

# Riding Shotgun in the Fight Against Human Trafficking

Lisa Mercer

University of North Texas, USA  
lisa@lisamercerdesign.com  
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**Abstract:** The 3.5 million truck drivers on U.S. highways are in a unique position to identify incidents of human trafficking and to help victims by providing information to authorities. Studies show that truck stops in the United States are a common venue for sex trafficking due to their remote locations and lax security. This research project asks: How can a specifically designed technologically-based communication enable truck drivers to report incidents at a higher rate than is now being reported?

**Keywords:** Qualitative Design, Inclusive Design, Activity Theory, Human Centred Design

## Introduction

When I first started studying human trafficking, I was surprised to discover its proximity to my home and my childrens' school and the sheer number of victims affected globally and domestically. The desire and urge to know more about human trafficking grew, and eventually, I decided this was the cause I wanted to focus on for my thesis.

Since starting this project, I have heard stories about victims of human trafficking on a regular basis. Some stories have stuck with me more than others, not because they are worse, but because they are compounded by the ages of the victim. One friend shared a story about a young girl—a girl so young that she was still in pigtails—whose parents sold her as a sex worker to help pay their rent and bills.

During my secondary research, I read a story about a 16-year-old girl named Sarah, who ran away from home and was introduced to one of her traffickers through a friend. She was taken to a house in Phoenix, Arizona where she was bound, violently gang raped, and kept in a dog kennel where she was threatened with a gun. She was physically harmed and psychologically imprisoned as her captors repeatedly threatened to hurt her family should she attempt to leave. She was continuously raped and forced to prostitute herself during



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her time with the traffickers. The only reason Sarah survived was because one of her captors was arrested and told the police Sarah was hiding in the box spring of a mattress and thought she might run out of oxygen (NBC News, 2015).

## **Statement of Problem**

Human trafficking, also known as modern-day slavery and sex and labor trafficking, has seen an increase in public awareness in the United States since 2000, when the Trafficking Victims Protection Act became federal law. This allowed human trafficking to be punishable by law as a federal crime. The definition of human trafficking used in this study comes from the first global legally binding definition formed by the United Nations in 2003:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude and the removal of organs. (Trafficking in Persons Protocol, article 3 (a))

When referring to sex laborers, child sex laborers, and victims of survival sex in this study, I am referring to them as victims who have been held “by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion” (Trafficking in Persons Protocol, 2009). Children who are sex laborers are often runaways, abducted, or neglected. They receive little to no support from a guardian and are forced into trading sex for money or basic necessities. In this study, the basic human needs refer to those originally articulated by Maslow in 1943, which determined the five basic necessities every human must meet every day in the following order: physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. The most important is the foundation the other four must rest on, the physiological needs, which include breathing, food, water, and sleep. When a child’s basic needs are not being met, it creates an ideal scenario for traffickers to take advantage of their vulnerability. Whereas basic necessities are often the reason children are coerced into human trafficking, this does not equate to a particular economic bracket of our society.

## ***Sex Trafficking***

Sex trafficking has become the fastest growing form of organized crime in which the perpetrators control their victims by subjecting them to physical and emotional abuse (Walker, 2013). There is a common misperception that human trafficking is less likely to happen to an American citizen and more likely to occur to a foreign national brought to the United States. It is estimated that 41% of sex trafficking victims in the United States are U.S. citizens (National Human Trafficking Resource Center, 2013). Victims of human trafficking come from a range of situations that include runaways, kidnappings, foster care, neglect, abuse, homelessness, a lack of support, or a combination of these. It is becoming increasingly common for victims to be lured online through social media or online gaming

targeting children from every socio-economic bracket. Females represent 80% of the victims of sexual trafficking and their average age is 12–14 years old. Male victims of sexual trafficking are recruited between the ages of 11–13 years old (Walker, 2013). The male victims' average age is getting younger because of the demands of the men who solicit sex workers, commonly referred to as "Johns." Girls are typically sold ten times each night, six nights a week, adding up to one girl being raped approximately 15,000 times by the time she is 18, when she becomes a "willing participant" (Hunt, 2013).

