

GETTING IT RIGHT. MAKING IT MATTER.

Telling the Real Story of Human Trafficking

**Polaris**

LETTER FROM THE CEO —

The Liam Neeson-shaped elephant in the room

In the anti human trafficking world, “Taken” has become a shorthand for how NOT to make content about human trafficking.

The reference is to *Taken*, a 2008 action-adventure film starring Liam Neeson as a heroic father racing to save his teenage daughter, who was forcibly kidnapped to be sold into human trafficking. It was successful enough to spawn two sequels.

The film was created as entertainment in the action-adventure genre and no one involved claimed to be telling a “true” or “ripped from the headlines” story. Unfortunately, it had the unintended effect of completely miseducating the public about what human trafficking is, how it happens, and who it happens to. Nearly 15 years later, those of us who work in the anti-trafficking field are still managing the consequences. Indeed, we often start out saying things like: “You know that movie *Taken*? Well that’s not really how trafficking happens.”

Such is the power of narrative. And with great power – stop me if you’ve heard this – comes great responsibility.

This guide is not meant to make you think twice about creating content about human trafficking. Our goal is to help you do that important and potentially powerful work with the guidance of those resilient, brave, powerful people who have experienced trafficking and fought their way to freedom. This guide was informed by a diverse community of survivors of sex and labor trafficking, including Jessa Dillow Crisp, April Baker and many others who did not choose to be thanked by name. We are grateful to all for their time, their commitment and their unparalleled expertise.

We are also hopeful that with their guidance, content creators can help those in a position to make the kinds of changes we need, while understanding the reality of the crime, and with it, the solutions that do and do not work. Accurate portrayals of human trafficking may also help victims and survivors who don’t currently self-identify to recognize their own experiences and seek help if they choose.

Thank you for all you do. Your work could not matter more.



Catherine Chen
CEO Polaris



Who Is Polaris?

Named after the North Star, an historical symbol of freedom, Polaris works to reshape the systems that make sex and labor trafficking possible and profitable in North America. Over two decades, Polaris has assisted some 30,000 victims and survivors through the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline and built the largest known U.S. data set on the crime. With the guidance of survivors, and working with public and private-sector partners, we use that data to understand and improve the way trafficking is identified, how victims and survivors are assisted, and how we can prevent this abuse at the scale of the problem – 25 million people worldwide robbed of the basic right to choose how they live and work.

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Note: Photos are for illustrative purposes.
All people depicted are models.



PART 1

THE BEST BEST PRACTICE —

Working with Survivor Anti Trafficking Professionals

Everything we know about human trafficking – including everything in this guide – comes from the lived experience of people who have come out the other side and shared what they have learned.

Working in **real partnership with survivors** as you craft your content is the single most important step you can take to ensure your work is as impactful as it is entertaining and informative. It also means taking care **not to re-exploit people** who have already lived through trauma and dehumanization.

Partnership means:

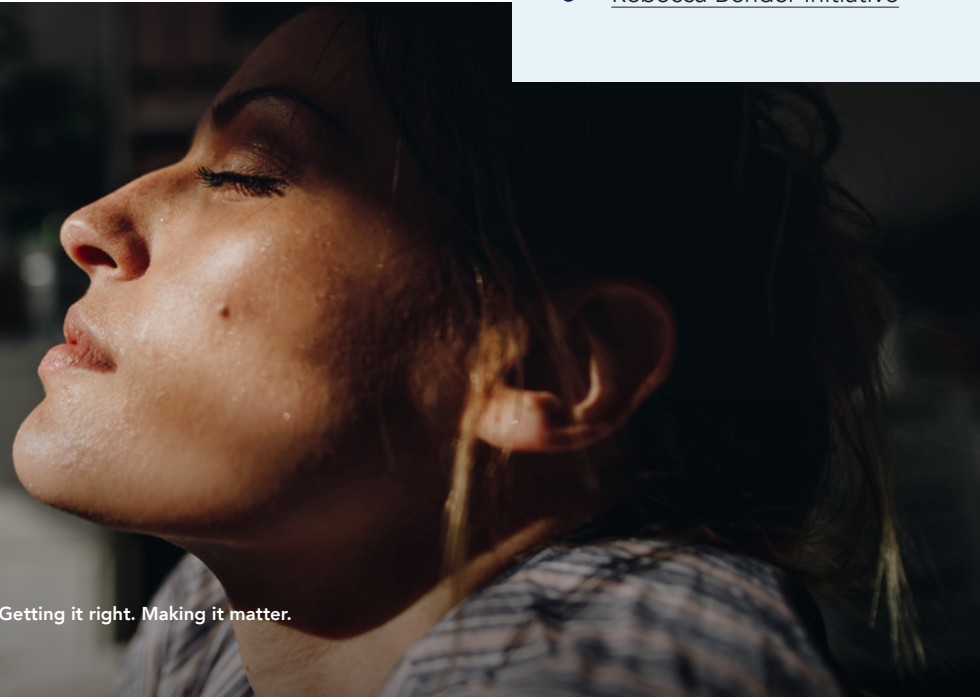
- ✓ Hiring survivors with lived experience relevant to your content to consult on the project and compensating them as you would any other expert
- ✓ Hiring survivors to work on the project in other capacities, including the co-creation of content
- ✓ Never using a survivor's personal story or experience without express permission of the survivor
- ✓ Never telling someone else's story without compensation
- ✓ Being clear about how a person's story of their own lived experience will be used – and how many times – before the person shares their story

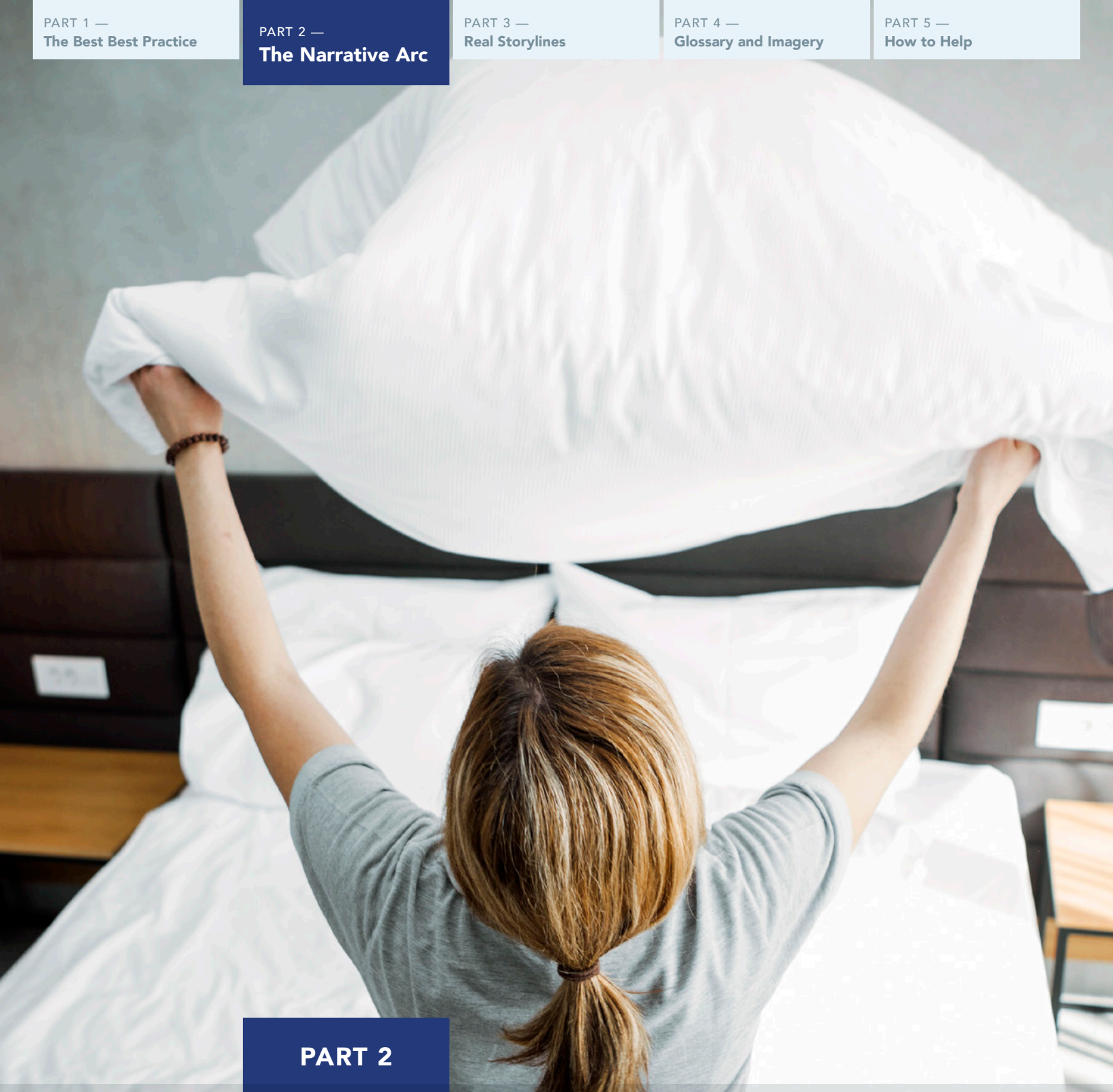
To find survivor consultants and connect with survivor-led organizations that focus on survivor leadership, empowerment, and professional development, please feel free to reach out to us at media@polarisproject.org; or connect directly with some of the organizations below.

- [Survivor Alliance](#)
- [GEMS Survivor Leadership Institute](#)
- [Survivors 4 Solutions](#)
- [The National Survivor Network Consultant's Bureau](#)
- [Rebecca Bender Initiative](#)



RESOURCES





PART 2

THE NARRATIVE ARC —

Understanding Human Trafficking

While every situation is unique, traffickers tend to follow patterns. Understanding “typical” trafficking scenarios can help to spark ideas about stories to tell that are both realistic and powerful.

