



Countering QAnon

Understanding the Role of Human Trafficking
in the Disinformation-Extremist Nexus

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KEY FINDINGS:

- Disinformation about human trafficking serves as a gateway narrative that radicalizes susceptible audiences to condone, and even perform, acts of violence and terrorism. This ultimately poses a threat to the national security of the United States.
- The fallout from disinformation about human trafficking has a profoundly harmful impact on victims and survivors of human trafficking; the amount of time Polaris spent responding to false reports about the Wayfair conspiracy theory could have been used to respond to an additional 42 trafficking cases.
- A significant portion of the U.S. population is susceptible to being radicalized; 21 percent of U.S. adults self-identify as QAnon believers, and 41 percent of U.S. adults believe that elites, politicians, and/or celebrities are involved in a global pedophilia ring.
- In spite of de-platforming efforts by social media companies, white supremacist and other violent far-right extremist groups on encrypted chat platforms are using human trafficking disinformation as a way to recruit disillusioned QAnon followers to join their movements.
- A coordinated, multi-stakeholder effort is needed to develop and implement strategies to impart the truth about human trafficking in a way that is compelling to both susceptible audiences and to audiences already convinced of the false narrative.

I. INTRODUCTION

On January 6, 2021, a violent mob launched a deadly siege on the U.S. Capitol with the stated purposes of disrupting the final, official certification of Joseph R. Biden, Jr. as the winner of the 2020 presidential election. Among the indelible images of that terrifying day were totems of hate desecrating one of democracy's sacred spaces — gallows and a noose; a flag representing a fictional white supremacist nation; a sweatshirt reading “Camp Auschwitz.”

As the picture of the January 6th attack comes into focus, it is clear that while many attendees were animated by these expressions of hate, the reality is far more complicated. While hate certainly played a role in drawing many to the event, there was another far more benevolent force that attracted others: a concern — albeit fueled by false narratives and conspiracy theories — for the safety of children.

Many of those who gathered at the Capitol, armed, angry, and dangerous, were followers of QAnon, a movement of individuals dedicated to spreading insidious conspiracy theories. QAnon's central premise is that a global cabal of Satan-worshiping pedophiles in the Democratic party and Hollywood elite form the core of a transnational sex trafficking ring, and that Donald Trump is the prophet who is leading the fight against this.¹

¹ For additional background on QAnon, please see: <https://thesoufcenter.org/intelbrief-qanon-gaining-international-attention-and-political-clout/> and <https://thesoufcenter.org/intelbrief-a-conspiracy-of-dunces-qanon-and-the-threat-to-the-u-s-homeland/>.



Incoherent as this sounds to anyone outside the fold, the majority² of QAnon followers genuinely believe this to be real. And so it follows that they truly are, in their minds, acting as heroes, protecting children from being snatched away from their parents and sold — trafficked — for sex.

Rosanne Boyland was one of these believers. She was killed at the Capitol, reportedly trampled to death during the event.³ Her family told news outlets that Boyland got caught up in the QAnon conspiracy theory after reading, on social media, about an entirely fictional child sex trafficking scheme perpetrated by Wayfair, the online furniture retailer.⁴ The QAnon-peddled child sex trafficking conspiracy involved charging outrageous prices for cabinets named after children who were allegedly the actual product being sold. The resonance and virality of the Wayfair conspiracy can be understood in the context of conspiracy theory researcher, Mike Rothschild's observations: "When [a conspiracy theory] crosses over into Reddit, it's like the fire break has been jumped. And it's like this inferno has gone from contained to out in the real world. And when it goes out into the real world, it could really hurt somebody."⁵

Another casualty of the insurrection, Ashli Babbitt, followed a similar path to Washington, D.C., where she was shot to death inside the U.S. Capitol.⁶ Analysis of Babbitt's social media over a period of several years illustrates a clear radicalization pattern rooted in child sex trafficking conspiracies. As she grew more involved with the QAnon movement, her focus on trafficking became more intense, as did her anger — anger that eventually led to violence.

The QAnon movement's modern origins trace back to the 2016 presidential election between former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. The leak of the Democratic National Committee's emails in March 2016 ultimately lead to Pizzagate,⁷ the December 2016 incident in which an armed gunman stormed a D.C. pizza shop because he incorrectly believed that President Bill Clinton and Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton were operating a child sex trafficking ring in the restaurant's basement. A year later, in 2017, "Q" established his⁸ presence on 4chan,⁹ posting under the name "QClearancePatriot" and co-opting the pizza tale into the larger narrative of Satanic child sex traffickers, compounded with long-standing antisemitic tropes about blood libel.¹⁰ It was a successful warping of the altruistic instinct — evoked by the idea of children in danger — to incite anger, and ultimately violence. And as we saw too clearly, on January 6, it worked.

While the insurrection at the Capitol was the most violent "real life" manifestation of QAnon rhetoric, it was hardly the first. There have already been multiple attempts of violence in the name of QAnon: Matthew Philip Wright¹¹ created a barricade with an armored vehicle at the Hoover Dam; Anthony

2 According to the Believability Classification survey, 82.5 percent of self-identified QAnon followers agree or strongly agree with the following statement: "I believe elites, politicians and/or celebrities are involved in global pedophilia rings and we need to #SaveOurChildren."

3 Evan Hill, Arielle Ray and Dahlia Kozlowsky, "How Pro-Trump Rioter Rosanne Boyland Died During the Capitol Attacks," *The New York Times*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/15/us/rosanne-boyland-capitol-riot-death.html>.

4 Sudhin Thanawala, Stefanie Dazio and Jeff Martin, "Rosanne Boyland, Trump Supporter Who Died, Followed QAnon Conspiracy, Family Says," *USA Today*, January 9, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/01/09/rosanne-boyland-trump-supporter-who-died-followed-qanon-family/6608289002/>.

5 Rothschild, Mike, "Country of Liars," *Reply All*, September 18, 2020, <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/reply-all/lhe5nm>.

6 "The Journey of Ashli Babbitt," *Bellingcat*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2021/01/08/the-journey-of-ashli-babbitt/>.

7 Erik Ortiz, "'Pizzagate' Gunman Edgar Maddison Welch Sentenced to Four Years in Prison," *NBC News*, June 22, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/pizzagate-gunman-edgar-maddison-welch-sentenced-four-years-prison-n775621>.

8 While the identity and gender of QAnon is not confirmed, followers of QAnon use he/him/his pronouns.

9 Adrienne LeFrance, "QAnon Is More Important Than You Think," *The Atlantic*, June 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/>.

10 "Blood Libel: A False, Incendiary Claim Against Jews," *Anti Defamation League*, <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/glossary-terms/blood-libel>.

11 William Mansell, "Man Pleads Guilty to Terrorism Charge after Blocking Hoover Dam Bridge with Armored Truck," *ABC News*, February 13, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/man-pleads-guilty-terrorism-charge-blocking-bridge-armored/story?id=68955385>.



