Introduction to Human Trafficking
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Human Trafficking Defined

Human trafficking is the use of force, fraud, or coercion to exploit someone for profit.[1] 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.[2] It is the fastest growing criminal industry and generates an estimated $236 billion in worldwide profits.[3]

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.[4]

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.[5] 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.[6]

Human Trafficking Statistics

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.[7]

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, 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.
- Child trafficking — An estimated 12% of total trafficking victims are children, over half of whom were sexually exploited.[8]

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.[9]

Despite many victims remaining undetected, reports to the National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH) offer a glimpse into U.S. trafficking.[10] According to the most recent 2025 data:

- The NHTH identified 15,085 cases involving 21,457 victims, totaling 268,723 known victims since 2007. As in previous years, the majority of cases involved sex trafficking (6,201 v. 2,400 labor trafficking) and females (9,931 v. 3,272 males).

Identified cases increased in 2025—reaching the highest level since single year recording began in 2015—while the number of victims held relatively steady.[11]

Pennsylvania Estimates

The NHTH has identified over 5,954 trafficking victims in Pennsylvania since 2007. Similar to national trends, 2025 identified cases increased for the fourth straight year, reaching their highest number since 2015.[12] The number of identified victims dipped to 2023 levels. Specifically:

- **In 2025, 299 cases impacted 497 victims**. Where known, the majority of victims were female (227 v. 65 male) and adults (202 v. 52 minors).
- Sex trafficking accounted for 144 cases primarily in the illicit massage/spa businesses venue, followed by residence-based commercial sex.
- Labor trafficking accounted for 52 cases, including restaurant/food business and agricultural work.

Vulnerabilities

Human trafficking can happen to anyone, no matter location, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity. However, traffickers tend to exploit common pre-existing vulnerabilities, including:[13]

- 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.[14]

Trafficker Profile

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.[15]

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.[16] An analysis of 2021 NHTH calls found:[17]

- 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.[18] Prior reporting found this percentage increasing for younger victims in particular.[19]

Conclusion

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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