A QUICK REFRESH

Human trafficking is the use of force, fraud or coercion to get someone to perform labor or sex acts in exchange for money or something else of value such as a place to live or an addictive drug.

Key Points

- ✓ Trafficking has nothing to do with moving something or someone from one country to another. That is smuggling, which is a crime against a border, not a person; people can be trafficked in their own homes.
- ✓ Force, fraud or coercion **MUST** be present for a situation to be trafficking and that force, fraud or coercion **MUST** be the factor that compels the person to remain in the situation. If you hire someone and promise to pay a certain amount then renege on that promise, that is fraud. If the person you cheated is free to leave and go file a complaint it is not trafficking, though it may be exploitation. This situation only becomes trafficking when the defrauded person is, for example, threatened with deportation for complaining.
- ✓ The **EXCEPTION** to the force, fraud or coercion requirement is that children participating in commercial sexual activity is **ALWAYS** considered trafficking under federal law. **There is no such thing, under federal law, as a child prostitute.**
- ✓ Not all adult commercial sex is trafficking. There are adults who choose to make a living in the sex trades, but it’s important to remember that choice exists on spectrum. For example, there are many people who choose to make a living in the sex trades because there are no other good options available to them.
- ✓ Human trafficking can happen in any business – not just in sexually oriented businesses like escort services or strip clubs. It can also happen where no business exists in any formal sense – such as within families.
- ✓ While human trafficking **CAN** happen to anyone, certain individuals and groups of people are far more vulnerable than others.
- ✓ People being trafficked will not always or even often identify as trafficking victims. Because of how trafficking works, most people do not identify their experience as trafficking until **AFTER** the situation is over.



KEY POINTS

The human trafficking story arc

Unlike murder, or robbery, human trafficking is not a single event that happens at one specific moment in time. Trafficking occurs through a series of activities that take place over time, throughout the course of a day, for months or even years.

Like any traditional, linear narrative, the story of every sex and labor situation has a beginning, a middle and – we hope – an end. The beginning and middle tend to follow fairly common patterns. How trafficking ends is as unique as the resilient survivors who manage to find their ways to freedom.

“One thing I find hard to take is language or pictures or stories about ‘innocence lost.’ I feel like that means some victims are worthwhile and some are ‘guilty.’”

– A survivor of human trafficking



Who gets trafficked and why

If you've done any research at all on human trafficking, chances are you have run into one of two ubiquitous tag lines or tropes:

"Human trafficking: It can happen to anyone."

AND

"Human trafficking is happening right here, in our own backyards."

These phrases were coined at a time when the concept of human trafficking happening in the United States – as opposed to in faraway countries – was new and surprising.

And technically, it is true that anyone can be a victim of human trafficking. But these phrases are also a little misleading because in reality, certain individuals and communities are far more vulnerable than others.

That's because human trafficking doesn't happen in a vacuum. It is the end result of a range of other persistent injustices and inequities in our society and our economy.

Traffickers recruit victims by offering them something they desperately want or need. Sometimes that's a job. Sometimes it's love, a safe place to sleep or a sense of belonging and community. So it makes sense that there is more trafficking in communities where needs are greater.

Data shows that the vast majority of trafficking victims identified in the United States are people who have historically faced discrimination and its 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, or who are struggling with addiction, trauma, abuse or unstable housing, are all at a higher risk for trafficking.

So is human trafficking happening right here, in our backyards? Well it really depends on what else is in your backyard!



CLICHE ALERT

The other problem with the ubiquitous phrase "it's happening right there in your backyard" is that it makes it sound like the way to protect yourself and your family is through vigilant policing of strangers. It's not! Read on.



PART 3

REAL STORYLINES —

Typical Trafficking Patterns

Labor trafficking: The basics



KEY POINTS

How does labor trafficking begin?

Labor trafficking most often begins with a simple job offer. It becomes trafficking when pay or working conditions are abusive and the worker cannot quit or complain because the boss is threatening them or exploiting their desperate economic circumstances. Kidnapping or physical force are rarely part of how labor trafficking situations begin.

Who are the traffickers?

Traffickers can be business owners, bosses, or other workers with a managerial role in a formal business. Traffickers can also be victims' families or legal guardians, including parents, spouses and intimate partners.

Who are the victims?

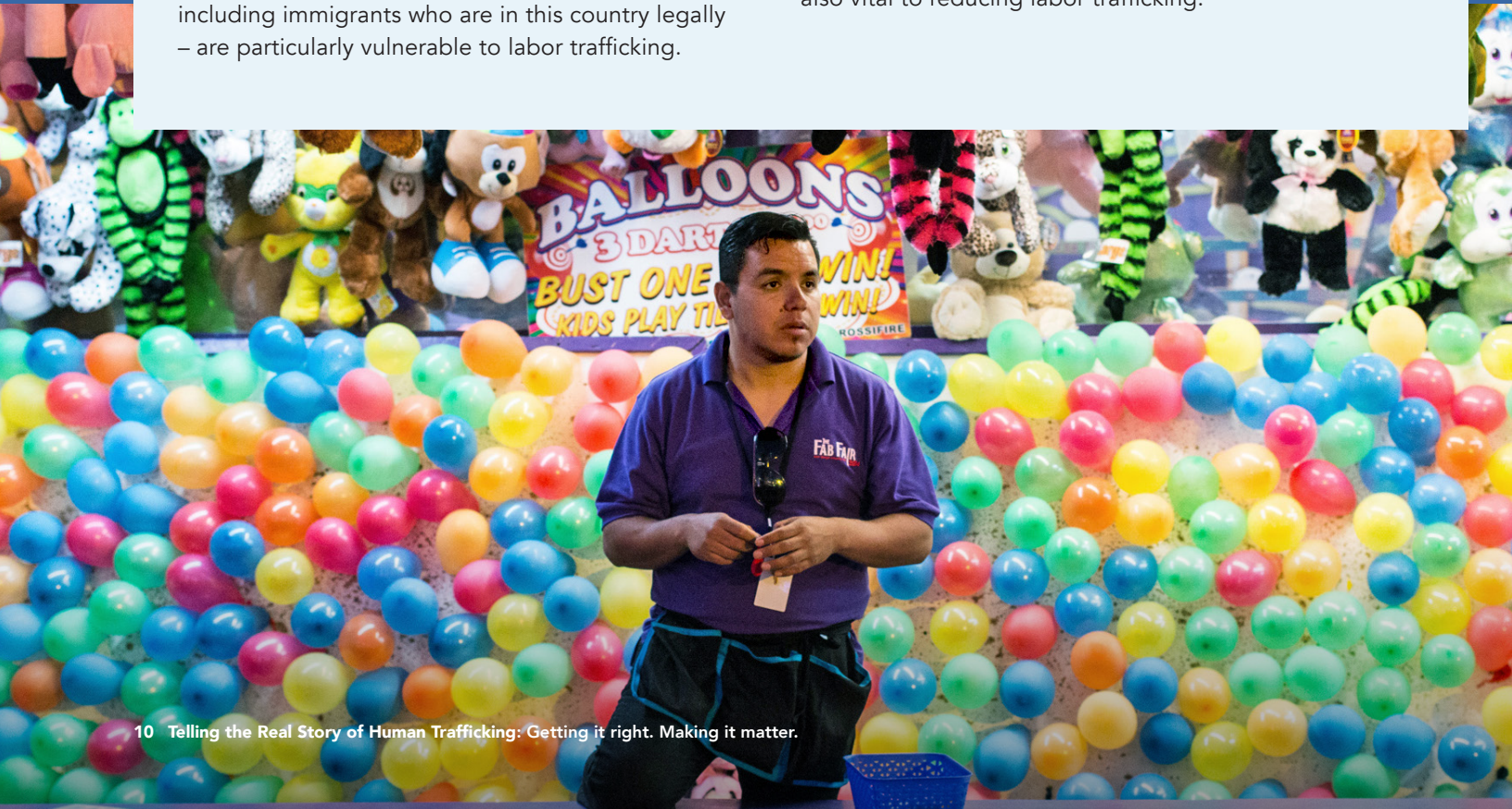
Anyone can be victimized by a labor trafficker, but certain people are far more vulnerable than others. Economic need is a key risk factor and immigrants – including immigrants who are in this country legally – are particularly vulnerable to labor trafficking.

Why don't the victims just leave?

The most common ways traffickers control victims are through threats or economic abuse. Immigrants are vulnerable to labor trafficking because many have come to the United States due to violence or severe poverty in their home countries. That makes threats like “if you complain, I will call ICE” extremely powerful. Additionally, many labor trafficking victims are bound to traffickers by debt and the belief that even the minimal amount they are being paid is better than their other options.

How do we reduce or prevent labor trafficking?

Vigorous enforcement of basic labor protections afforded to workers in the United States would go a long way toward reducing labor trafficking, as would efforts to help workers understand their rights and the protections available to them. Increased employer accountability or “skin in the game,” is also vital to reducing labor trafficking.



Real labor trafficking storylines

Below are the kinds of labor trafficking situations that we hear about most frequently on the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline. They are by no means the only ways that labor trafficking can occur, but taken together may help you craft your own stories in ways that are realistic and impactful.

1 Migrants, immigrants and domestic work

- **Recruitment and grooming:** A diplomat entices someone from her home country with an offer to come to the United States and care for her children. They promise the worker a good wage and the opportunity for her to go to school here. The diplomat repeatedly tells the worker how lucky she is for the opportunity she would never get at home. If she returns home without having completed the job, she will be ashamed because so many people in her community are desperate for better opportunities.
- **Coercion and control:** When she gets here, the worker is told she will sleep in a closet and is also responsible for keeping the house and yard, and making and serving all meals. Her passport is taken and she is told she can't leave the house without permission. When she complains, the employer threatens her family in her home country and says she will call ICE and have the worker arrested for being here illegally.
- **Exit:** The worker sneaks a phone call to a community center for people from her country and gets help. The trafficker is never punished.