The story of Sarah detailed at the beginning of this paper demonstrates one of many ways children are recruited into sex trafficking. Sara Ann Friedman of the organization End Child Prostitution and Trafficking USA (2005) interviewed a young woman named Sonya, who said she had been moved to more states than she could remember and had left the life many times, but always felt it was the only thing she thought she was good at, so she returned to it. According to the organization Demand Abolition (Hunt, 2013), a paradigm shift is needed regarding how the roles people play in the human trafficking of minors are named and referred to in the media. Instead of a "child prostitute," this organization believes that an underage sex worker should be referred to as "someone who is being raped as a means to provide profits to whomever is forcing her to accept money for sexual services" (Hunt, 2013). Instead of calling the people who solicit these minors "Johns," Demand Abolition believes they should be referred to as sexual predators. It was not until 2005 that the U.S. government legally recognized the importance of changing the term from juvenile prostitution to commercial sexual exploitation of children or child sex trafficking. This applies to anyone eighteen and younger who has transacted sex for basic needs, such as money, food, or a place to stay. A study conducted by the University of Toledo on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking (Prior, 2009) reported, "Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 and its revisions in 2005 and 2008 has done much to change the perception of child sex trafficking at the federal level" (p. 47). The TVPA helped change some of the language government officials use to refer to victims of human trafficking. For instance, juvenile prostitution is now referred to as commercial sexual exploitation of children, and pimps are now called traffickers. The change in terms is important for a paradigm shift to occur in how people view children who are victims of trafficking. Friedman (2005) expands on this topic stating,

The public, by and large, has come to view prostitution as a victimless crime and makes little distinction between adults and adolescents under eighteen. Advocates argue that juvenile prostitution is a crime, but not victimless... the majority of prostituted girls do not see themselves as victims until many years later and only then if they are well out of the life. They often cling to the false belief that they are doing what they want [to do], believing their pimp is the only one who can save them, that he will fulfill all his promises and that their lives will [someday] change for the better. (p. 4)

Many victims are afraid of the police because of the threats and verbal abuse they have repeatedly received as victims of sex trafficking from their traffickers. It is difficult for them to confide in or admit to authorities they are victims of an illicit sex trade. In a study at Northeastern University, Farrell (2012) found, "When victims are detained, they often

experience many of the same negative emotions that they experienced in the trafficking situation. Arresting victims can destroy their trust in law enforcement and subsequently decrease their willingness to participate in investigations” (p. 122). Because human trafficking is still not commonly understood in our culture, most law enforcement agencies do not have protocols set up for them to identify victims of human trafficking, and they often fail to identify these victims before giving them back to their captors.

This study began with the research question: How can technology help victims of sex trafficking help themselves? Further research and the realization of the circumstances in which many sex workers are recruited into the industry made it clear it may not always be a realistic objective for victims to feel empowered to help themselves. The fear and manipulation victims endure from their traffickers dominates their natural instinct of fight or flight, resulting in these victims remaining in stasis as forced sex workers. President Barack Obama acknowledged the importance of using technology in the fight against human trafficking when he was the keynote speaker at the Clinton Global Initiative meeting in 2012, stating “...we’re turning the tables on the traffickers. Just as they are now using technology and the Internet to exploit their victims, we’re going to harness technology to stop them.”

## **Actors**

Polaris, headquartered in Washington D.C., is one of the leading non-profit organizations in the fight against human trafficking in the United States. The physical locations they list as common domestic networks of operation for human trafficking are streets, hotels, residential brothels, strip clubs, some massage parlors, truck stops, and private parties. They report more than 42% of cases that occur are cases of pimp-controlled prostitution at hotels/motels, streets, and truck stops. More than 40% of the cases of pimp-controlled prostitution involve a child under the age of eighteen (NHTRC, Statistical). The National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) found that more than half the callers who identified themselves as truck drivers reported potential cases of human trafficking, and 70% of those reports made reference to a minor being involved in some capacity (NHTRC, Annual Report).

Polaris reports many victims stay at one truck stop for a short period of time and are then moved from state to state in order to avoid law enforcement and for the victims to become familiar with their surroundings (Truck Stops at a Glance, 2012). This hinders not only locating victims, but also the ability to identify them. Given this reality, the 3.5 million professional truck drivers traveling U.S. highways are in a unique position to provide information that could lead to trafficker apprehensions. Although the NHTRC hotline has received nearly 32,000 anonymous phone calls to report incidents of human trafficking, only 300 of these calls were from truck drivers (NHTRC, Statistical). Educating this industry about human trafficking and getting truckers involved can be critical steps toward stopping the abuse of these victims as they are moved from truck stop to truck stop on the nation’s highways.