Comello¹² killed a Gambino crime family boss; Eduardo Moreno¹³ intentionally crashed a train near a hospital ship because of a COVID-19 conspiracy; and Jessica Prim¹⁴ live-streamed her attempt to “take out” then-presidential candidate Joe Biden with a stash of knives. In 2019, the FBI identified the QAnon conspiracy theory as a domestic terror threat.¹⁵

The attack of January 6, the closest thing this country has seen in modern history to a successful insurrection, started and was fueled by online disinformation,¹⁶ including about human trafficking. A data-driven understanding of how a horrendous and very real crime — human trafficking — could be distorted in such a way as to convince everyday Americans to attack Congress, is vital both to the movement to end human trafficking and to the very preservation of democracy itself.

II. BACKGROUND

Polaris is a non-partisan non-governmental organization that is leading a data-driven social justice movement to fight human trafficking. Polaris works directly with victims and survivors in order to tackle the underlying systems that enable sex and labor trafficking. Since 2007, Polaris has operated the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline, and to date, has responded to more than 63,000 instances of sex and labor trafficking.¹⁷

In August 2018, Polaris was the target of a coordinated disinformation campaign that accused the organization of being part of a fictitious child sex trafficking conspiracy run by the Clinton Foundation. This conspiracy, Polaris discovered, was driven by QAnon. QAnon followers doxxed Polaris’s staff and board, and intimidated them with threats of physical violence. Worse, QAnon followers coordinated a cyberattack to make it impossible for victims and survivors of human trafficking to get help. While QAnon was not well understood by the general public in 2018, Polaris knew that this was not an ordinary threat that the anti human trafficking movement was accustomed to.

Two years later, the Wayfair disinformation campaign brought QAnon to a mainstream audience with similarly damaging and longer-lasting impacts on the anti human trafficking movement, as explored in section IV. For Polaris, confirmation that the 2018 attack was not an isolated incident surfaced a deeper worry about QAnon’s effect beyond the anti human trafficking movement. The concern was that the COVID-19 pandemic, growing civic unrest about systemic racial injustice, and an upcoming presidential election would create a near-perfect storm of tangential events that conspiracy theorists could use to exploit existing fault lines in our society and fuel violent extremism. This pattern of behavior went beyond this one particular group. QAnon was not the first, and was unlikely to be the last, group to weaponize disinformation that causes significant harm in the real world.

12 Ali Watkins, “He Wasn’t Seeking to Kill a Mob Boss. He Was Trying to Help Trump, His Lawyer Says,” *The New York Times*, July 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/21/nyregion/gambino-shooting-anthony-comello-frank-cali.html>.

13 Brendan Thomas-Noone and James Holloway, “Conspiracy in the Time of Coronavirus,” *United States Studies Centre*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.uscc.edu.au/analysis/conspiracy-in-the-time-of-coronavirus>.

14 Margot Harris, “A Woman Inspired by QAnon Conspiracy Videos Was Arrested after Live-Streaming Her Trip to ‘take out’ Joe Biden,” *Insider*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.insider.com/biden-qanon-supporter-arrested-attempt-live-streaming-trip-to-take-2020-5>.

15 Jana Winter, “Exclusive: FBI Document Warns Conspiracy Theories Are a New Domestic Terrorism Threat,” *Yahoo! News*, August 1, 2019, <https://news.yahoo.com/fbi-documents-conspiracy-theories-terrorism-160000507.html>.

16 In addition to disinformation (intentionally false or inaccurate information), there is also misinformation (unwittingly false or inaccurate information), and malinformation (content that has malware embedded). In this paper, “disinformation” refers to all three categories.

17 The National Human Trafficking Hotline is supported by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the United States (U.S.) Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$3.5 million with 80% percentage funded by ACF/HHS and \$848 thousand with 20% percentage funded by non-government source(s). The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACF/HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit the ACF website, Administrative and National Policy Requirements: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/administrative-and-national-policy-requirements#chapter-8>.



To understand this threat in a data-driven way — both to anticipate it in the future and fight it off in the immediate term — Polaris established a strategic partnership with The Soufan Group, a premier global intelligence and security consultancy, which has a long-standing relationship with Limbik, a Content Science company that uses artificial intelligence and predictive modeling to analyze and counter weaponized information online. Through this unique partnership, new evidence has been uncovered that sheds light on previously unexplored links between QAnon, human trafficking, and violent extremism.

UNDERSTANDING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking is the illicit business of exploiting vulnerable people for profit. It is a \$150 billion industry with 25 million victims worldwide.¹⁸ Human trafficking does not happen in a vacuum. It is the end result of a range of other persistent injustices and inequities in our society and our economy. Not surprisingly, all available data suggests that the vast majority of trafficking victims identified in the United States are people who have historically faced discrimination and the resulting political, social, and economic consequences: people of color, indigenous communities, immigrants, and people who identify as LGBTQ+ are disproportionately victimized. People living in poverty or foster care, as well as those struggling with addiction, trauma, abuse, or unstable housing, are all at comparatively higher risk for trafficking. Preventing human trafficking at the scale of the problem means changing the underlying systems — particularly the racial, gender, and economic injustices mentioned above — that make people vulnerable and ultimately make trafficking possible.

III. METHODOLOGY

The findings presented in this paper are based on both quantitative and qualitative analysis of posts from various social media platforms, which include status updates, images, and videos. The quantitative analysis is based on publicly available volume and interaction data from Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter gathered through third party social listening services. Social listening is the process of monitoring social media platforms for content related to a specific brand, product, event, or topic. All monitored and analyzed social media content used for this paper is available in the public domain. The data was collected from January 1, 2020 to December 31, 2020 to observe month-over-month trends and provide sufficient monitoring periods to evaluate social media activity related to specific events throughout 2020, including the initial COVID-19 shelter-in-place mandates (March 2020), the murder of George Floyd (May 2020), the apex of the Wayfair conspiracy (July 2020), Facebook's mass removal of QAnon accounts and posts (October 2020), and the presidential election (November 2020).

The collected posts were subsequently analyzed through proprietary classification models that utilize artificial intelligence to extract and generate textual and audiovisual metadata in order to discern Believability. Believability is defined as a post that is considered believable, credible, trustworthy, and/or aligned with existing beliefs. The Believability classification model is trained and calibrated with manually classified social media posts, which are produced using Limbik's *always-on*¹⁹

18 Anjana Rajan, "The Role of Technology in Countering Trafficking in Persons," *The United States House of Representatives Committee on Science, Space, and Technology Subcommittee on Investigations & Oversight and Subcommittee on Research & Technology*, July 28, 2020, <https://science.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Rajan%20Testimony.pdf>.

19 This Believability classification survey is a continuous, dynamic survey, rather than a static survey.



Believability Classification survey. Believability is applied to the aggregate U.S. adult population and specific segments of the adult population.