“Most labor trafficking victims in the U.S. are immigrants, but they are not necessarily undocumented immigrants – that’s a myth.”

– A survivor of human trafficking

2 Domestic work in marriage

- **Recruitment and grooming:** A man from a conservative, patriarchal society promises a poor girl's family he will marry and take care of her in the United States. She has been raised her whole life knowing she will have an arranged marriage.
- **Coercion and control:** Once here, the wife is forced to take care of the husband's children from another relationship, keep the house, work in the family business and not leave the house. She has no money and does not speak the language. Her husband tells her complaining will bring shame on her family and ruin her sister's chances of a good marriage.
- **Exit:** The wife befriends someone in her religious community – the one place she is allowed to socialize – and the friend helps her find a lawyer.



3 Exploitation of disabilities

- **Recruitment:** A couple befriends a woman with a developmental disability and promises her safety and shelter in return for help around the house.
- **Coercion and control:** The victim is put to work in a family business for long hours every day and not paid. She is told if she doesn't like it, they will send her to a halfway house that is more like a prison. They cash her disability check monthly.
- **Exit:** The victim's family, who has lost track of her, finds her and brings her home.

Human trafficking does not have to involve movement from one place to another at all. A person can be trafficked in their very own home. This myth is problematic because conflating trafficking with smuggling leads to solutions in the name of fighting trafficking that are unrelated to how trafficking actually happens – such as building a wall between the United States and Mexico.



KEY POINT

4 Exploitation of addiction

- **Recruitment:** A person struggling to stay clean from drugs joins a spiritual community that lives under the guidance of a charismatic leader.
- **Coercion and control:** The formerly addicted person is put to work making and selling crafts in abusive conditions for no pay. Those who complain are expelled from the community, which they have come to depend upon in order to maintain sobriety.
- **Exit:** The victim collapses from exhaustion and hospital staff recognize she needs help and connect her with services.



5 Fraudulent job offers

- **Recruitment and grooming:** A mid-level manager in India is offered a dream job that sounds like a promotion in the United States. When the family gets here, the trafficker tricks them out of their savings, takes out a loan under their name, and then tells them they are working in the back of a restaurant washing dishes.
- **Coercion and control:** The family is not paid and has no money to escape. The trafficker tells them if they complain to the police they will be arrested and separated from their children because they entered the country illegally.
- **Exit:** One of the children's teachers notices they have no winter coats and goes to visit the family. They confide in her and she helps them seek legal assistance.



6 Recruitment fees and debt bondage

- **Recruitment and grooming:** A 25-year-old man from an Indigenous community in Mexico learns on social media about a job at a farm in the United States. The job comes with a legal, temporary visa and is well paid. In his hometown, most of the adults take these kinds of jobs overseas for half the year to support their families.
- **Coercion and control:** He is told by the recruiter that it costs \$5,000 for the visa but the advertised wages make it worthwhile, so the worker borrows the money from his new employer. When he gets here, he is told he is working off the debt the business owner incurred bringing him here and will not be paid for the first several months of work. Soon, his boss begins charging him for water, lunch, and transportation to and from the work site. His debt is increasing at a rate that will be extremely difficult to pay back. If he leaves, he will have no way to pay back the money he borrowed. The boss tells him he will be barred from ever returning on a legal visa. Although there is no such thing as an official blacklist, the worker knows that his boss knows many of the recruiters who come to his town, so it would be impossible to get work in the future. He feels he has no choice but to stay and try to pay off the debt.
- **Exit:** Too concerned about being blacklisted for the future, the worker decides to just get through the abusive situation and try for a better position next year. His parents have to sell their home and move in with relatives to pay their debt.



Sex trafficking: The basics



KEY POINTS

How does it begin?

People in sex trafficking situations almost always know and even trust or love their traffickers. Traffickers target vulnerable people who have needs that the traffickers can fill. Sometimes they offer material support – a place to live, clothing, a chance to “get rich quick.” Other times they offer love, emotional support or a sense of belonging. Kidnapping victims and forcing them into the sex trade through violence is rare.

Who are the traffickers?

Traffickers come from all genders, races, ethnicities and walks of life. In sex trafficking situations, they may be intimate partners or spouses of the victims, family members, friends or benefactors, business acquaintances and bosses.

Who are the victims?

Anyone can be trafficked, but some people are far more vulnerable than others because they have greater needs. These include people living in poverty or in unstable housing situations, as well as people with a history of trauma or addiction. Because of current and historic discrimination and inequity, people of color, immigrants, and people who identify as LGBTQ+ are more likely to be exploited for these vulnerabilities and face trafficking.

Why don't victims just leave?

In many cases, people in sex trafficking situations do not see themselves as victims while they are being trafficked. They have been so expertly manipulated

or “groomed” that they believe they are making their own choice to engage in commercial sex. These emotional ties are as powerful as being held in handcuffs or behind bars. People in sex trafficking situations may well also depend on their traffickers for physical needs like money or shelter. They may face threats against them or their families or violence if they complain or try to leave.

How do people get out of sex trafficking situations?

Every story is different. What they have in common is resilience. Survivors come to the understanding that they want to leave the situation, and then fight to get out. Sometimes they get help from service providers, or anti trafficking organizations, but the concept of “rescuing” adult sex trafficking victims is misleading and dangerous. Survivors rescue themselves.

How do we reduce or prevent sex trafficking?

Human trafficking doesn't happen in a vacuum. It is the end result of other inequities in our society and our economic system that make people vulnerable to the enticements of traffickers. So while prosecuting traffickers and seeking justice for survivors is vital, it is not enough by itself to end trafficking. To reduce trafficking at the massive scale of the problem, we need to work together as a society to increase supports and services for vulnerable people and change conditions – like homelessness, family violence, poverty and discrimination – that make people vulnerable to the lure of traffickers.

Real sex trafficking storylines

Below are examples of the kinds of sex trafficking situations that we hear about most frequently on the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline. They are by no means the only ways that sex trafficking can occur, but taken together may help you craft your own stories in ways that are realistic and impactful.

1 Romeo pimps or “boyfriending”

- **Recruitment and grooming:** A man and a woman meet briefly at a party and afterwards, he follows her on social media. He contacts her after she posts about a breakup with her baby’s father. He is everything she ever dreamed of – a great listener, very supportive. He showers her with gifts. She is deeply in love and believes she has found the person she will build her family with. One night he takes her to a party and he tells her to be “nice” to his friends – to earn jewelry. He makes it seem like it’s no big deal at first, so she does it. But then it becomes more frequent.
- **Coercion and control:** He keeps all the money she earns and tells her he is saving for them to buy a house. Sometimes he hits her to help her understand how much he needs for her to contribute. He says he will stop loving her and she will be alone again if she keeps making trouble.
- **Exit:** After he blackens her eye, she packs up a “go” bag, calls a friend and escapes when her trafficker is out of the house.



“Understanding what happened to you as trafficking is a really important part of healing, but it took me 10 years to realize: Hey. Wow. I was trafficked, because my situation was so different from what I had seen represented as trafficking.”

– A survivor of human trafficking



2 Familial trafficking

- **Recruitment and grooming:** Mom is a survivor of rape and abuse who has been prostituting for many years. In her community, there are few options for young people and she is already struggling to support her children. When men start expressing interest in one of the kids, she tells her it's time to contribute to the household and takes her out on the streets.
- **Coercion and control:** The child loves her mother, and has no other means of support.
- **Exit:** A teacher notices the child is tired all the time and appears frightened and asks if she needs support. The child confides in her and a social services team comes together to work out a safe place for her to stay.

3 Child trafficking

- **Recruitment and grooming:** A parent sexually abuses a child himself, and offers the child to others for sexual gratification in exchange for access to other young children.
- **Coercion and control:** The child has been taught that this kind of activity is 'normal' for parents and children and warned not to tell anyone or they will be hurt. NOTE: Coercion or control is not legally required for this to be considered trafficking because the victim is a minor.
- **Exit:** An ER doctor notices signs of sexual trauma and alerts child protective services to check on the family after the visit.



Human trafficking virtually never begins with kidnapping or other violent acts. Traffickers almost always know their victims. They are friends, acquaintances who offer jobs, members of their own families or romantic partners.



KEY POINT

4 Online trawling

- **Recruitment and grooming:** A lonely, insecure teen dreams of a modeling career and frequently posts pictures of herself striking a pose. She is contacted by someone who claims to be a modeling agent and sends her a plane ticket to come to his studio. When she arrives, he takes her out on the town and tells her she has to “be nice” to some people in the business to get contracts and sends her out to prostitute.
- **Coercion and control:** She is far from home, didn’t tell her parents she was leaving, has no money and is ashamed. He tells her she is making a good impression, and that it will just take a little longer for her hard work to turn into modeling jobs.
- **Exit:** Eventually the child contacts a friend, who tells her family where she is and she is extracted from the situation.



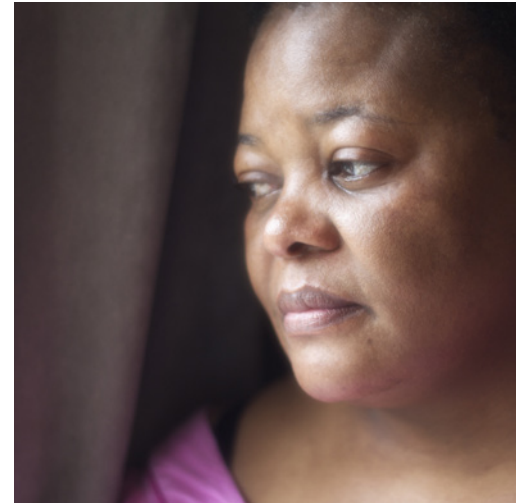
5 Survival sex

- **Recruitment and grooming:** A teen who identifies as queer runs away from home in a small Texas town when his stepfather beats him up for his sexual identity. He camps out in a bus station and meets other runaways who tell him about someone they know in Houston who will probably let him stay at his house – for a price.
- **Coercion and control:** The person who owns the house is very straightforward about the arrangement. The teen can stay there as long as they provide sex to the homeowner and occasionally, other friends. The teen does not have any other options for housing and is also seeking a community, which he hopes to find with the homeowner.
- **Exit:** The teen meets other young people who have run away. They connect him with a supportive shelter situation and he returns to school.