## **Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of the way drivers operate day to day, the type of technology drivers used, and the reason they used it. This would help to ensure the artifact created as a result of this research would be designed with the population for which it was intended. After conducting secondary research, my question evolved from how technology can help people in human trafficking to how an integrated form of technologically based communication would enable truck drivers to report incidents of human trafficking at a higher rate.

My secondary questions were focused on potential unintended consequences the technology created based on this research could have. Mark Latonero (2012), the Principal Investigator and Research Director at the University of Southern California, established five guiding principles for technological interventions in human trafficking. “The ultimate beneficiaries of any technological intervention should be the victims and survivors of human trafficking. Successful implementation of anti-trafficking technologies requires cooperation among actors across government, nongovernmental, and private sectors, sharing information and communicating in a coordinated manner” (p. v).

## **Methods**

I divided my research into two phases. Phase one focused on the exploratory framework, which included secondary research, interviews, and field site observations. Phase two focused on the user-group framework. Although different methods of research were used in each phase, two phases will be presented to highlight the different aspects of the research and to reflect on the way phase one impacted the work performed in phase two.

### *5.1 Phase I – Exploratory Research*

The exploratory research sought to: 1) analyze how truck drivers engage in everyday activities while they are on the road working, 2) to gain a better understanding of how truck drivers operate while on the road, 3) to understand how extant or emerging technology could encourage higher levels of trafficking reports, and 4) how technology naturally integrates into their daily activities. Grounded theory carried through my exploratory research, allowing me to conduct my research and continuously ask open-ended questions to determine the direction of phase one. A study by Muller and Kogen examined grounded theory and explained the result of the process as “a rich, deeply interwoven description of the phenomena (being studied), and a set of new open-ended questions for further work” (p. 2). To learn about these objectives, I conducted interviews and made field site observations at a truck driver training school and at truck stops.

The first driver, truck driver #3, was a referral from a non-profit organization. He had been working in the trucking industry for nearly 20 years and worked with different organizations privately and publicly to provide assistance to victims of human trafficking and to help develop policies that would create a safe environment for human trafficking victims. His

hope was to change the image of truck drivers, and he required every one of his employees to be trained to recognize the signs of human trafficking. He believes truck drivers have three options when a sex worker knocks on the doors of their rigs:

1) Invite the girl in, 2) refuse her, or 3) call the 888 number (hotline ran by the NHTRC). If we call the police, then the girl will likely flip-flop her story once the police arrive because her trafficker is most likely nearby and then the driver is the one that gets in trouble. Ninety-nine percent of the guys [drivers] are good honest family guys... fathers, husbands, and grandfathers. They are out there trying to make a living to put food on the table. (Truck Driver #3, 2014)

He discussed the different types of technology he uses and knowing my objectives for this research, he recommended, "Make sure it [the technology] can capture as much information as possible and get publicity and as much advertisement as physically possible. From a trucker's standpoint, we have a higher advantage. You can see everything. It's a whole other world out there. I have seen things most people wouldn't believe I have seen." (Truck Driver #3, 2014)

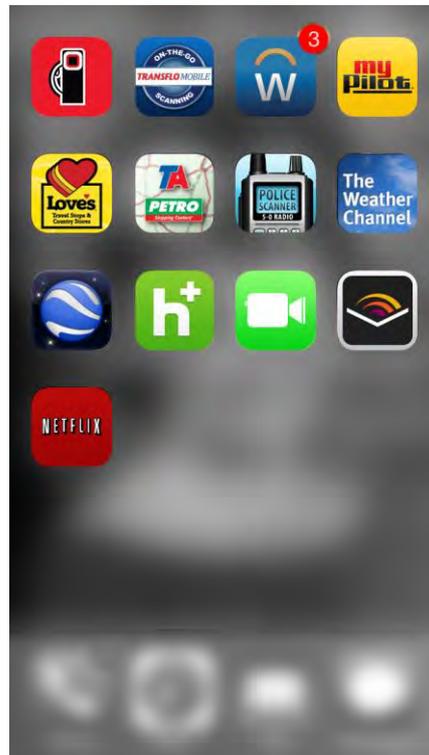
#### TECHNOLOGY

I learned about many different types of technology drivers use while working, such as Qualcomm (on board computer in the tractor), Garmin Global Position System (GPS), iPhone, iPod, computer, mobile hot spots, satellite radio, citizens band radio (CB) and mobile applications. Many drivers used iPods and iPhones to call, face-time, email, or text their family and friends. One driver mentioned using his phone to communicate with clients via texts or phone calls; however, the most important use of their technology is to plan their route for the next day. GPS allows them to input the height of their tractor-trailer and it will route them appropriately; however, they also have to consult with Google maps and the Qualcomm to avoid any major construction.

