



## **Introduction to Human Trafficking**

September 2024

### **Human Trafficking Defined**

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Human trafficking is the use of force, fraud, or coercion to exploit someone for profit.<sup>1</sup> It occurs in many forms across the world, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, debt bondage, and domestic servitude — impacting over an estimated 27 million people worldwide and 1 million people in the United States.<sup>2</sup> It is the fastest growing criminal industry and generates an estimated \$236 billion in worldwide profits.<sup>3</sup>

Human trafficking is a subcategory of modern-day slavery, which is a broader term that includes people in forced marriages. Modern-day slavery harms nearly 50 million people worldwide. This exploitation is deeply embedded within global supply chains. A 2023 analysis of G20 imports (which accounts for 85% of global GDP trade) found nearly \$500 billion worth of goods were likely connected to modern-day slavery.<sup>4</sup>

Human trafficking does not require smuggling across borders, kidnapping, nor physical violence. Traffickers tend to use deception, manipulation, and exploitation of others' existing vulnerabilities. Once traffickers recruit victims, they retain control through a variety of means, including psychological manipulation, physical violence, and threats.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, inducing a minor to perform a commercial sex act is human trafficking regardless of force, fraud, or coercion due to their lack of ability to consent.<sup>6</sup>

### **Human Trafficking Statistics**

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#### ***Global Estimates***

International Labour Organization estimates of annual modern-day slavery significantly increased — from 40.3 million people impacted in 2016 to 49.6 million people in 2021.<sup>7</sup>

Victim demographics vary by location and trafficking type. A snapshot of global statistics finds:

- Sex trafficking — Over 6 million people are sex-trafficked, including 1.7 million children and mostly, the majority of whom are females.
- Labor trafficking — Over 17 million people are forced into labor trafficking.
- State-imposed trafficking — Approximately 4 million people globally are forced into labor by state authorities, such as through forced military conscription, prison labor, or economic development projects or agricultural labor.<sup>8</sup>

- Child trafficking — An estimated 12% of total trafficking victims are children, over half of whom were sexually exploited.<sup>9</sup>

### ***United States Estimates***

According to the federal Trafficking In Persons (TIP) Report, traffickers in the U.S. exploit victims from almost every region of the world through a range of illicit and illegal industries, including hospitality, agriculture, construction, manufacturing, salons, retail, drug distribution, child care, and domestic work.<sup>10</sup>

Despite many victims remaining undetected, reports to the National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH) offer a glimpse into U.S. trafficking.<sup>11</sup> According to the most recent 2023 data:

- The NHTH identified 9,619 cases involving 16,999 victims totaling 197,000 known victims since 2007. As in previous years, the majority of cases involved sex trafficking (5,572 v. 1,558 labor trafficking) and females (6,863 v. 1,480 males).

Both identified cases and victims increased in 2023. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened human trafficking and victim identification. This is reflected in trafficking reports peaking in pre-COVID 2018 and 2019, followed by declines in 2020, 2021, and 2022.<sup>12</sup>

To understand the impact of the pandemic and potential long-term trends changes, the Polaris Project analysed January 2020–August 2022 hotline data.<sup>13</sup> They found:

- The rates of online sexual exploitation temporarily spiked in the early months of the pandemic. While escort services remain the top reported type of sex trafficking, trafficking in the pornography industry has steadily increased since 2018.
- Restaurant/food services labor trafficking dropped during the pandemic as businesses were shuttered, but that trend has since reversed.
- Otherwise, vulnerabilities to human trafficking, victim demographics, top venues, and exploiter relationships and tactics followed pre-pandemic trends.
  - Sex trafficking — When known, 37% of victims were minors and 80% female.
  - Labor trafficking — When known, 9% of victims were minors, majority male, and 82% Latino/a-identifying.
  - Victims almost always knew their trafficker, with employers, family, and romantic partners the leading relationship types.