6 Exploitation of addiction

- **Recruitment and grooming:** A trafficker hangs outside the municipal courthouse chatting up people as they come out of drug court, where they were busted for use charges. He offers them drugs for free, and slowly feeds their addiction. Soon, in order to access drugs, the trafficker tells them that they have to engage in sex acts for money.
- **Coercion and control:** Whenever the victim begins to talk about getting clean and getting out of prostitution, stripping, or porn, the trafficker gives them more drugs and builds their dependency. He also warns that he will report their drug use to their probation officer if they leave.
- **Exit:** The victim contacts the National Human Trafficking Hotline, which helps them find a space in a drug rehab facility.



7 Exploitation of disabilities

- **Recruitment and grooming:** A young adult with a developmental disability and limited family support is placed in a group living facility.
- **Coercion and control:** At the home, residents are told that sex with strangers is part of what they are expected to do to earn their meals and rent.
- **Exit:** After many complaints from family members of other residents who have left the home, it is finally shut down and the residents are sent to other safe facilities.

8 Gangs

- **Recruitment and grooming:** A young woman grows up in a neighborhood where gangs control most of the commercial activity and the streets. She joins them for protection and a sense of belonging, and because there are few other options available. The gang tells her she has to engage in prostitution and give them the proceeds to help them pay a drug debt they owe to a rival gang.
- **Coercion and control:** If she leaves the gang, her family, their home and their business will be targeted for violence.
- **Exit:** When the gang is targeted in a police raid involving drugs, she is swept up by a trauma-informed police officer who understands the situation and connects her with appropriate supports.



9 "CEO pimping"



- **Recruitment and grooming:** A young woman who grew up in foster care ages out and is left without a place to live or guidance for her future. She meets a man at her job at a gas station who tells her he has connections in the entertainment industry and she should come dance at his strip club where she will meet producers who might need an assistant. After a few weeks, he tells her the reason she isn't getting noticed is that she does not perform sex acts in the club's back room after her shift ends.
- **Coercion and control:** When she doesn't comply, he threatens to fire and blackball her from any other clubs or music venues in the city. He also makes veiled threats about hurting her and her young child.
- **Exit:** She stays until she is able to save enough money to quit and begin community college.



PART 4

GLOSSARY AND IMAGERY —

Word and Image Choices and Why They Matter

Glossary of terms

As content creators, you know that language matters. In the anti trafficking movement, this is particularly true. The words you use in reference to the sex trades in particular often carry weight far greater than you may have intended. Here's what you should know:

SEX TRAFFICKING AND THE SEX TRADES

Decriminalization

The anti trafficking movement is largely **united around the idea that no one should be arrested for providing sexual services**. Arresting people for directly selling sex helps no one and actually makes things worse for people in trafficking situations, saddling them with criminal records that can derail their lives when they manage to leave the trafficker. But the movement is sharply divided over the more nuanced question of what else around the sex trade should be decriminalized:

Full decriminalization

- ✓ No criminal penalties for buyer or seller
- ✓ Legal to buy sex
- ✓ Legal to own a brothel
- ✓ Legal to procure/pimp

Partial decriminalization

- No criminal penalties for the seller only
- ✗ Illegal to buy sex
- ✗ Illegal to own a brothel
- ✗ Illegal to procure/pimp



TERMS

Supporters of full decriminalization believe that selling sexual services should be a choice and that a fully legalized environment will keep people who choose to be in the sex trades safer.

Supporters of partial decriminalization believe that full decriminalization will bring more sex buyers into the marketplace, but will not lead to a corresponding increase in the number of people voluntarily choosing to sell sex. That will result in a market imbalance and traffickers will step in to recruit more victims to fill the gap.

Where you fall in this debate, and it is an extremely complicated and hard-fought one, will then shape which words you choose to describe various aspects of and roles within the sex trades.



TERMS

Sex work

Most people who support full decriminalization refer to the direct sale of sexual services as sex work and those involved as sex workers. The term is consciously crafted to destigmatize the sex trades and empower people who choose to earn their living this way, which defines someone wholly by this activity.

Prostitution

Many in the anti trafficking world believe the term sex work is misleading because the activity involved is neither sex, nor work – it is rape/ assault. Instead, they use prostitution which is legally accurate and well understood. Those living this experience would generally refer to people directly selling sex as prostituted people or people in prostitution as opposed to the more stigmatizing “prostitutes.”

“One thing that drives me crazy is the whole idea of being a voice for the voiceless. I had always had a voice, even when I was being trafficked, so I find that offensive.”

– A survivor of human trafficking

RESCUE LANGUAGE

U.S. law has only recognized human trafficking as a crime since 2000. For years after, much of the work of fighting trafficking – particularly adult sex trafficking – involved helping law enforcement and government to see people as victims who they were used to thinking of as “criminals.”

To do so, many adopted language and tropes that simplified the extremely complex nature of trafficking into a more digestible and compelling narrative – of villainous evildoers, damsels in distress, and swashbuckling heroes.

But the truth is, adults in sex trafficking situations generally do not see themselves as victims while in the situation. And so they do not want or need “rescue,” in any physical sense. And if you try to get someone out of a trafficking situation before they are ready, they will likely return.

One survivor remembers an FBI agent telling her, during her trafficking situation, that she could help her get away from her pimp. The survivor says she was confused at the time. “He isn’t my pimp, I told her. That’s ridiculous. He’s my boyfriend.”

Today, our understanding of adult sex trafficking has evolved. It’s understood that that oversimplification and dramatization – use of certain tropes and language – is not only inaccurate but actually harmful because it creates a false picture of the problem, which leads to ineffective solutions and harm to survivors.

“You can’t rescue a person being trafficked. What you can do is create an opportunity for that person to leave.”

– A survivor of human trafficking



TERMS

Bottom line:

Just don’t use rescue language in any context related to helping adult survivors of sex or labor trafficking in the United States to get out of their situations. It’s inaccurate and offensive!

- ✗ Rescue
- ✗ Save
- ✗ Set free
- ✗ Voice for the voiceless

Instead consider:

- ✓ Support
- ✓ Assist
- ✓ Help to recover
- ✓ Rebuild and heal

“Words like ‘rescue’ turn people off from getting help. It’s too dramatic, like you’re hanging off a side of a cliff. But when you are in the situation, you don’t think you are being trafficked, you just think this is your life. So you don’t recognize yourself.”

– A survivor of human trafficking

Modern slavery

In the United States, the term modern slavery is generally used for emphasis or as a descriptor – as in, “human trafficking is modern slavery.”

In Europe, the term is much less controversial and is widely used in place of human trafficking. In some countries, like the United Kingdom, “modern slavery” is the legal term for this activity.

Some organizations, including Polaris, have chosen to use this as rarely as possible in order to reserve the term slavery for the incomparable institution of chattel slavery in the United States.

The language of blame

Sometimes sentence construction makes all the difference in how people understand trafficking. Specifically, certain sentence constructions imply the person selling sex has chosen to do so, while others suggest that this person may be in a trafficking situation.

“I did not conceptualize what he was doing was exploitation, I just thought it was par for the course. It was what I thought was my life. When you come from a life of abuse, things that might tip other people off aren’t a red flag for you.”

– A survivor of human trafficking



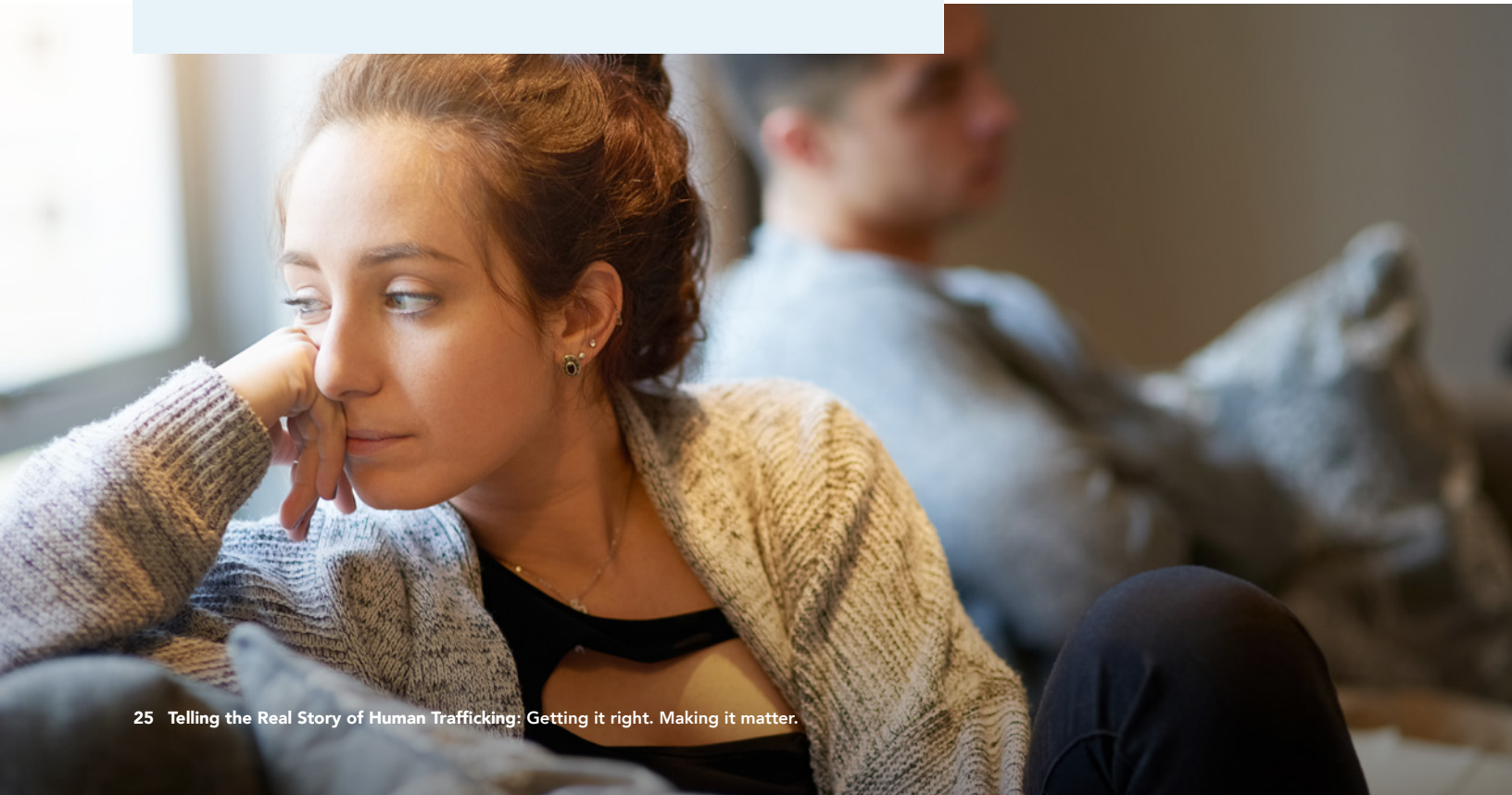
TERMS

Problematic

- “He sold sex”
- “She sold sex”