I spoke with many drivers with a range of preferences of technology. Whereas the CB is the most common form of technology in a driver's rig, many choose to keep it turned off. "The CB became the place where guys are rude and many people just don't mess with it anymore. It is good for accidents. I especially keep it on when I am carrying 80,000 pounds...it is good to know what is ahead of you." (Truck Driver #5, 2014). One driver I spoke with had more than 30 years of experience in the industry, and he did not use any of the mobile devices previously mentioned. He had a cell phone, but he did not email or text, whereas others had all of the aforementioned devices and used them frequently. Many mentioned the on board computer, Qualcomm, that was in the tractor for them to use to create reports and log how long they had driven and how many breaks they were legally required to take. Most drivers I spoke with looked at these computers as if their employers were watching them and preferred to use their own mobile devices. One interviewee, truck driver #4 explained,

"There is this idea of big brother watching them while they are out on the road. Many men are told to abide by the laws with driving times; however, once they are handed their times, they realize they don't have any other option. They prefer to use logs on

their phones or paper logs. This way they don't have big brother watching their every move." (Truck Driver #4, 2014)



*Figure 1 Truck Driver #2 sent a screenshot of his phone to show the mobile application he uses.*

One gentleman was anticipating our interview and was excited to tell me about the apps he likes to use. His exact words were, "I love apps!" (Truck Driver #2, 2014) (– Figure 1) He said many drivers like to use apps, especially the apps that allowed them to earn money by spending money at specific locations. Loves, TA Petro, and Pilot all have rewards programs. Some trucking companies also have rewards programs that work in conjunction with Loves, TA Petro, and Pilot. I downloaded one of these apps because I was curious to see if it would be possible to incorporate an incident report form into an existing app. The reports filed through these apps would need to be sent to the same location as the stand-alone app; however, because a driver has an account associated with these apps, the concept of anonymity may not be supported.

#### SAFETY

The biggest safety concerns were cargo theft and the feeling of being vulnerable to this crime. Many of the bigger truck stops employ off-duty police officers to ensure safety; however, drivers need to get off the road early to get a spot at a nice truck stop, which is not always an option to ensure the products get to the clients on time. There is also the risk of a sex worker being used as a distraction for cargo theft. (Truck Stops at a Glance, 2012)

When I asked drivers if they had ever reported an incident of human trafficking to the police, many of them gave an explanation rather than a yes or no answer. Each driver I spoke with

had at least one memory of a girl they knew was too young to be knocking on their door. Truck Driver #5 said,

You know it is hard to tell between that (human trafficking) and prostitution, it seems like they have hidden it more than it used to be. I can remember years ago in Florida, it was horrible, really young girls knocking on the door, one girl couldn't have been 14, it was pouring down rain, after a while you get hardened by it because it happens a lot. (Truck Driver #5, 2014)

#### HUMAN TRAFFICKING VERSUS PROSTITUTION

It became apparent there was no clear definition for many participants who were victims of human trafficking and who were working as sex workers as willing participants. One participant I interviewed questioned, "I don't mean to be insensitive; however, don't lot lizards need to make a living?" Sex workers at truck stops have many different labels; the most commonly known is the term lot lizard. While conducting research on this term, I found t-shirts that read, *I love Lot Lizards*. (– Figure 2) This is an actual product a company made for consumers to purchase.



Figure 2 These are just some examples of the t-shirts found that read, *I love Lot Lizards*.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research, as any research would have, and the need for an educational tool to inform the trucking industry on human trafficking with an emphasis on the sex trafficking occurring at truck stops. It is imperative to know

their mind-set to educate the industry on human trafficking and prostitution. This question does not have an easy and clear answer, which is the reason so many victims of human trafficking are hidden in plain sight.

#### FACTORS

The factors determined in phase one helped to design the prototype framework in phase two. These factors were anonymity, convenience, working time, safety, types of technology, ease of use, and recognizing human trafficking. It also helped determine four potential places for product integration of reporting devices, such as GPS, Qualcomm, existing apps, and mobile apps. The Qualcomm and existing apps were eliminated because of the importance of anonymity. GPS was quickly eliminated because of the inability to have access to the Internet or a wireless network at all times.

### *5.2 Phase 2 – Prototype Framework*

Once I determined a mobile app would be the best fit for this study, I started using the determined factors to create a prototype. This research phase focused on creating the prototype, gaining the approval of an Institutional Review Board to conduct user groups, and analyzing the information gathered to determine any changes needed to be made to the mobile app.