Prior to any reporting, the collected posts and volume and interaction data were analyzed and the datasets were checked for missing data as well as outliers and other anomalies. Ultimately, the datasets were visualized and further analyzed using Tableau.²⁰ The qualitative analysis is based on a variety of secondary data from open source materials, including journal articles, traditional media, books, research papers, government publications, encrypted chat forums (including Telegram), and other social media platforms (including Parler, Gab, Voat, and YouTube). Amazon search data referenced herein includes monthly rankings for the top 1 million searches on Amazon each month between November 2017 and August 2020.

For a comprehensive description of the methodology, see Appendix I.

IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

While followers may be introduced to and join the QAnon movement for a plethora of reasons, evidence suggests that QAnon narratives and conspiracy theories surrounding human trafficking — especially the sex trafficking of children — present a critical radicalization gateway. Indeed, the QAnon radicalization pathway fits quite comfortably into the playbook of groups that practice intentional radicalization by first luring in potential supporters with a “soft topic” — a subject that grabs attention and invokes a strong, passionate response.²¹ In this scenario, child sex trafficking is the “soft topic” — a way to entice a large, susceptible segment of the U.S. population into a particular discussion before pivoting to narratives surrounding the cabal of “Satanic baby-eating” global elitists.

The Wayfair Conspiracy: A Perfect Storm of Disinformation

The Wayfair conspiracy theory is a textbook example of how this kind of radicalization works and the direct negative impact it has on the anti human trafficking movement. In February 2018, “qanon” only ranked in the top 40 percent of all searches on Amazon. By February 2020, however, “qanon” had made its way into the top 10 percent of all Amazon searches. As it turned out, this was only the beginning; the COVID-19 pandemic would provide the QAnon conspiracy a new opening as people began to spend inordinate amounts of time online and the fears and stresses of the real world manifested in online ecosystems.

On June 14, 2020, a QAnon influencer tweeted about Wayfair’s expensive storage cabinets having girls’ names. The tweet gained little traction until it became a topic of conversation in a popular conspiracy subreddit the following month on July 9. A day later, #Wayfair started trending on Twitter. Over the next week, #WayfairConspiracy and #WayfairGate amassed 2.5 million and 830,600 views, respectively. Between June and July, “qanon” jumped more than 23,000 spots, ranking in the top 3 percent of all Amazon searches. In August, following the Wayfair conspiracy’s migration from Reddit to Twitter and other social media platforms, “qanon” ranked in the top 1.5 percent of all Amazon searches. The case study of the Wayfair conspiracy, coupled with the Amazon search data, illustrates that individuals originally exposed to child sex trafficking conspiracies are rapidly co-opted into the

²⁰ Tableau is software, owned by Salesforce, that provides visual analytics capabilities for researchers.

²¹ Michael King and Donald M. Taylor, “The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 4 (September 1, 2011): 602–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2011.587064>.



broader QAnon movement to the point where they feel compelled to search for, and potentially purchase, QAnon merchandise online.

The effect of the QAnon-peddled Wayfair conspiracy on the anti-trafficking ecosystem was devastating in the short-term. Outreach to anti human trafficking organizations reached levels far beyond what the system could handle.²² Because Polaris staff are designated mandated reporters²³ of child abuse, every contact suggesting possible harm to a child must be shared with other authorities, usually law enforcement, according to carefully-crafted protocols. The sheer volume of disinformation being shared impacted other agencies. Law enforcement was oversaturated with unactionable, false information as was the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.²⁴ The Wayfair conspiracy also resulted in online harassment and privacy intrusions of people mistakenly believed to be victims, as well as broad sharing of online sexual abuse material of actual victims who have not been connected in any way to Wayfair.

Additionally, the QAnon allegations against Wayfair offer a useful reference point that quantifies the extra time Polaris staff spent responding to the influx in conspiracy theory-related inquiries. It is important to note that the Wayfair allegations are just one instance of a conspiracy theory resulting in a flood of reports and questions to Polaris. The Wayfair conspiracy sowed the seeds in the public's mind for other conspiracies that then appeared to take hold in its wake. The result of this aggregated panic overwhelmed resources across the country that would have otherwise been available to support victims and survivors of human trafficking.²⁵ The amount of time Polaris spent fielding inquiries relating to the Wayfair case alone could have been used to respond to an additional 42 trafficking cases.

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In the longer term, this disinformation campaign is profoundly dangerous to the anti-trafficking movement. It threatens the hallmark bipartisan support the field has enjoyed since the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000. It will result in already extremely limited resources being directed toward interventions that respond to myths and misperceptions and are potentially harmful to victims and survivors. It will lead to ineffective and even dangerous policies and practices driven by rumors instead of evidence-based expertise. Ultimately, it will harm trafficking victims and survivors whose voices are drowned out in the noise.

While QAnon originated online, it is evident how the disinformation peddled by the movement can manifest in the real world with clear costs to human security. Although the Wayfair story eventually ebbed, the long-term damage and the simultaneous growth of the QAnon conspiracy was just beginning.

22 "Polaris Statement on Wayfair Sex Trafficking Claims," *Polaris*, July 20, 2020, <https://polarisproject.org/press-releases/polaris-statement-on-wayfair-sex-trafficking-claims/>.

23 A mandated reporter is an individual who holds a professional position (as of social worker, physician, teacher, or counselor) that requires him or her to report to the appropriate state agency cases of child abuse that he or she has reasonable cause to suspect. In Washington, D.C., where Polaris is headquartered, human trafficking counselors are considered mandated reporters.

24 Matthew Brown, "Fact Check: Mask-Wearing Not Connected to Child Trafficking," *USA Today*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/08/11/fact-check-mask-wearing-not-connected-child-trafficking/3318642001/>.

25 Kevin Roose, "QAnon Followers Are Hijacking the #SaveTheChildren Movement," *The New York Times*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/12/technology/qanon-save-the-children-trafficking.html>.



“Red Pilling” Human Trafficking

Another way to understand how QAnon-peddled disinformation about child sex trafficking serves as a radicalization gateway is to consider it within the context of “red pilling.” The term “red pilling” comes from the 1999 movie “The Matrix” in which the protagonist is asked to choose between taking a blue pill and remaining in a state of blissful ignorance or a red pill that will wake him up to a terrifying reality. The concept has been co-opted by the most violent adherents of the white supremacy extremist movement. These extremists seek to radicalize followers to “figuratively ingest a ‘red pill’ intended to awaken them to the world as it truly is, leading them toward more reactionary, then ultimately extreme, politics, such as white supremacy, hypermasculinity, and antisemitism.”²⁶ Within the QAnon movement, introducing someone to disinformation and conspiracy theories surrounding child sex trafficking can be considered “red pilling.”