Preferred

- “He was sold for sex”
- “She was bought for sex”



Imagery

Pictures are indeed worth countless thousands of words, but they are also problematic in the anti trafficking world because they can reinforce stereotypes that paint a false picture of how trafficking looks. These kinds of images can also reignite trauma responses for survivors as they are reminded, graphically, of what it feels like to be treated as less-than-human. Below are some of the worst cliches and stereotypes:

✘ Bar codes overlaid on a real person



✘ Images that suggest survivors are voiceless or cannot speak for themselves



✘ Chains, handcuffs, rope or other hardware that suggest the physical constraint of victims



✘ Shopping bags, price tags, receipts or other images that imply a human being is a commodity of any kind, for sale, or has been purchased



✘ Human meat: People in packaging, such as women trapped in jars, children in vacuum-sealed packaging, or packaging that implies a person is "meat"



✘ Body parts: Don't use imagery that focuses solely on a single body part – a hand, a leg, etc. This sort of imagery echoes the dehumanizing aspects of trafficking



✘ Prison imagery (unless you are actually portraying someone in prison)



In addition, here are some things to consider when selecting images:

- **Race of victims and traffickers:** Different types of trafficking are more prevalent among certain communities and it is fine to accurately reflect that fact. If, however, you are reflecting, for example, “sex trafficking” generally, it would be misleading to depict only white women and girls.

It is also extremely important not to perpetuate biases and stereotypes, including, and most egregiously, the stereotype that Black men are more likely to be pimps.

- **Age:** If you are depicting sex trafficking overall, you will want to be sure that you show people of a range of ages, not just children.
- **Gender:** If you are depicting trafficking generally, and sex trafficking in particular, be mindful of the fact that men, boys, and people who identify as nonbinary or trans are trafficked as well as women and girls.
- **Emotion:** While trafficking is indeed tragic and traumatic, it doesn't always feel that way at the moment it is happening to the people affected. For accuracy, we suggest that pictures showing people who are clearly deeply unhappy as the only imagery is misleading.





PART 5

How Can My Audience and I Help?

There are a number of ways you and your audience can help to reduce and prevent trafficking, help people at risk and support survivors as they rebuild their lives.

LEARN THE STORY, NOT THE SIGNS

Most of the time, adults in sex trafficking situations look and act like anyone else. They may be happy or sad, dressed in any way, and behaving like anyone else. So the popular idea that you can spot “signs” of trafficking out of context if you do not know the people involved is somewhat misleading. But if you understand how sex trafficking really works, you may be able to offer support or help to *someone you know or someone who’s situation you understand* who appears to be at risk. The key to being able to help is having some degree of **context** and **proximity** to the situation.

SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT THE U.S. NATIONAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING HOTLINE

The U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline connects victims and survivors with services and supports to meet their individual needs and receives reports from third parties about potential situations of trafficking. The Trafficking Hotline is staffed 24-hours a day, 7 days a week, and confidential help is available in more than 200 languages. **The Trafficking Hotline is a public resource and you do not need permission to share contact information.**

Content creators can help by:

- Letting audiences know how to contact the Trafficking Hotline if someone they know appears to be in a trafficking situation.
- Sharing information about the Trafficking Hotline widely, including through “end cards” or other materials.

Sample end card:

Is your boss threatening you, withholding your paycheck, or restricting your movements? Do you feel pressured to have sex for money, shelter, or other things you need?

Contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline.

Call 1-888-373-7888 or text 233733

Free confidential help is available 24 hours a day.



Learn more:

- [Know the Story Not the Signs](#)



RESOURCE

Downloadable awareness materials:

- [U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline](#)



RESOURCE

Polaris
polarisproject.org

NATIONAL
HUMAN
TRAFFICKING
HOTLINE

humantraffickinghotline.org



RESOURCE

CONNECT TO LOCAL AND NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

People interested in learning about anti trafficking organizations in their communities can visit the referral directory of the [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#).

Additionally, please share the important message that working to reduce and prevent trafficking does not necessarily mean working only with trafficking survivors or only on programs specific to trafficking. Domestic violence shelters, food pantries, organizations for the homeless, child-serving agencies, all need help and the work they do is very much the work of reducing and preventing human trafficking by mitigating the conditions that make people vulnerable to trafficking in the first place.

“ It’s long past time to replace “rescue” with resiliency. I mean do we really think that these programs people run for survivors have such a perfect regimen and system that they are the reason a person who has experienced such trauma is successful? No. Not at all. A person’s success in healing belongs to them and is thanks to them. Period.”

– A survivor of human trafficking



KEY POINTS

Food for thought

It may seem counterintuitive but the word “trafficking” in awareness materials may in fact turn off people who are actually in trafficking situations, since most of the time, they don’t see themselves as trafficking victims.

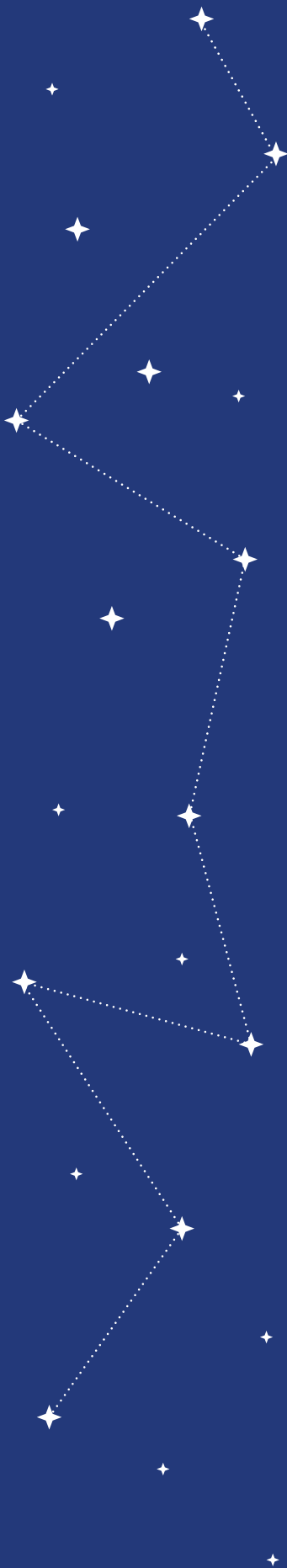
Instead, think about describing what they might be experiencing. For example:

- Is your boss threatening you? Help is available.

OR

- Do you feel pressured to have sex for money or someplace to live? You have options.





 **Polaris**

Human Trafficking During the COVID and Post-COVID Era

An analysis of data on human trafficking situations reported to the US National Human Trafficking Hotline from 2020-2022

We have long known human trafficking to be a pervasive and versatile crime, as traffickers and exploiters adjust to changing environments. The COVID-19 pandemic showed us the profound adaptability of human trafficking. A global pandemic did not stop or impede trafficking from happening and, with few exceptions, did not seem to change how it happens or to whom it happens.

In this report, we examine data from the National Human Trafficking Hotline from January 2020 through August 2022 and explore a snapshot of the top findings of human trafficking during the calamitous pandemic years. We provide top trends and answers to questions we typically report on as a part of our data analysis, and introduce how select trends that began early in the pandemic changed or continued as the crisis evolved.

ABOUT THIS DATA

This data presents information collected on situations of trafficking reported during the majority of the pandemic years, January 2020-August 2022. This report presents trends observed in data collected by the Hotline during this time frame, but does not determine cause or specifically attribute these changes and trends to the pandemic. The information provided is limited to empirical information provided directly by Hotline data.



Limitations: The National Human Trafficking Hotline's primary purpose is to assist victims and survivors. Data collection via the Hotline is limited to information relevant to the signaler's safety and privacy. Data that is not relevant to the signaler's needs, such as details of their trafficking experience, is not collected. Individuals are never asked questions specifically for data collection purposes and are asked to share only the information that they are comfortable providing for the purposes of helping them get help and stay safe. **Due to this, data presented here does not represent prevalence data, nor should it be considered a representative sample of all trafficking situations or trafficking victims in the United States.**



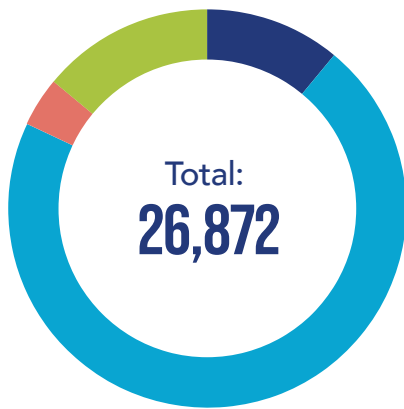
Findings Summary

- Much of what we know about how human trafficking happens and who is vulnerable remained the same during the pandemic. No substantial changes in these trends were observed during the January 2020-August 2022 timeframe.
- Trends that did change were specific to the identity of Hotline signalers and the rates of reporting of online sexual exploitation.