#### PROTOTYPE

While creating a prototype for user groups, I used the factors gleaned from phase one as a constant source of direction. For example, while conducting exploratory research, I interviewed many truck drivers who had recalled hearing solicitations from victims over the CB. Because of these statements, I included an audio recording function for truck drivers to make recordings of these types of solicitations. When talking to the human trafficking group who would be receiving these reports, they had not considered this type of reporting capability and were excited about the prospect.

#### INTERVIEWS

The intention of these interviews were meant to be conducted as user groups; however, after coordinating one, I quickly realized the timing would continue to be a difficult when considering the differences in each driver's schedule. I then changed my recruitment options for the truck drivers and allowed them to decide if they wanted to be a part of a user group or a one-on-one phone interview. All drivers chose a one-on-one phone interview. Although the format did change, the questions and the goal to receive feedback from the drivers did not. These interviews were imperative to ensure the mobile app was designed with the population for which it was intended.

Utilizing activity theory helped me understand the interaction between my participants and the mobile app, sex workers at truck stops, and how those encounters could translate into creating a report on this mobile application. (Bennett, 2006, Pg. 75) An important aspect of this phase was to engage in an on going, collaborative relationship with drivers who would

derive the most benefits from this research. This allowed me to learn how truck drivers engage in a variety of communication-based activities, especially those that might help guide my design of an effective, digitally facilitated interdiction system that could curtail instances of human trafficking in and around American interstate highways. This method helped ensure the efficiency of this app in perspective to how it could fit into a truck driver's daily routine. Information gained from the user groups and one-on-one interviews helped determine any changes to the app and its functionality before being released to the public. While I had included the audio component for solicitations heard on a CB, many of the drivers in this phase liked this option because it allowed them to give an oral incident report in transit since it is illegal for them to use their phones while driving. According to one driver,

I liked the audio [option], so that you could not only write down, you could choose to just say, 'I saw this... I saw that.' That was different and I liked that, and make a recording... I liked the write over the audio, but there are advantages, like going down the road. You could stop on the side of the road and it would be quicker to do the audio form, to just make a recording and send it out to the national human trafficking resource hub. (Truck Driver #10)

One of the drivers mentioned that he wished the mobile app was currently available to report a tip. He stated,

"The other day while I was driving, I passed a truck, and I saw a dog cage in the back of the truck, which is normal, there was a blanket over the crate, which is also normal; however, I thought I saw a head in the crate. I slowed down to let the truck pass me and as it pulled in front of me and got off on the shoulder of the highway I was able to verify there was a person in the crate...I called the state troopers right away." (Truck Driver #15)

Another aspect many drivers mentioned was the option of anonymity. Many participants I interviewed in phase one mentioned the difficulties of becoming involved in the situation and would prefer a way to submit a report that preserved their anonymity. While the mobile app automatically populates with the date, place, and time, the only required question is whether the person doing the reporting minds being contacted by law enforcement. One interviewee stated,

One big problem that we have out here is we have to show our driver's license a lot. We have to get them photocopied, all kinds of stuff... now they know that my wife and my family are alone. Nobody even bothers with that. That's why I said that they have the anonymity problem is because they're trying to protect their home front from a possibility of getting in repercussions, because we're dealing with the dark side. These people have no problem in going and taking care of our family, because they know there's always a means to find them." Not only are the victims afraid of traffickers' threats to their families, but also the truck drivers themselves see the danger of getting involved. (Truck Driver #11)



Figure 3 Flow Chart of Mobile Application used in the user groups, interviews and at the conference

#### HUMAN TRAFFICKING CONFERENCE

In April 2015, I attended a conference organized by the Freedom Network held in Washington D.C. This is the largest human trafficking conference in the United States, and its participant's work with victims of human trafficking. Most of the attendees were lawyers, law enforcement, and social workers. Though my intention for attending was to learn more about human trafficking, the feedback I received from these participants on the prototype of the mobile app was immeasurable. After showing it to a prosecutors, law enforcement and social service providers, I started receiving feedback based on the way they used information received from an incident report. I started to show the prototype to as many people as I could. (– Figure 3) Some of the recommendations were:

- The need for it to be available in Spanish.
- No pictures for legal reasons because it could be considered pornography.
- Concern with liability for person sending an incident with a picture taken through the app.
- The inclusion of a privacy policy.
- Ensuring the wording of questions is efficient.
- With these changes, make sure the form of the interface remains effective.