### ***Pennsylvania Estimates***

The NHTH has identified over 4,800 trafficking victims in Pennsylvania since 2007. Similar to national trends, 2023 identified cases and victims increased from 2022, yet still falls below pre-pandemic identification in 2018 and 2019.<sup>14</sup> Specifically:

- In 2023, there were 220 cases impacting 469 victims. Where known, the majority of victims were female (173 v. 35 male) and adults (163 v. 72 minors).

- Sex trafficking — When known, 142 sex trafficking cases occurred primarily in the residence-based commercial sex venue, followed by illicit massage businesses.
- Labor trafficking — Labor trafficking, including domestic work, accounted for 29 cases.

## **Vulnerabilities**

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Human trafficking can happen to anyone, no matter location, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity. However, traffickers tend to exploit common pre-existing vulnerabilities, including:<sup>15</sup>

- Financial instability/poverty or economic need.
- An unstable living situation, including a dysfunctional family environment and young people experiencing homelessness, the juvenile justice system, or foster care.
- A history of enduring domestic violence or sexual abuse, with intimate partner exploitation among leading types of trafficking.
- A mental, behavioral, or neurological disorder or physical disability.
- Being an undocumented immigrant or having recently relocated.
- An addiction to drugs or alcohol, or having a caregiver or family member who struggles with substance abuse.

A federal analysis finds that U.S. traffickers often target those who experience compounding forms of discrimination and vulnerabilities such as homelessness, foster care, incarceration, and immigration.<sup>16</sup>

## **Trafficker Profile**

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Though traffickers' backgrounds and positions vary, they tend to have a power advantage over victims. Some examples include business owners exploiting workers, intimate partners exploiting their significant other, parents exploiting their children, adolescents/young adults exploiting younger schoolmates, and even governance-type groups using violence or threats to control victims in a community or region.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to physical and emotional threats and abuse, means of coercion include:

- Economic abuse, such as withholding pay.
- Isolation from family and friends.
- Promising to provide for victims' needs to impose control, including "grooming" tactics premised on false love and provision, isolation, and dependency.
- Perpetuating a cycle of emotional, psychological, and physical trauma, unhealthy attachment, and control.
- Taking victims' identity documents, including birth certificates, passports, and drivers' licenses.

Disturbingly, increasing numbers of U.S. victims are exploited by family or intimate partners.<sup>18</sup> An analysis of 2021 NHTH calls found:<sup>19</sup>

- Of total cases, 33% were exploited by family members or caregivers—a 5% increase from the previous year (following a drastic 47% increase from 2019 to 2020)—and 28% by intimate partners, a 6% increase from 2020.
- Of sex trafficking victims, 45% were exploited by family members or caregivers and 40% by intimate partners. These percentages were similarly consistent in the 2020-2022 data analysis.

Traffickers increasingly use social media to recruit and advertise victims. Case data from 2021 finds that 43% of human trafficking survivors were recruited via dating websites, Facebook, Instagram, chat groups, and other mobile apps.<sup>20</sup> Prior reporting found this percentage increasing for younger victims in particular.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

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Amidst these concerning statistics and the prevalence of human trafficking, every community member has a crucial role to play.

First, family, friends, and neighbors can be a vital helpline to those in need. Since 2017 and through the pandemic, friend and family interactions were the most common access point to help. Community members, by understanding trafficking indicators, also drive victim reporting and access to services. Red flags to know include: signs of physical abuse, neglect, malnutrition, and fear; a controlling employer (such as providing transportation or housing), a worker receiving little to no wages, a young person romantically involved with an older individual or in commercial sex, and sudden changes in appearance and/or behavior, including drug use.

Second, by contributing to societal awareness, advocating for private and public sector changes, and supporting direct services, communities can bring accountability to traffickers and increase paths of restoration for victims.

These simple steps can help create a world in which every person has a chance at freedom and restoration.

Suspect a case of human trafficking?

1. Call 911.
2. Contact ChildLine if a minor is involved.
3. Call or text the National Human Trafficking Hotline, which operates 24/7 and offers over 200 languages.
  - a. Call: 1 (888) 373-7888
  - b. Text: 233733 (Text "HELP" or "INFO")

**We believe that together, we can make a difference.**

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