell this to parents because I think it's important that even if your kids roll their eyes while you're talking to them, that they're listening to you and you do have an impact on what they do. So Charlie, what's your parents do? Give me a list of things that parents should do beyond establishing that relationship with their kids.

Charlie Crockett:

Yeah, I'd say make yourself aware with what your child's involved in and just in the fact of what they're enjoying, what kind of platforms they're using. And because as long as you have that trusting relationship where you feel like they can come to you, you don't want to be too invasive to where that trusting relationship is compromised.

Robert J Marks:

Yes.

Charlie Crockett:

But to a level where you have an idea of where they are. And so knowing if they're gaming, if your child's on gaming, the sites that I would always... One site that I do advise against that is a red flag is using Discord. It's a chatting platform for gaming specifically. And it's one that's highly, very, very secured. It's got this ton of code that was created by computer hackers and other things that made it really, really difficult to track IP addresses, to track conversations, and to note who that person is you're talking to.

So you can remain really, really anonymous on Discord. And so it's really common that we're seeing, well, these traffickers or people that have bad intentions will use in conversation. They'll say, "let's just talk on Discord instead." And so you'll talk on there. And then they can't be traced nearly as well. And the same thing, I think there's a feature on there where you can delete conversation from both sides, and so they can talk about whatever they want, share pictures, share all this stuff, and then delete all the evidence from your side and my side.

And there are similar features on WhatsApp. So any social media where someone says, you know what? Let's just talk on WhatsApp instead. I always tell kids that Discord and WhatsApp are going to be two red flags for any time in conversation with somebody. And they say, let's just talk on here instead. And so that's a pretty big indicator. So I would just as a parent, be aware of things like that, discord and WhatsApp specifically. But then also just who your kid's talking to, what those conversations are like. And then just keep an open relationship of communication that they can come to you when something's weird.

Robert J Marks:

Yeah. Okay. So WhatsApp, do they have that capability of erasing conversations also?

Charlie Crockett:

I don't think that you can do that on WhatsApp, but WhatsApp does still have that, a lot of code security where it's really difficult to trace who somebody is where they are, and IP addresses, things like that. So it makes it really difficult on law enforcement to figure out any information on that person.

Robert J Marks:

It sounds like these traffickers, getting back to the traffickers that are recruiting these young people, they're almost psychologists. They get on there and they know how to manipulate the emotions and such of the people that they're talking to eventually though, they have to bounce off of a internet platform and meet. Is that right? And when they meet, yeah. Where do they meet and what happens next for the grooming for human trafficking?

Charlie Crockett:

Yeah. I mean, a lot of the time they will meet, but especially in this today's age, you don't even need to meet to start becoming trafficked. So, this is a perfect example of how easy this happens. We had a case just a few years ago that we were helping with where this girl was just at home. She was in, again, kind of like Julia's, in a trusting relationship with her family, just not involved in trafficking whatsoever. But had met somebody online, talked to them for a while, and they groomed her, felt like she could trust them and done nothing crazy was going on, but felt like she was in relationship with this person but hadn't met them yet. And so it was just a classic, you're dating somebody that you haven't met, but they're just online. And so what happened was he requested pictures.

So he requested that she sent him nude pictures. She felt like she trusted him, so she sent them, and then instead of now telling her that he loved her, wanted to care of her, all the things that he had been saying, then he blackmailed her for those pictures. He said, if you don't show up on these webcam calls at this time, then I'm going to expose these pictures to your friends, family, school, et cetera. And so on these webcam calls, people would pay in request for her to do different sexual actions on these webcams. And so she started being trafficked right out of a room without even leaving her house. And so it can happen that easily. And that's where a lot of this is starting for sure.

Robert J Marks:

That astonishes me that you can be put in this sex trafficking position without even meeting your controller, your pimp, if you will. Boy, that's really chilling.

Charlie Crockett:

And it was very likely, thankfully in that case, we were able to kind of intercept, heard that that was happening from one of her teachers, noticed that she was falling asleep in class and we were able to intercept that. But it would be very likely that as that would go on, she would feel a lot of shame. She would feel a lot of hopelessness, and then he would use that against her to then meet up in person, would be kind of the next step. So, it's trafficking, but it's also can be the first part of, or a step in the grooming process to meet that person in-person. So that could just be a stepping stone as well, for sure, in the process.

Robert J Marks:

Wow. Wow. Our guest today has been Charlie Crockett. Charlie has head educational trainer for UnboundNow. It's a ministry that helps free victims of human trafficking. They have a hotline number, and I'm going to share it. (254)-414-0814. That's the number in the Waco area and surrounding areas. Let me repeat it. (254)-414-0814. And there's a national number too for human trafficking. It's 1-888-373-7888. That's 1-888-373-7888. And again, Charlie, could you share the website for Unbound in case somebody would like to learn more, become involved or make a donation?

Charlie Crockett:

Yeah, that'll just be unboundnow.org. And so from that website, you can access all of our different offices internationally within the US and then I'm specifically in the Waco office.

Robert J Marks:

So you mentioned before we started recording that you guys are really, really busy. Are you also looking for people to help you out?

Charlie Crockett:

We do offer volunteer opportunities. I mean, I teach in middle schools and people can volunteer for that. I go in once a week to teach in juvenile detention centers to talk to kids. And so both of those are opportunities to serve. And we have various opportunities, again, to get involved and we'll accept help in various different platforms as kind of the skills, skillsets of people vary. We can kind of fit people in as well.

Robert J Marks:

Okay. That's great. So anybody can help, but I guess if you have some background in counseling or some sort of ministry, that would probably really be an advantage, I would imagine.

Charlie Crockett:

Any type of teaching or love for kids or counseling, anything like that where you feel you can get across to these kids that they're valuable, worth everything and that they're worth protecting is a huge thing.

Robert J Marks:

Okay. Thank you, Charlie. Again, our guest today has been Charlie Crockett. Charlie is head educational training for UnboundNow in Waco, and it's a ministry that helps free victims of human trafficking. Next time we're going to talk about human trafficking and the topic of pornography. It's a difficult thing to talk about, but I think it needs to be addressed. So until next time, be of good cheer.

Announcer:

This has been Mind Matters News with your host Robert J. Marks. Explore More at MindMatters.ai, that's MindMatters.ai.

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