TOP NUMBERS

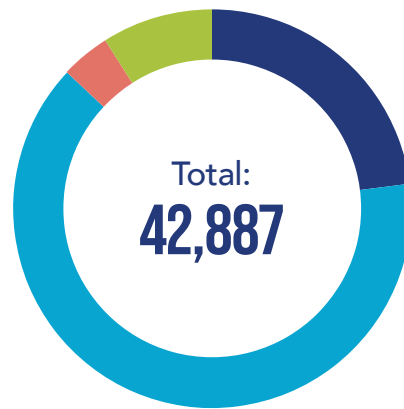
(1/1/2020-8/31/2022)

Total Trafficking Situations, by Form



Form of Trafficking	# of Situations
Labor	2,873
Sex	19,283
Sex and Labor ¹	1,005
Other/Not Specified ²	3,711
Grand total	26,872

Total Likely Trafficking Victims, by Form



Form of Trafficking	# of Likely Victims
Labor	9,735
Sex	27,370
Sex and Labor	1,862
Other/Not Specified	4,004
Grand Total	42,887³

1 Situations where the form of trafficking is 'Sex and Labor' involve both indicators of commercial sex and labor by force, fraud, or coercion, or if there are indicators of commercial sex being performed by a minor alongside indicators of labor or services happening through force, fraud, or coercion.

2 Situations where the form of trafficking is 'Other/Not Specified' typically occur when a law enforcement agent or service provider contacts the Trafficking Hotline for resources and referrals but does not disclose details about the trafficking situation due to confidentiality. This category also includes situations in which the person reporting the information references human trafficking but does not provide further detail regarding the presence of labor or commercial sex. These cases are often submitted to the Trafficking Hotline through anonymous online tip reports.

3 This count is non-cumulative, as individuals may be victimized in multiple situations.



Trafficking Victims During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Hotline data during the pandemic showed that victim demographics largely followed existing trends.



In situations of sex trafficking, 37% of potential victims were minors; in situations of labor trafficking, 9% of potential victims were minors.



In situations of sex trafficking, 80% of victims were female, and in situations of sex and labor trafficking, 66% of victims were female. In situations of labor trafficking where gender was identified, most victims were male.



In situations where the victims' race or ethnicity was known,⁴ Latino/a-identifying people comprised 82% of labor trafficking situations. In sex trafficking situations where the victims' race or ethnicity was known, victims were African American (21%), Asian (25%), Latino/a (20%), and White/Caucasian (32%).

Hotline data also showed that vulnerabilities to trafficking during the pandemic were similar to those reported prior the the pandemic. In situations where vulnerabilities were known,⁵ the top five risk factors included:

TOP 5 RISK FACTORS/VULNERABILITIES

(1/1/2020-8/31/2022)

Labor Trafficking

Recent Migration/Relocation

Unaccompanied Foreign Minor⁶

Unstable Housing

Self-Reported Economic Hardship

Substance Use Concern

Sex Trafficking

Substance Use Concern

Unstable Housing

Runaway/Homeless Youth

Recent Migration/Relocation

Mental Health Concern

These risk factors are consistent with pre-pandemic data and highlight the need to address systemic issues that create vulnerability to trafficking, including but not limited to those mentioned here.

⁴ Race/ethnicity information was only provided for 26% of victims (n = 11,242).

⁵ Risk factors/vulnerabilities were known for 30% of victims (n = 12,852).

⁶ "Unaccompanied Foreign Minor" is selected as a risk factor or vulnerability when, prior to the start of exploitation relevant to the described trafficking situation, the victim or survivor could have ever been described as a youth under the age of 18 who entered the United States, without a parent, relative, or other responsible adult to care for them. Non-citizen children who enter the U.S. with relatives who are unable to care for them are still considered to be unaccompanied.



Means and Methods of Trafficking During the Pandemic

The Trafficking Hotline segments human trafficking into at least 25 types within the categories of sex trafficking and labor trafficking. Analysis of data reported during this period demonstrates that victims were largely trafficked in the same venues and in the same ways as they were pre-pandemic. Hotline data also showed that trends in exploiter relationship; recruitment tactics; and method of force, fraud, or coercion also remained largely unchanged during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Victims were trafficked by someone they knew. For both sex trafficking and labor trafficking, in situations where the relationship was disclosed, traffickers were almost always someone the victim knew.⁷ Across all forms of trafficking, the top relationship types were employer, familial relationship, or romantic partner.

TOP 5 EXPLOITER TYPES

(1/1/2020-8/31/2022)

Labor Trafficking

Exploiter's Relationship to Victim	% of Victims
Employer	85%
Familial Relationship to Victim(s)	7%
Recruiter (Non-Employer)	5%
Smuggler	4%
Intimate Partner of Victim(s)	3%

Sex Trafficking

Exploiter's Relationship to Victim	% of Victims
Familial Relationship to Victim(s)	44%
Intimate Partner of Victim(s)	39%
Employer	6%
Dealer/Illicit Substance Provider	5%
Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: No Controller	3%

Recruitment tactics used by traffickers also remained largely unchanged. For situations of labor trafficking, job offer or advertisement remained the dominant recruitment tactic. For situations of sex trafficking, familial trafficking and trafficking by intimate partners were the top reported recruitment tactics.

Victims were trafficked in escort services, pornography, illicit massage businesses, domestic work, and agriculture. In situations of sex trafficking, escort services and pornography were the most reported types of sex trafficking. In situations of labor trafficking, victims most often reported being trafficked in either domestic work or agriculture and animal husbandry. While these data remain largely consistent with pre-COVID data, it is worth noting that since 2018, the number of situations of sex trafficking in pornography has steadily increased. While escort services remain the top reported type of sex trafficking, trafficking in the pornography industry is being reported more and more. For situations of labor trafficking, the only notable difference is the deep decline in traveling sales crews⁸ and begging/peddling as a type of labor trafficking.⁹

7 Exploiter types were known for 32% of victims (n = 13,871).

8 Begging/peddling was the third most reported type of labor trafficking in 2017 (<https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2017NHTHStats-1.pdf>).

9 Traveling sales crews were the third most reported type of labor trafficking in 2016, 2018, and 2019 (<https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2016-Statistics.pdf>, https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Polaris_National_Hotline_2018_Statistics_Fact_Sheet.pdf, <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Polaris-2019-US-National-Human-Trafficking-Hotline-Data-Report.pdf>).



TOP TYPES OF TRAFFICKING

(1/1/2020-8/31/2022)

Labor Trafficking Situations

Type	# of Situations
Domestic Work	542
Agriculture & Animal Husbandry	277
Restaurants & Food Service	192
Construction	178
Illicit Activities	157

Sex Trafficking Situations

Type	# of Situations
Escort Services	2,781
Pornography	2,212
Illicit Massage, Health, & Beauty	1,448
Residential-Based Commercial Sex	1,355
Personal Sexual Servitude	637

Traffickers used economic abuse, threats, and emotional abuse and manipulation to traffic victims.¹⁰ During the pandemic years, victims of labor trafficking reported financial abuse, such as wage withholding; threats, such as immigration threats; and excessive working hours as the primary methods of trafficking. Victims of sex trafficking reported emotional and physical abuse and inducing or exploiting substance abuse issues as primary methods traffickers used to recruit and trap victims.¹¹ These reflect the same tactics traffickers used pre-pandemic, with one exception: The use of isolation as a means of force in situations of sex trafficking, which was the top reported method in 2017 and 2018, has dropped out of the top five reported methods.

Other notable observations include the top reported method of control. During the COVID-19 timeframe, inducing or exploiting substance abuse issues was the top reported method of coercion in situations of sex trafficking. While the top reported method of coercion in sex trafficking has varied from year to year in the past, inducing or exploiting substance abuse regularly appears in the top three, suggesting this finding is not unusual. In situations of labor trafficking, taking/withholding earnings, excessive working hours, and threats to immigration were the top reported methods of coercion.

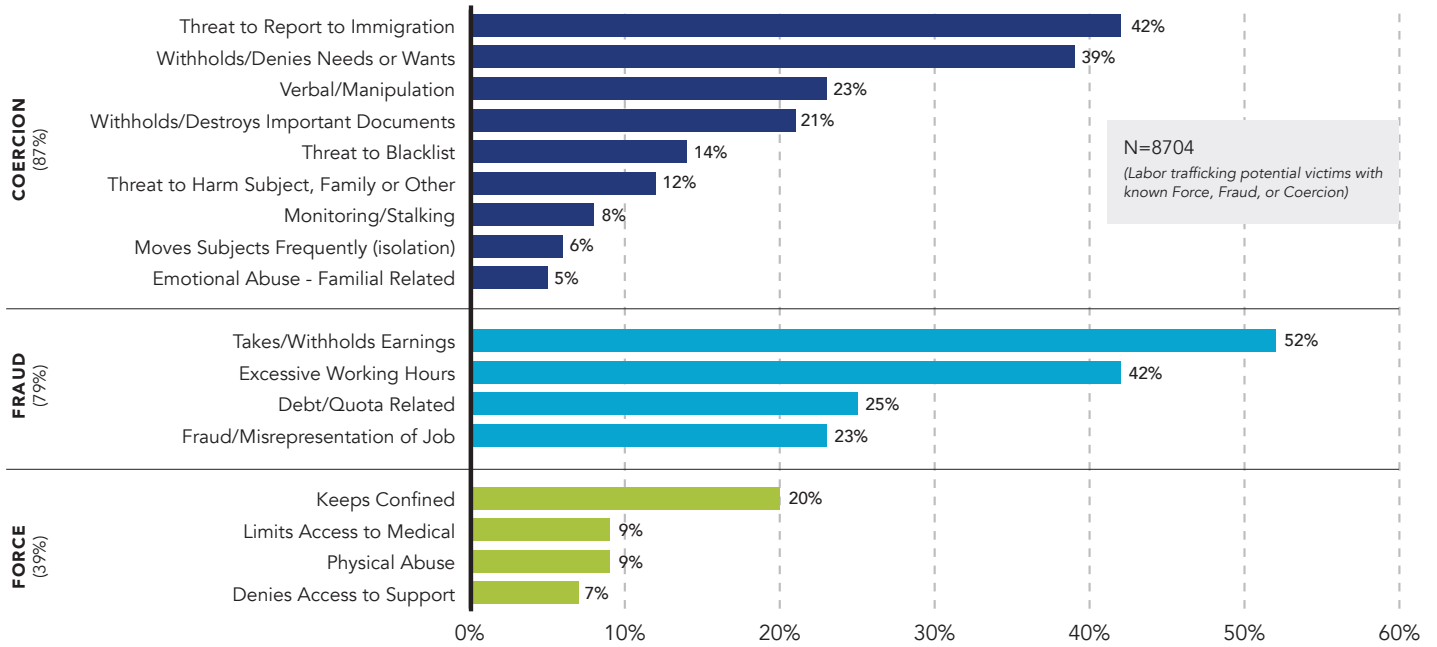
¹⁰ Force, fraud, and coercion was specified for 72% of victims (n = 30,752).