The debunked Wayfair story, for example, can be seen as a “red pilling” moment. It was a notable example of when a child sex trafficking conspiracy went viral on mainstream social media platforms, subjecting many Americans to this form of disinformation. It is impossible to know how many of the people sharing the original Wayfair story — or contacting Polaris about it — were already followers of QAnon. But as the Wayfair phenomenon grew and changed, it became abundantly — if anecdotally — clear that many of those reporting the Wayfair conspiracy were doing so because they genuinely believed they were helping to protect children.

That compassionate response was then twisted toward the wider conspiracy. QAnon followers hijacked hashtags such as #SaveTheChildren and #EndHumanTrafficking,²⁷ and non-followers who had their interest in the issue piqued by the Wayfair story began using those same hashtags and so, inadvertently, became connected with QAnon. An article in the MIT Technology Review²⁸ detailed how community leaders struggled in the summer of 2020 with members of their communities growing obsessed with child sex trafficking conspiracies and rapidly becoming QAnon followers. A family therapist interviewed in the article said: “It was Wayfair that really opened my eyes to which of my friends were really following the QAnon stuff. And it was a lot.” The Wayfair conspiracy grew, where social media users shared what they learned with their friends and reshared memes about it — which can be likened with the phenomenon of children and young adults in the United States learning disinformation about the Holocaust from antisemitic memes.²⁹ Antisemitic, homophobic, and conspiratorial memes serve to ridicule and dehumanize violence against its victims. As noted in an article in *The Atlantic* that examines the violence of meme culture, “What was once dismissed as ‘trolling’ is now recognized as harassment and abuse; where flat earthers and 9/11 truthers once seemed laughable, today’s conspiracy theorists commit acts of violence.” The phenomenon of Wayfair also moved offline, with rallies attended by both QAnon followers protesting the fictional cabal and non-followers who believed they were working with a legitimate group trying to call attention to a very real problem.³⁰

26 “White Supremacy Extremism: The Transnational Rise of the Violent White Supremacist Movement,” *The Soufan Center*, September, 2019, <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/white-supremacy-extremism-the-transnational-rise-of-the-violent-white-supremacist-movement/>.

27 Kevin Roose, “QAnon Followers Are Hijacking the #SaveTheChildren Movement,” *The New York Times*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/12/technology/qanon-save-the-children-trafficking.html>.

28 Abby Ohlheiser, “Evangelicals Are Looking for Answers Online. They’re Finding QAnon Instead,” *MIT Technology Review*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/08/26/1007611/how-qanon-is-targeting-evangelicals/>.

29 Helen Lewis, “The Joke’s on Us,” *The Atlantic*, September 30, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/09/how-memes-lulz-and-ironic-bigotry-won-internet/616427/>.

30 Kevin Roose, “How ‘Save the Children’ Is Keeping QAnon Alive,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/28/technology/save-the-children-qanon.html>.



The Susceptibility of the U.S. Population

The most critical aspect of understanding the magnitude of the threat to both the anti human trafficking field and to other institutions of democracy is the sheer size of the population that is susceptible to QAnon conspiracies and manipulation. A Believability Classification survey conducted between November 4, 2020 and January 7, 2021 with a nationally representative sample of 15,951 respondents³¹ indicates that more than 20 percent of U.S. adults self-identify as QAnon believers. Additionally, when asked, "To what extent do you agree with this statement: I believe elites, politicians and/or celebrities are involved in global pedophilia rings and we need to #SaveOurChildren," a staggering 41 percent of U.S. adults agreed or strongly agreed.

41% of U.S. adults believe that elites, politicians, and celebrities are involved in global pedophilia rings.

By contrast, only 18 percent of U.S. adults firmly reject the idea that elites, politicians, and/or celebrities are involved in global pedophilia rings. Clearly, a material percentage of U.S. adults are currently being manipulated by QAnon rhetoric; without effective intervention, they are at risk of being radicalized into full-fledged QAnon believers who, like those at the Capitol, could potentially become violent in support of their "cause." The widespread coverage of Jeffrey Epstein's indictment,³² arrest, and death have only served to fuel this idea, allowing those who aim to spread conspiracies to bait people first with a true but extreme case of human trafficking. In many ways, Epstein's methods of force, fraud, and coercion were very typical of human trafficking cases. He was a wealthy, powerful man who used his resources to identify, groom, recruit, and exploit vulnerable girls, particularly those coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. QAnon followers were less interested in exploring the underlying systemic inequities that enabled Epstein to commit his crimes for so long, and instead focused on the details of his private islands and his famous friends, which fueled the false narratives about a celebrity pedophile ring at the highest levels of power.

Disinformation narratives about human trafficking are particularly compelling to women. While some conversations surrounding violent extremism may only consider men as the threat, it is important to note that QAnon narratives and conspiracy theories surrounding human trafficking have proven to attract women of all ages to a large degree. Many prominent scholars have long argued that women play an integral role in violent extremist movements and terrorist organizations.³³ Considering the appeal of the QAnon movement for women, terrorism scholars Farah Pandith, Jacob Ware, and Mia Bloom write: "QAnon, like the Islamic State militant group, understands that the best way to appeal to women is by exploiting their inherent altruism and desire to protect children."³⁴ Based on reviewing the Believability Classification survey results, Pandith, Ware, and Bloom's assessment has validity. Women are 50 percent more likely than men to classify as QAnon "fence sitters" — meaning they are exposed and susceptible to QAnon rhetoric, including trafficking-related conspiracies — thus paving the way for potential radicalization.

31 The Believability Classification survey is a continuous, dynamic survey administered by Limbik. Results included in this paper are based on interviews conducted between November 4, 2020 and January 7, 2021 among a nationally representative sample of 15,951 U.S. adults.

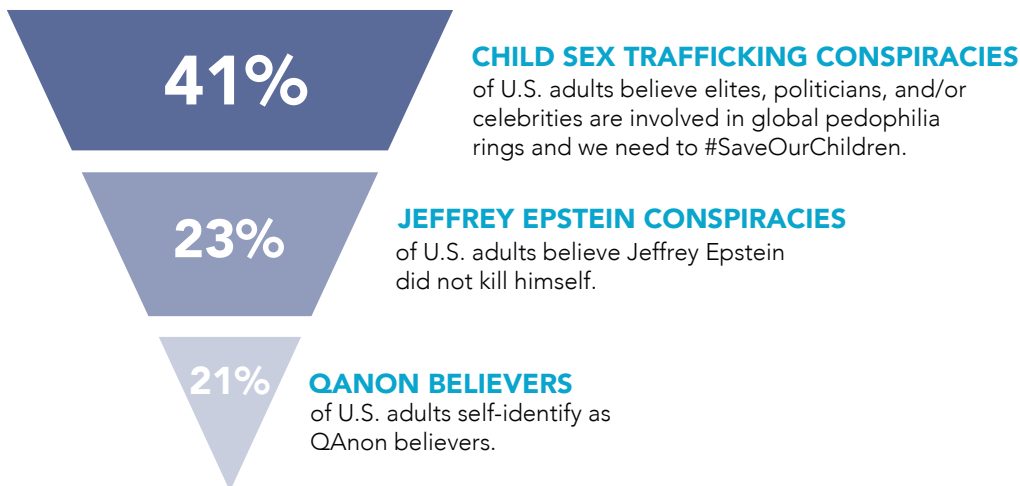
32 Jeffrey Epstein was arrested in July 2019 on federal charges for the sex trafficking of minors.