It was important to remove the option to take a picture due to legal issues; however, I believe it is an essential tool in creating an incident report. Many victims are moved state to state and have criminal records in more than one city with a picture attached to their record. If we can start to identify victims in different states by using facial recognition software, then we can start to find patterns in cases that will lead to potentially finding victims.

#### FACTORS

The factors from the one-on-one interviews and conversations with law enforcement and victim advocates at the conference helped refine the mobile app to its current design. I had expected more participants to question different aspects of the app; however, the main topics of conversation were anonymity and the ability to create an audio recording to submit an incident. ( – Figure 4)

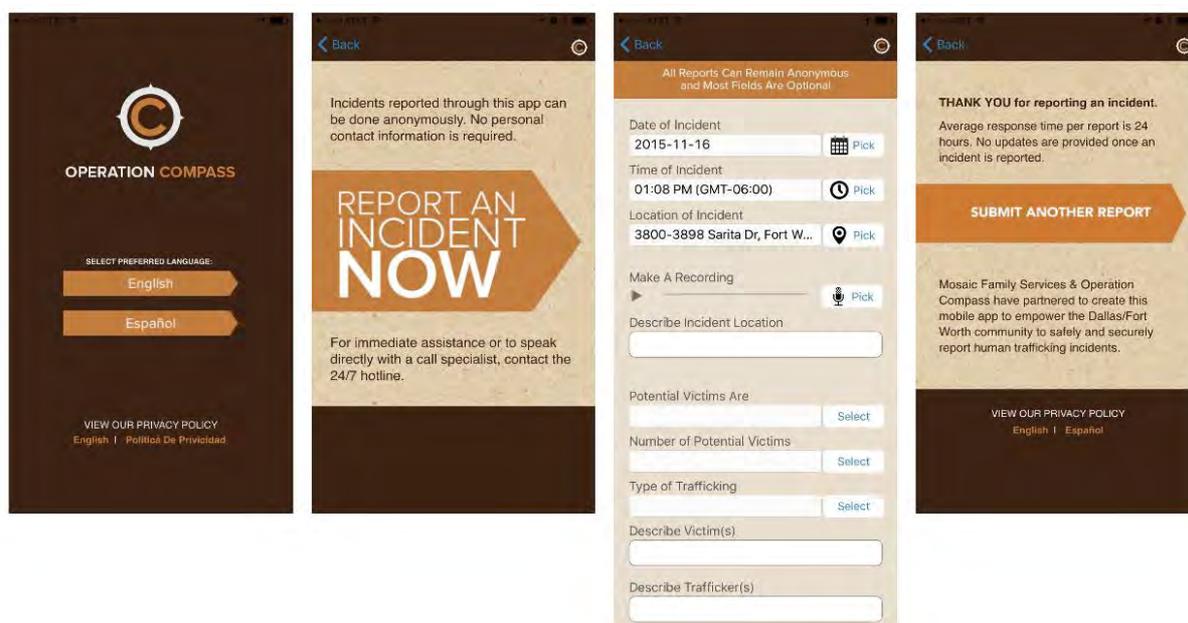


Figure 4 Screenshots of mobile application currently available on the Apple Mobile Application store and the Google Play Mobile Application Store.

## Conclusion

This project began with an idea to create a mobile app specifically for victims of human trafficking to ask for help. It quickly became clear that this was not a realistic objective when I learned more on the subject and realized the fear and manipulation victims receive from their traffickers dominating their natural instinct of fight or flight. It is important for us to educate and provide technologically based reporting solutions to the communities that have a higher potential of interacting with victims of human trafficking for victim advocates and law enforcement to receive incident reports at a higher rate.

Providing truck drivers with an easy to use mobile app that guarantees anonymity would provide the truck driving community with the ability to reliably and safely report sex trafficking and thereby expedite search and rescue efforts. Once an incident is reported to

the calling center, it could then be forwarded to local law enforcement or the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This paper will focus on the methods used to ensure any piece of technology that gives a voice to the truck driving community has the power to aid victims of modern-day slavery. The name I have given my study and the non-profit organization developed from this research is called Operation Compass.

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*Lisa Mercer*

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About the Author:

**Lisa Mercer** graduated with her MFA in Design Research in December of 2015 from the College of Visual Arts & Design at the University of North Texas. Her research is focused on using design research methods to develop and execute social innovations that positively affect change.