¹¹ A minor in commercial sex is not included but is sufficient to classify a situation as human trafficking based on federal law.



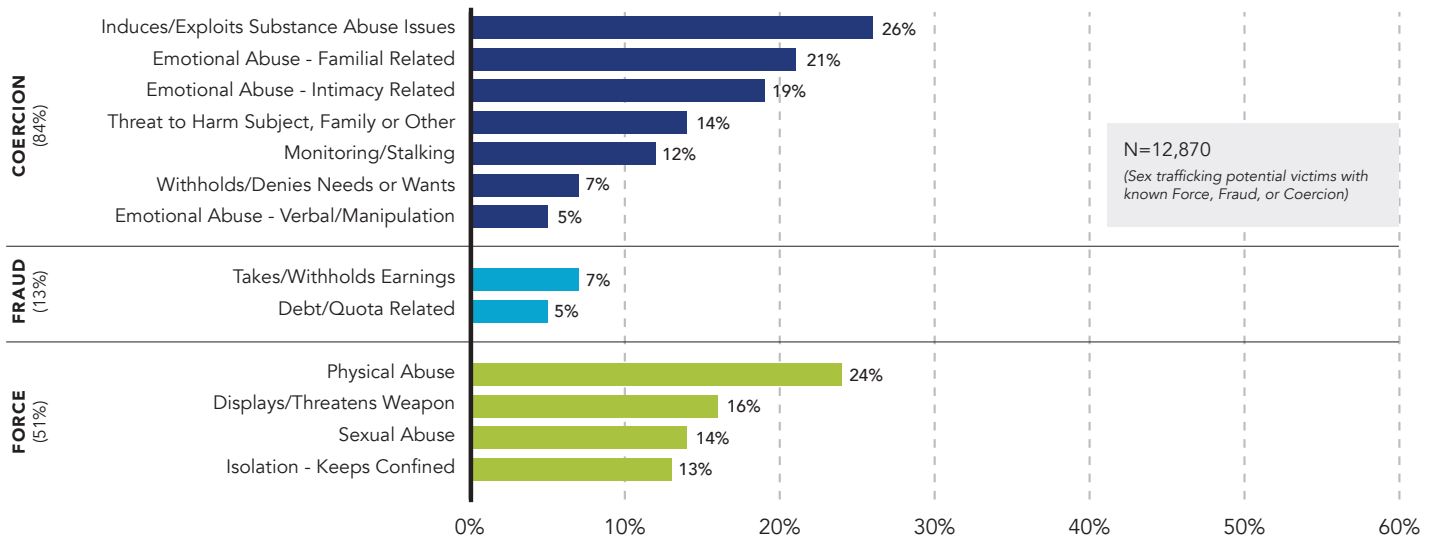
EXPLOITATION OF VICTIMS OF LABOR TRAFFICKING

(1/1/2020-8/31/2022)



EXPLOITATION OF VICTIMS OF SEX TRAFFICKING

(1/1/2020-8/31/2022)





Getting Help

For both sex and labor trafficking during the COVID pandemic, **interaction with friends and family was the most common point of access to help for likely victims.**¹² Friends and family were also reported as the top access point for victims dating back to 2017, suggesting that top access points were largely unaffected by the pandemic.



The top referral request in labor trafficking situations was for legal services.



The top referral request in sex trafficking situations was for shelter or housing.

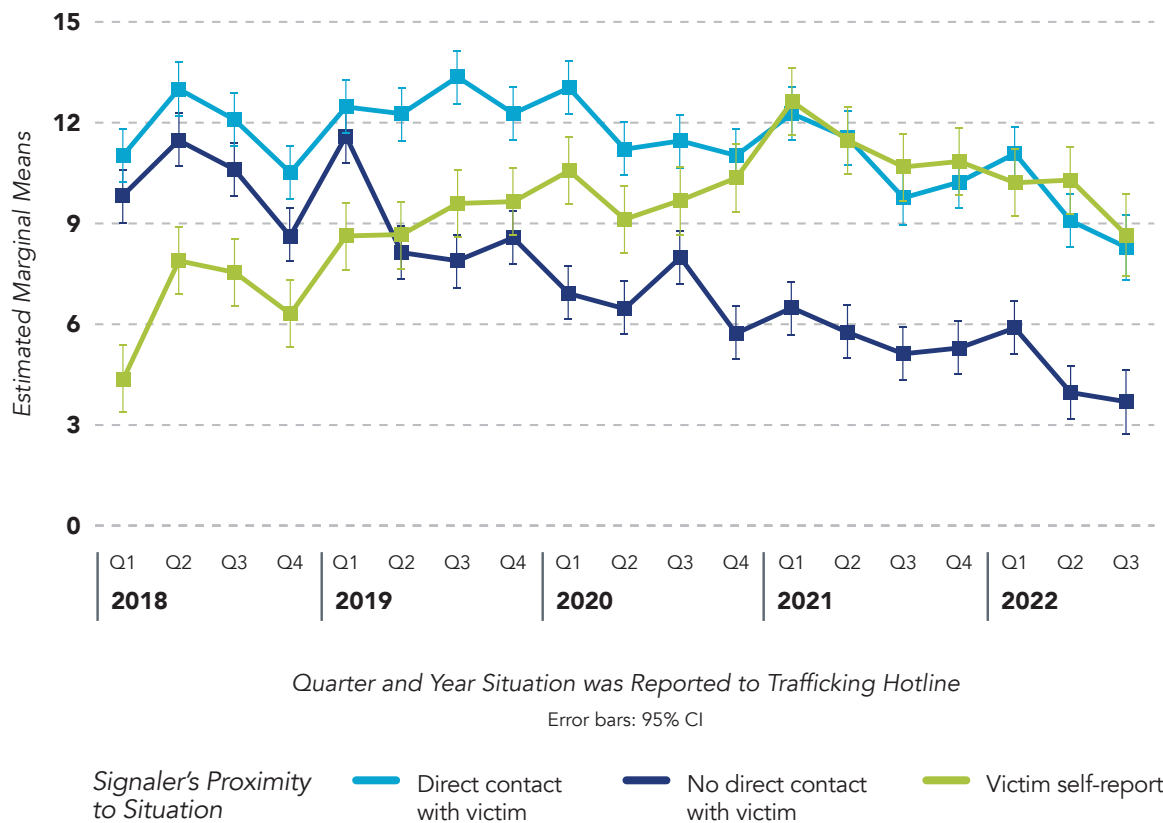
Five Years of Trafficking Trends (2018-2022)

Victims of trafficking increasingly self-reported their trafficking situations to the Hotline.

Conversely, people with no relationship to or interaction with the victim (e.g., bystanders) were involved in fewer reports trafficking situations as the pandemic went on.



DAILY NUMBER OF SITUATIONS



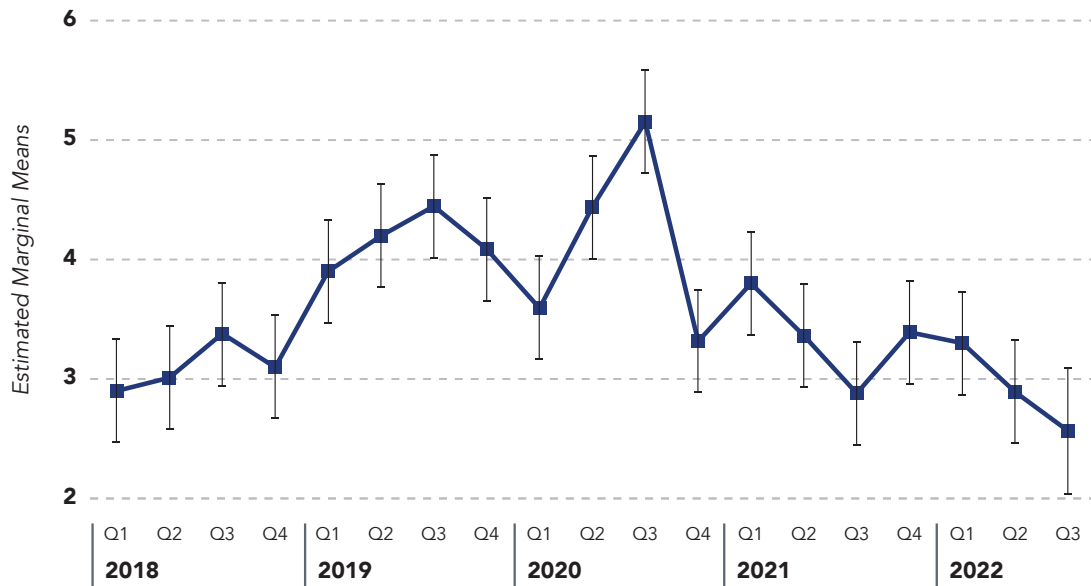
¹² Access points were known for 22% of victims (n = 9,549).