33 For more information about women and terrorism, see this bibliography from Leiden University: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2020/issue-2/12.-tinnes-2.pdf>.

34 Farah Pandith, Jacob Ware, and Mia Bloom, "Female Extremists in QAnon and ISIS Are on the Rise. We Need a New Strategy to Combat Them," NBC News, December 11, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/female-extremists-qanon-isis-are-rise-we-need-new-strategy-ncna1250619>.



QAnon-Child Sex Trafficking Radicalization Funnel



Physical Manifestations and Echo Effects

While the introduction already detailed numerous examples of how QAnon-peddled conspiracies surrounding child sex trafficking can manifest in physical acts of violence, Ashli Babbitt’s case clearly illustrates the path of radicalization. For Ashli Babbitt, the woman who was shot during the attack on the U.S. Capitol, the nexus between violence and trafficking disinformation is tangible in her social media presence. Babbitt tweeted about trafficking, homelessness, and drug addiction crises more than 50 times dating back to November 2018. However, it was not until February 15, 2020 that she first referenced QAnon, when she tweeted: “We are all 1!” with #WWG1WGA and #Q.

At that point, she was clearly a target for further radicalization. In the weeks following the presidential election, her concerns were no longer solely related to trafficking and homelessness. After November 7, in addition to disseminating human trafficking falsities, her Twitter feed was replete with conspiratorial retweets regarding election fraud, lockdown mandates, as well as anti-China sentiment. In the days leading up to her death on January 6, Babbitt tweeted about attending the “Save America” rally in support of Donald Trump.³⁵

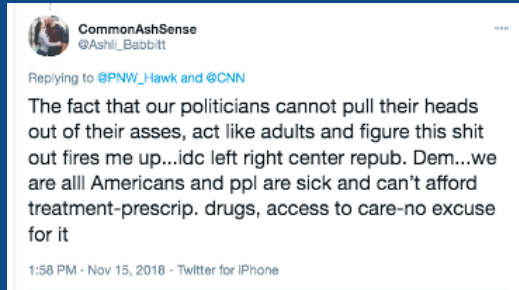
Indeed, data analysis for the purpose of this report makes clear that the lines between human trafficking conspiracies and those related to politics have become blurred. Within the radicalizing echochamber of QAnon, this raises the threat for political violence, as witnessed at the U.S. Capitol on January 6. Posts seemingly unrelated to trafficking propagate hashtags like #EndHumanTrafficking alongside more relevant ones like #StopTheSteal and #MAGA. Prior to the January 6 insurrection, extremist accounts perpetuated false trafficking accusations by using language inciting “patriots” to “save the children.” Such language illustrates the ways in which human trafficking remains a critical facet of the QAnon disinformation apparatus and a potential gateway for individuals to commit acts of violence.³⁶

35 “The Journey of Ashli Babbitt,” *Bellingcat*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2021/01/08/the-journey-of-ashli-babbitt/>.
 36 Jen Steer, “Ex-school therapist who reached VP’s chair during Capitol insurrection arrested,” *ABC News*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.abc27.com/news/ex-school-therapist-who-reached-vps-chair-during-capitol-insurrection-arrested/>.

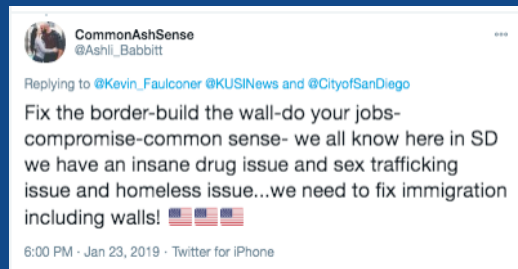
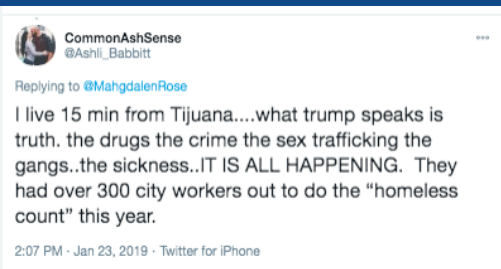


Ashli Babbitt Timeline of Radicalization

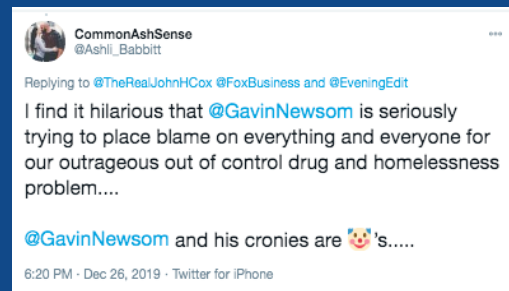
November 2018 – December 2018 Tweets Related to Homelessness and Other Social Problems



January 2019 Tweets Related to Trafficking without QAnon-Specific Terminology



January 2019 – January 2020 (and Beyond) Anti-Establishment Tweets Referencing Social Problems



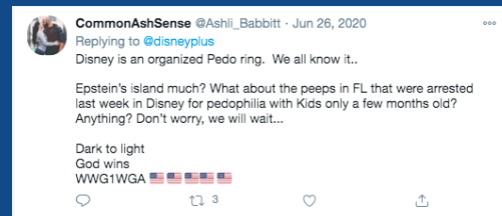


February 2020 First Post with QAnon-Specific Hashtags



February 2020 – January 2021 Tweets with QAnon-Specific Terminology and Conspiracy Theories

- Tweeted about homelessness five times
- Referenced Q, QAnon, and/or WWG1WGA (or used #Q, #QAnon, #WWG1WGA) in 14 tweets
- Referenced pedophilia, trafficking, #SaveTheChildren, etc. in 27 tweets



January 6, 2021 Shot and Killed While Participating in the Insurrection at the U.S. Capitol

Tweet from January 1, 2021, before Ashli Babbitt was shot and killed while participating in the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.



Sources: Twitter, Limbik, and "The Journey of Ashli Babbitt," Bellingcat, January 8, 2021, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2021/01/08/the-journey-of-ashli-babbitt/>.



White supremacist and other violent far-right extremists tout child sex trafficking conspiracies as a recruitment tool to co-opt disillusioned QAnon followers to commit acts of violence.

