In corrections, countless stories and many faces of suffering individuals can shape perspectives and approaches to reforming the system. Every walk through the reception center at the Ohio Reformatory for Women (ORW), located in Marysville, Ohio, is a glimpse into the harsh reality of the world today. Meeting and talking with these women — the fastest growing incarcerated population — spotlights the impact human trafficking has had on their lives on so many different levels. For many of these women, that experience has led them down a destructive path that ultimately led to incarceration.

From the front lines

This trend has unfortunately become more prominent in society, with victims all around the globe. Criminals have begun shifting from trafficking narcotics and weapons to trafficking humans. While drugs and guns must be restocked to make a profit, criminals see a person as a renewable asset that can be resold time and time again — or even multiple times in one night.

Due to their horrific experiences, victims of human trafficking often find themselves dependent on an antisocial lifestyle, a lifestyle that sadly begins at a very early age for some. Subsequently, their behaviors follow this lifestyle, creating a continuum that is dependent on individuals who do not reflect prosocial behaviors.

“Once you’re out there, there’s no going back. It’s either prison or death,” a woman incarcerated at ORW said. Her nightmare began at 14 years old; her parents brought their drug dealer into their house to marry her in lieu of payment. For years, she was used as payment for drugs by her parents and her husband. He kept her pregnant year after year, not only to ensure she would stay with him, but to also use her as a drug mule. As she explained, no one would expect a pregnant 16-year-old girl to be transporting drugs day by day.

“You have multiple men who know your weakness and what controls you,” she said. “They allow people to hurt you if you’re not willing to work for them inside their trap [i.e., drug] house.”

Her story continued for eight years. “My kids were taken from me, I was living on the streets and my life was spiraling out of control,” she painfully recollected. “I had a [second-degree] robbery [charge] because I was tired of walking the streets and I was weak and I was broken and I had just endured rapes that night. So I allowed myself to be talked into being bait for a robbery.” To her, there was no hope, nothing left to live for. During this time, other women who were forced into human trafficking alongside her in the community went missing and were ultimately found dead.

“The night one of them came up missing, I was supposed to be with her. She was shot and left for dead on the riverbank …. Every time I refused to walk for them, they would call over several dope dealers to take turns raping me for money.”

One morning, after being severely raped the night before, she chose to call her parole officer for help while sitting next to a drug dealer.

“That was a chance I took knowing that he could go ahead and end my life or let me leave. By the grace of God, he let me walk out of there.”
What happens once “inside”? 

Unfortunately, stories like this have become all too common. In an attempt to escape these environments, some individuals commit crimes just to be sent to prison. Their last resort has become incarceration, because they feel as though that is the only environment that will keep them safe. However, the pursuit of victims for human trafficking doesn’t end once they are incarcerated.

Many of these victims have an extensive trauma history from living experiences in volatile environments. Once they are isolated in an institutional setting, such as prison, they quickly become easy targets for recruitment. Recruitment happens through written communication from traffickers in the community, or even by female inmates who are still under the control of a trafficker on the outside.

At times, these recruitment efforts may not be immediately recognizable. In fact, the most enticing tactics used by recruiters is to prey on the vulnerability of these women and their needs post-incarceration. They do this by offering female inmates financial support during incarceration, as well as housing and employment upon release.

There are multiple pathways related to trafficking that result in women becoming incarcerated, such as addiction, prostitution, coercion and domestic violence. The vulnerability of trafficked women, in general, has the potential to increase upon incarceration. Women lacking community support and education on human trafficking are susceptible to the tactics of traffickers — especially upon release.

Considering the stories of what these women have endured, it quickly becomes evident that many were unaware that what was being done to them is a crime. In some cases, they even blame themselves for their situations. They may not consider themselves victims or choose to not seek help because of fear.

Victims of human trafficking often experience severe and lasting mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression. Some of the symptoms even include sleeplessness, nightmares, panic attacks, difficulty concentrating, physical pain, a feeling of hopelessness, suicidal thoughts, hyper alertness and dissociation.

Additionally, substance use issues are not uncommon with human trafficking survivors. Traffickers will often use drugs as a control technique with victims, or victims may start using drugs to escape the trauma of their daily lives. When they arrive in the state correctional system, some may require drug and alcohol treatment to stabilize and restore their lives.

What can we do? 

As you can imagine, this issue presents unique obstacles for correctional staff. Quite frankly, for too long in the state of Ohio, training involving the rehabilitation of trafficked offenders was rare. That is why Ohio has been active in its approach to assisting in the rehabilitation of these individuals. These efforts begin by
Ohio has also developed a comprehensive program designed to empower survivors and combat the societal epidemic of trafficking.

Completing a human trafficking screening of more than 20,000 individuals, both men and women, who enter the state correctional system each year.

Ohio has also developed a comprehensive program designed to empower survivors and combat the societal epidemic of trafficking. Upon identification through the screening process, Ohio offers survivors the opportunity to join a human trafficking group that provides courses: Human Trafficking 101, The Traffickers, The Johns, Ethical Sex, and Shame and Guilt. These groups and courses provide the opportunity to become educated about human trafficking, to better understand what has been experienced, and to learn how to move forward in a way that is safe and healthy.

Upon completion of the courses, Ohio then provides survivors an opportunity to participate in a human trafficking aftercare group. This ongoing support group for survivors gives individuals a platform to continue processing and healing from their victimization. Trained clinicians also provide individualized trauma-specific counseling and ongoing mental health services to survivors. Most importantly, the mental health staff works with survivors to secure safe housing upon release while also developing a connection to community resources for successful reentry.

Ohio believes effective treatment for survivors of human trafficking requires a holistic approach. Survivors need to feel safe and supported; that is why it is imperative for all staff to be trained in trauma-informed care to help create a secure environment for healing. Walking up and down the rows in a reception block at ORW makes one realize how important the work is that people in corrections face. For too long, corrections has tried to simply “keep a lid on things.” But the job, the calling, is to release individuals back into society better than when they arrived. And to achieve that, it means corrections must invest in understanding how to appropriately assist individuals who are impacted by issues such as human trafficking.

If corrections is serious about providing the best opportunity for these victims to turn their lives into a positive experience, then asking if prison is the correct approach should be the first step. People often say that prison is intended for those society is afraid of, not who it is mad at. Yet the population of women filling the nation’s prisons at an accelerated rate is less violent and has a higher level of addiction and greater mental health needs than the correctional population of men.

Creating interventions earlier in one’s criminal justice journey through specialty courts sensitive to this
population’s needs is critical to finding success. This can be achieved through partnerships throughout communities as well. Here in Columbus, Ohio, Judge Paul Herbert is a perfect example of this partnership as he focused on establishing more responsive endeavors than prison. Judge Herbert’s CATCH (Changing Actions to Change Habits) Court “exists to break the cycle of abuse for victims of human trafficking, prostitution, and sexual exploitation by providing resources, community, and accountability.”

A person’s worth can be found in others. Because of that, the response to the human trafficking epidemic will impact lives for generations to come.

Gary Mohr is director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction and president-elect of the American Correctional Association.

Endnotes on p. 90