Although situations of online sexual exploitation went up in the early months of the pandemic, this trend did not continue as the crisis evolved. This change in data could reflect either an actual decrease in the amount of online sexual exploitation or a decrease in reporting of online sexual exploitation to the Hotline.



AVERAGE DAILY SITUATIONS INVOLVING ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION



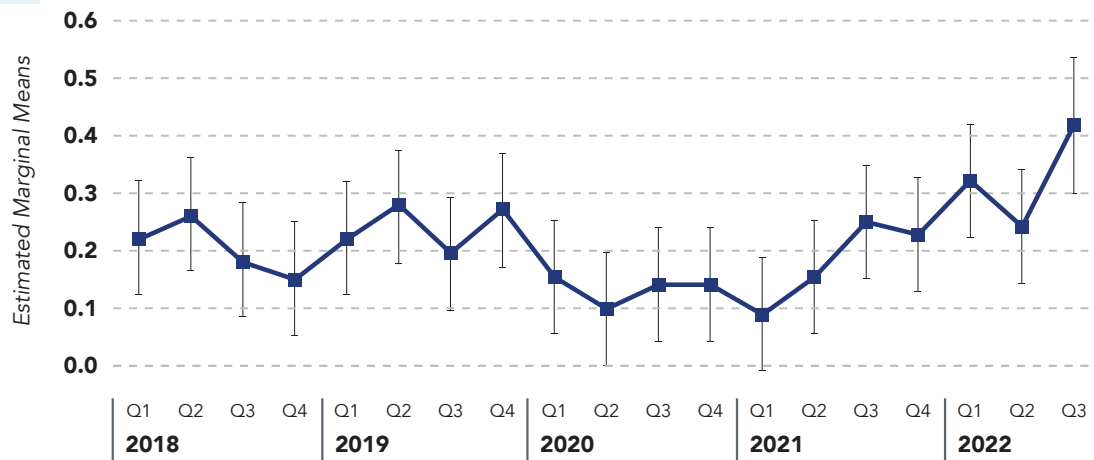
Quarter and Year Situation was Reported to Trafficking Hotline

Error bars: 95% CI

During the pandemic, the number of labor trafficking situations involving restaurants and food service went down as businesses were temporarily or permanently shuttered, but now that trend is reversing. Starting in late 2021, the Hotline began to see a rise in situations of labor trafficking in the restaurant industry, a trend that continued through 2022.



AVERAGE DAILY SITUATIONS INVOLVING TYPOLOGY OF RESTAURANTS AND FOOD SERVICE



Quarter and Year Situation was Reported to Trafficking Hotline

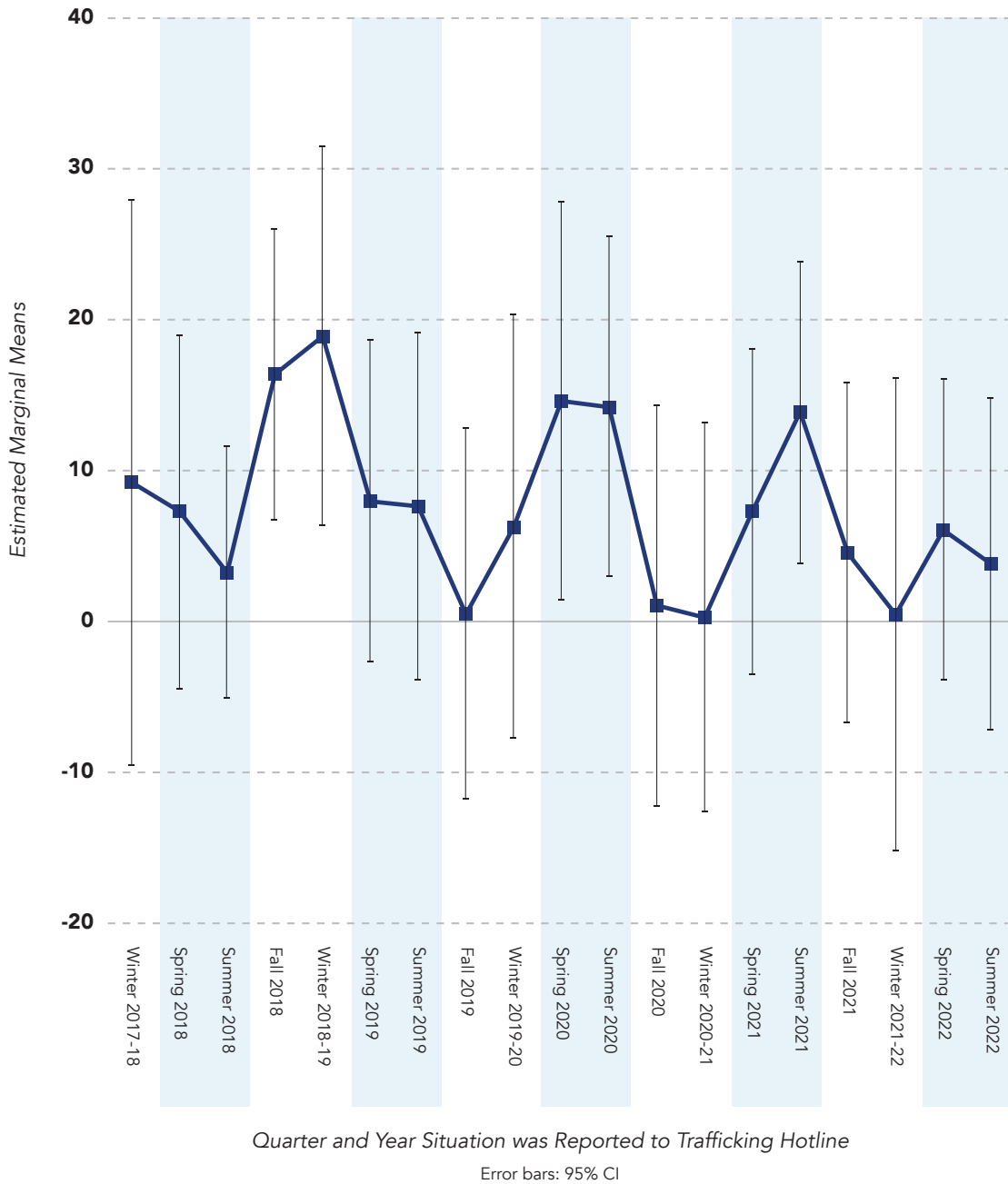
Error bars: 95% CI



During the pandemic, average daily victims of labor trafficking among H-2A visa holders did not vary significantly compared to previous growing seasons. The H-2A program grants temporary work visas to foreign nationals, allowing them to work in the agricultural industry for up to a year. H-2A visa holders are especially vulnerable to labor trafficking due to factors such as the economic situation in their home countries, lack of knowledge about their rights, and their recent migration. Analysis of Hotline data stretching back to 2017 demonstrates reports of labor trafficking of H-2A visa holders remained fairly consistent in pattern and at levels similar to those observed pre-pandemic, indicating that labor trafficking of H-2A visa holders appears to have been unimpeded by the pandemic.



AVERAGE DAILY VICTIMS WITH H2-A VISAS





Conclusions: The Wrong Kind of Resilience

Demonstrated by the above data, trends in human trafficking type and recruitment tactics as reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline did not change significantly over the course of the COVID pandemic. Human trafficking in the US remained remarkably unimpeded by the pandemic and regrettably resilient.

This analysis suggests that the vulnerabilities that make people susceptible to trafficking in the first place— the broken systems that enable traffickers to target people who are unhoused, impacted by substance use, economically marginalized, or have recently migrated; and the unending demand for commercial sex and cheap labor— continue to drive human trafficking. Even in the midst of a global pandemic that suppressed commercial activity across industries, human trafficking continued to thrive.

Even in the midst of a global pandemic that suppressed commercial activity across industries, human trafficking continued to thrive.

To put an end to trafficking, we must work together to address the underlying situations that make people vulnerable, strengthen our systems to care for the most marginalized and disenfranchised, and hold abusers and exploiters accountable for their crimes.

And most importantly, we must listen to human trafficking victims and survivors. It is encouraging to see the longer-term growth in the proportion of victims self-reporting their situations to the Trafficking Hotline — indicating growing awareness and trust, as well as improving the assistance the Trafficking Hotline can provide. As victims and survivors share their experiences and expertise, it is our responsibility to listen, respond, and amplify their voices as we work to address root causes and broken systems together.

If you or anyone you know is being pressured to exchange sex for money or something of value; or is being threatened or otherwise forced to work against your will, help is available:



CALL 1-888-373-7888



TEXT BEFREE 233733

The data displayed in this report was generated based on information communicated to the National Human Trafficking Hotline via phone, email, online tip report, SMS, or webchat. The National Human Trafficking Hotline cannot verify the accuracy of the information reported. This is not a comprehensive report on the scale or scope of human trafficking within the United States. These statistics are accurate as of 11/3/2023, but are subject to change as new information emerges or as data cleanup occurs.

Since awareness of both human trafficking and the existence of a national victim service hotline is still limited, this data set should be interpreted as a limited sample of actual victim or trafficking incident data, rather than a representation of all existent victims or incidents of human trafficking. The information reported by the Trafficking Hotline is only able to represent who has access to and knowledge of the Trafficking Hotline, who has the means to reach out, and who is more likely to self-identify as a likely victim or someone in need of assistance. The data reported by Polaris should not be compared to the findings of more rigorous academic studies or prevalence estimates.

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 \$5 million annually with 71% percentage funded by ACF/HHS and \$2.06 million and 29% percentage funded by non-government sources. The contents are those of the authors 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.