PATRIOTS, IT IS NOW TIME TO SAVE YOUR CHILDREN, YOUR FUTURES, YOUR FREEDOMS BUT MOST OF ALL THE LAND OF THE FREE AND THE HOME OF THE BRAVE - UNITED STATES OF AMERICA!
[#SaveAmericaMarch](#) [#StopTheSteal](#)

Fig. 1: Language imploring “patriots” to “save your children” alongside [#SaveAmericaMarch](#) and [#StopTheSteal](#) (Source: Twitter)

[#Patriot](#) [#KeyboardWarrior](#)
[#FactsMatter](#) [#FightBack](#) [#StandUp](#)
[#TakeBackControl](#) [#WakeUp](#)
[#SaveAmerica](#) [#SaveTheChildren](#)
[#EndHumanTrafficking](#)
[#DrainTheSwamp](#) [#MAGA](#)
[#blacklivesmatter](#) [#MAGA2020](#)
[#KAG2020](#) [#WalkAway](#)
[#Election2020](#) [#Trump](#) [#Trump2020](#)
[#blm](#) [#SpiritualWarfare](#)
[#BackTheBlue](#) [#FreeSpeech](#)
[#ThinkForYourself](#) [#Awoke](#) [#RedPill](#)
[#RedPilled](#) [#Truth](#) [#TruthSeeker](#)
[#GodWins](#)

Fig. 2: Image depicts an array of QAnon-related hashtags in one post (Source: Instagram)

Disturbingly, violent anti-government extremists, white supremacists, and neo-Nazis not originally associated with QAnon appear to have also caught on to the allure of using disinformation and conspiracies surrounding child sex trafficking to radicalize followers and recruit new members. Co-opted QAnon followers could increase the membership of such groups, and potentially expand the pool of individuals willing to commit acts of violence and terrorism. On January 3, 2021, a Telegram channel associated with the Proud Boys posted content in celebration of actor Mel Gibson’s birthday, which contained QAnon terminology and phrases surrounding child sex trafficking, including describing Hollywood as a “den of parasites feasting on the blood of children.” Of note, in the aftermath of the Capitol attack and de-platforming efforts, white supremacist and other violent far-right extremist forums on encrypted chat platforms are instructing followers and sharing strategies of how to co-opt QAnon followers who are migrating to more fringe spaces on the Internet.³⁷ Data gathering and analysis of these chat forums suggest that using child sex trafficking disinformation is touted as an important recruitment tool. In January, a white supremacy channel on Telegram with almost 3,000 followers posted: “The bottom has just fallen out from underneath their worldview, they are extremely open to radical ideas when framed simply and reasonably. VOTING WILL NOT REMOVE THEM = voter fraud means your vote is worthless, if we want change we have to find another way. NO ONE IS COMING TO SAVE YOU = Q was a pied piper operation similar to

37 Michael Barbaro and Sheera Frenkel, “Is More Violence Coming?” *The New York Times*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/podcasts/the-daily/capitol-attack-social-media-parler-twitter-facebook.html>.



Operation Trust, there is no plan but theirs and we need to save ourselves. THE ELITES ARE BABY EATING PEDOPHILES = the elites are baby eating pedophiles.”

Due to the existing proliferation of antisemitic materials within the QAnon movement, joining racially and ethnically motivated violent extremist (REMVE) groups could be a logical step for QAnon followers. Evidence suggests that REMVEs and other violent far-right extremists were instrumental in orchestrating the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, indicating that the movement is indeed tapping into QAnon narratives about trafficking to radicalize individuals. This event emphasizes the acute threat the weaponization of human trafficking disinformation poses to the anti-trafficking movement, as well as to the U.S. Homeland.

V. CONCLUSION

The coalescing of previously disparate violent far-right extremist actors that overran the Capitol Building on January 6 portends a combustible future, where human trafficking is used as weapon against democracy. As such, based on the evidence collected and analyzed in this report, it is clear that conspiracy theories around trafficking should be treated as a critical threat to national security and the success of civil society organizations. Additional concerted and data-driven approaches remain necessary to combat this urgent threat. Thus, Polaris, The Soufan Group, and Limbik are proposing several policy recommendations that Congress, the Biden-Harris administration, as well as other stakeholders should consider exploring in 2021.



VI. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** **1** **Policy****makers must forcefully condemn conspiracy theories and disinformation about human trafficking.** In addition to speaking out individually, policymakers should look for powerful collective opportunities. At the beginning of October 2020, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning QAnon that specifically mentioned the impacts on the anti human trafficking movement.³⁸ It passed with overwhelming bipartisan support; Congress should continue taking actions like this.
- 2** **2** **Policy****makers must fully commit to understanding and communicating the truths of human trafficking.** All lawmakers should work with human trafficking survivors and experts and fully commit to educate their constituents, their colleagues, and themselves on the evidence-based realities of human trafficking, how it happens, and who is most likely to be impacted.
- 3** **3** **Policy****makers should continue bipartisan support of policies that help fight human trafficking at the systems level.** We urge policymakers at all levels to work with well-established and data-driven anti-trafficking organizations to identify, craft, and implement policies that will effectively address both sex and labor trafficking and, in doing so, make it far more difficult to weaponize. These include but are not limited to:
 - a. Support for runaway and homeless youth;
 - b. Reforming the temporary visa system to prevent and reduce exploitation;
 - c. Funding for holistic services to support victims and survivors; and
 - d. Legislation to address the economic vulnerabilities exacerbated by COVID-19, such as safe and stable housing and child care.
- 4** **4** **Civil society organizations must be resourced to strengthen their security posture against direct threats from white supremacist and violent far-right extremist groups.** In order for anti human trafficking organizations to serve their mission, they must be empowered and supported to speak forcefully and quickly against disinformation; doing so, however, will inevitably make these organizations a target of white supremacist and far-right extremist groups intent on perpetrating violence. Funds must be specifically appropriated for anti human trafficking organizations to bolster their security and technology apparatus so they can defend themselves against cyber, physical, and reputational threats.
- 5** **5** **Policy****makers, experts, and practitioners should support multi-disciplinary partnerships that take a complex systems approach to understanding disinformation.** As many seek to understand the causes of the January 6 attacks and create policies that can prevent future tragedies, it is imperative that policymakers understand the complex drivers of these events. Human trafficking disinformation was, and will continue to be, specifically weaponized as a way to radicalize susceptible populations into violent extremism; therefore, it is important that policymakers work with proven experts on human trafficking to solve this broader disinformation crisis. The unique partnership between Polaris, The Soufan Group, and Limbik fuses expertise on human rights, national security, and technology, and together they have taken a data-driven, complex systems approach to understand this urgent problem. This model of collaboration should be used by others aiming to understand the disinformation-extremist nexus.

38 Tom Malinowski, "Text - H.Res.1154 - 116th Congress (2019-2020): Condemning QAnon and Rejecting the Conspiracy Theories It Promotes," October 2, 2020, 2019/2020, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/1154/text>.



APPENDIX I

Comprehensive Methodology

The findings are based on both quantitative and qualitative analysis of posts from various social media platforms. The quantitative analysis is based on volume and interaction data from Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter gathered through third party social listening services. The data was collected from January 1, 2020 to December 31, 2020. For the purpose of this research, volume and interaction data was collected for posts related to five topics: i) Polaris; ii) Human Trafficking; iii) QAnon; iv) Racial/Social Justice; and v) Sex Trade Decriminalization; volume and interaction data includes Post Count, Post Volume, Post Reach, and Interaction Rate:

- **Post Count:** The total number of Posts collected during the Monitoring Period (January 1, 2020 - December 31, 2020).
- **Post Volume:** The average number of Posts per Account, for all Accounts that created one or more Posts during the Monitoring Period.
- **Post Reach:** The average number of Account Likes/Followers at the time the Post was created, for Posts created during the Monitoring Period.
- **Interaction Rate:** The total number of interactions as a percentage of Account Likes/Followers at the time the Post was created, for Posts created during the Monitoring Period.

The collected posts were subsequently analyzed using proprietary models that utilize artificial intelligence in order to extract textual and audiovisual metadata in order to discern Believability.

Believability is defined as a post that is considered believable, credible, trustworthy, and/or aligned with existing beliefs. Believability is generated using a proprietary Believability classification model; scores are indexed against average Believability, such that Believability of 141 reflects 41 percent higher than average Believability and 68 reflects 32 percent lower than average Believability. The model is trained and calibrated with manually classified social media posts, which are produced using Limbik's always-on Believability Classification survey. As of December 31, 2020, Limbik had conducted interviews with 58,846 U.S. adults and produced manual classifications for 336,275 posts from Facebook and Instagram. Each post is manually classified by a minimum of 35 unique survey respondents.

Prior to any reporting, the collected posts and volume and interaction data were analyzed and the dataset was checked for missing data as well as outliers and other anomalies. Ultimately, the dataset was visualized and further analyzed using Tableau.

In addition, monthly search data from Amazon was supplied by a third party data provider to quantify the monthly search volume of "qanon" and other related Amazon search terms from November 2017 through December 2020. Data was provided for the top 1 million search terms per month, as reported by Amazon; "qanon" and other related search terms were evaluated across the full monitoring period to determine possible correlation with social media behavior — i.e., if an increase in the number of Facebook posts related to QAnon was observed in July 2020 compared to June 2020, did "qanon" and other related search terms rank higher in July 2020 compared to June 2020, as reported by Amazon.

The qualitative analysis is based on a variety of secondary data from open source materials, including journal articles, traditional media, books, research papers, government publications, encrypted chat forums (including Telegram), and other social media platforms (including Parler, Gab, Voat, and YouTube.)



APPENDIX II

Believability Classification Survey Results

For this analysis, the Believability of a conspiracy is quantified using a combination of the following factors:

1. Relevance of topic or narrative;
2. Frequency of exposure to conspiratorial content;
3. Trustworthiness of source(s) responsible creating or amplifying conspiratorial content; and
4. Believability of conspiratorial content.

The results of Limbik’s Believability Classification survey — conducted with a nationally representative sample of 15,951 respondents between November 2020 and January 2021 — indicates that more than 20 percent of U.S. adults self-identify as QAnon believers (QAnon Adherents): 22.6 percent on November 16, 2020; 20.5 percent on January 7, 2021. When combined with QAnon Availables, or “fence-sitters,” between 49.4 percent (January 7, 2021) and 53.0 percent (November 16, 2020) of U.S. adults are classified as QAnon believers or individuals at risk of QAnon radicalization. Unsurprisingly, 82.5 percent of these QAnon Adherents are also classified as Trafficking (conspiracy) Adherents. Further, 40.5 percent of QAnon Rejectors are categorized as Trafficking Conspiracy Availables; this not only highlights the widespread impact of trafficking disinformation, but raises concerns regarding susceptibility to QAnon manipulation by way of child sex trafficking conspiracies.

Using various conspiracies from ‘The Conspiracy Chart’ created by Abbie Richards,³⁹ a representative sample of U.S. adults were categorized into six levels of Susceptibility — Grounded, Vulnerable, Sympathetic, Supportive, Detached, and Converted — based on their susceptibility to believe a range of conspiracy theories, from “The FBI spied on John Lennon” (Grounded) to “The moon landing was faked” (Converted).

QAnon Segmentations

Susceptibility Level	U.S. Adults	Adherents	Availables	Rejectors
Level 5 (Converted)	18.0%	32.6%	18.9%	10.4%
Level 4 (Detached)	24.1%	28.8%	20.8%	24.1%
Level 3 (Supportive)	3.4%	8.4%	2.5%	1.5%
Level 2 (Sympathetic)	10.1%	5.5%	8.5%	13.3%
Level 1 (Vulnerable)	12.0%	4.6%	5.7%	19.6%
Level 0 (Grounded)	32.5%	20.1%	43.6%	31.2%

39 David Farrier, “I Talk to the Creator of the Conspiracy Chart,” October 30, 2020, <https://www.webworm.co/pi-talk-to-the-creator-of-the-conspiracy>.



Susceptibility Level Descriptors

- Level 5 (Converted):** Believe the moon landing was faked and/or Wayfair is/was involved in child sex trafficking.
- Level 4 (Detached):** Believe global warming is a hoax and/or COVID-19 was created in a lab.
- Level 3 (Supportive):** Believe aliens built Stonehenge and/or Greta Thunberg is a time traveler.
- Level 2 (Sympathetic):** Believe Princess Diana was murdered and/or Jeffrey Epstein did not kill himself.
- Level 1 (Vulnerable):** Believe the FBI spied on John Lennon and/or ‘Big Tobacco’ lied about cancer.
- Level 0 (Grounded):** Not (currently) susceptible to believe conspiracy theories.

BELIEVABILITY DATA:

As of January 7, 2021:

A look at how U.S. adults perceive known QAnon conspiracies, compared to self-identified QAnon believers, reveals the potential for mass “red pilling”:

41.2 percent of U.S. adults believe elites, politicians, and/or celebrities are involved in global pedophilia rings and we need to #SaveOurChildren (Trafficking Conspiracy Adherents); 31.6 percent are “fence-sitters” (Trafficking Conspiracy Availables).

Trafficking Conspiracy Segment	U.S. Adults	Biden Supporters	Trump Supporters
Adherents	41.2%	40.2%	51.2%
Availables	31.6%	26.9%	33.7%
Rejectors	27.2%	32.9%	15.1%

‘Biden Supporters’ and ‘Trump Supporters’ reflect survey respondents that selected ‘Joseph R. Biden’ and ‘Donald J. Trump’ respectively when asked: ‘Which candidate did you support in the 2020 presidential election?’ 19.0 percent of survey respondents selected ‘Another candidate’ or ‘I’d rather not say.’



41.1 percent of U.S. adults believe wide-spread voter fraud impacted the 2020 presidential election (Government Conspiracy Adherents); 18.9 percent are “fence-sitters” (Voter Fraud Conspiracy Availables).

Voter Fraud Conspiracy Segment	U.S. Adults	Biden Supporters	Trump Supporters
Adherents	41.1%	26.9%	72.0%
Availables	18.9%	14.4%	17.3%
Rejectors	40.0%	58.7%	10.7%

‘Biden Supporters’ and ‘Trump Supporters’ reflect survey respondents that selected ‘Joseph R. Biden’ and ‘Donald J. Trump’ respectively when asked: ‘Which candidate did you support in the 2020 presidential election?’ 19.0 percent of survey respondents selected ‘Another candidate’ or ‘I’d rather not say.’

As of November 16, 2020:

22.6 percent of U.S. adults classify as QAnon Adherents.

QAnon Conspiracy Segment	U.S. Adults	Female	Male
Adherents	22.6%	14.1%	31.3%
Availables	30.4%	36.2%	24.2%
Rejectors	47.0%	49.6%	44.5%

QAnon Conspiracy Segment	U.S. Adults	Age: 18-24	Age: 25-34	Age: 35-44	Age: 45-54	Age: 55-64	Age: 65+
Adherents	22.6%	27.5%	38.7%	37.7%	9.6%	4.1%	8.9%
Availables	30.4%	35.6%	30.3%	28.7%	37.5%	28.4%	23.2%
Rejectors	47.0%	36.9%	31.0%	33.6%	52.9%	67.5%	67.9%



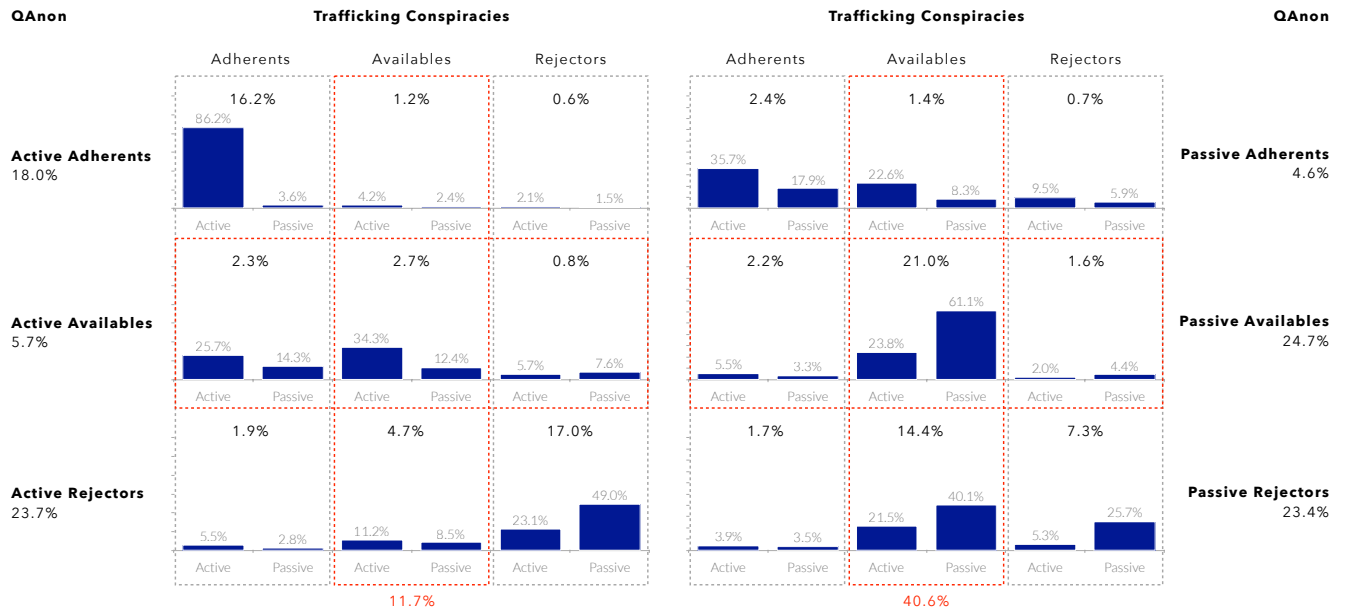
19.0 percent more U.S. adults classify as Trafficking (conspiracy) Loyals/Availables than classify as QAnon Loyals/Availables

Population Segment	Trafficking	QAnon
US Adults	72.0%	53.0%
Female	72.6%	50.4%
Male	72.0%	55.5%

Displayed values reflect the aggregate percentage of Adherents and Availables. ‘Trafficking’ includes U.S. survey respondents that believe (Adherents) or are susceptible to believe (Availables) human trafficking-related conspiracies. ‘QAnon’ includes survey respondents that self-identify as a QAnon follower (Adherents) or are susceptible to believe (Availables) QAnon-related conspiracies.

Population Segment	Trafficking	QAnon
US Adults	72.0%	53.0%
Age: 18-24	78.5%	63.1%
Age: 25-34	80.3%	69.0%
Age: 35-44	77.3%	66.4%
Age: 45-54	71.5%	47.2%
Age: 55-64	59.6%	32.5%
Age: 65+	62.5%	32.1%

Displayed values reflect the aggregate percentage of Adherents and Availables. ‘Trafficking’ includes U.S. survey respondents that believe (Adherents) or are susceptible to believe (Availables) human trafficking-related conspiracies. ‘QAnon’ includes survey respondents that self-identify as a QAnon follower (Adherents) or are susceptible to believe (Availables) QAnon-related conspiracies.



This visual reflects human trafficking-related conspiracy segmentations by QAnon segmentations, where 'Active' represents survey respondents likely to share their beliefs regarding a particular topic and 'Passive' details those unlikely to share. For example, 86.2 percent of Active QAnon Adherents classify as Active Trafficking Adherents and 61.1 percent of Passive QAnon Availables classify as Passive Trafficking Availables. The percentages included in each of the nine (9) boxes aggregates the percentage of the total universe represented by each segmentation — i.e., 2.7 percent of survey respondents classify as Active QAnon Availables and Trafficking Availables.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES:

The Believability Classification Survey is a continuous, dynamic survey administered by Limbik. Results included in this paper are based on interviews conducted between November 4, 2020 and January 7, 2021 among a nationally representative sample of 15,951 U.S. adults.

Results of any sample are subject to sampling variation. The magnitude of variation is measurable and affected by the number of interviews and the level of percentages expressing the results. For the interviews conducted in this particular study, the chances are 95 in 100 that the survey result does not vary, plus or minus, by more than 1.0 percentage point from the result that would be obtained if interviews had been conducted with all persons in the universe represented by the sample.