



An Introduction to Human Trafficking in the United States

Human trafficking, also known as trafficking in persons or modern-day slavery, is a crime that involves the exploitation of a person for the purpose of compelled labor or a commercial sex act. While the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has long enforced criminal laws against involuntary servitude and slavery, the enactment of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 brought new benefits, services, and criminal penalties to address human trafficking in a more comprehensive and effective way.



What Is Human Trafficking?

The TVPA defines a “severe form of trafficking in persons” as—

- Sex trafficking (the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act) in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or
- The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.

trafficking come from all walks of life and are entrapped in many different settings. Anyone can be a victim, regardless of their race, color, national origin, disability, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, or citizenship status. While there is no defining characteristic that all victims share, traffickers frequently prey on individuals who are poor, vulnerable, living in an unsafe situation, or are in search of a better life. These victims are deceived by false promises of love, a good job, or a stable life and are lured into situations where they are forced to work under deplorable conditions with little to no pay. Whether made to work in agriculture, a factory, or a strip club, forced into commercial sex, or abused in a home as a domestic servant, federal law recognizes these individuals as victims of human trafficking.

Who Are the Victims of Human Trafficking?

Anyone who is compelled (through force, fraud, or coercion) to perform any kind of work or commercial sex act by another person, and any minor engaged in a commercial sex act, is a human trafficking victim. Victims of human

Who Are the Traffickers and How Do They Trap Victims?

Traffickers are similarly diverse. There are traffickers working alone to deceive and prey on victims; businesses that enslave their workers;

families who have been in the business of human trafficking for generations or have just begun exploiting a family member; criminal networks, large and small; and front businesses that appear legitimate at first glance but disguise human trafficking.

An individual can be enslaved without chains. Indeed, traffickers often go beyond physical abuse and use extreme forms of psychological abuse that exploit victims' vulnerabilities to maintain control over victims and prevent them from escaping. To achieve their ends, traffickers instill fear of arrest or deportation, use threats of harm to a family member, perpetuate shame or guilt about what is happening, and warn of financial ruin. These experiences are traumatizing and often result in psychological dissociation, distrust, and gaps in the victim's memory that make recounting a clear and complete story difficult. In addition, traffickers sometimes promote drug dependencies among their victims, keeping the victims reliant on the trafficker for access to the substances that fuel their addiction.

How Many Human Trafficking Victims Are in the United States?

It is difficult to measure the magnitude of human trafficking. DOJ's National Institute of Justice supports an array of research projects working to estimate the prevalence of human trafficking in the United States. You can find the most recent research on their Web site at www.nij.gov.

What Services Do Victims of Human Trafficking Need?

While each trafficking victim is unique, the emergency and long-term services that trafficking victims often require include intensive case management, victim advocacy, shelter and housing, food, medical and dental care, mental health treatment, substance abuse treatment, support groups, interpretation and translation services, immigration and other legal assistance, literacy education, and employment and training services.

Primary sources of federal grant funding for services specific to trafficking victims are the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office on Trafficking in Persons and DOJ's Office for Victims of Crime. When victims are involved in trafficking investigations and prosecutions, some victim assistance is also provided by system-based victim/witness coordinators and victim specialists housed within federal agencies, such as DOJ's U.S. Attorneys' Offices and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Homeland Security Investigations. Victims of human trafficking are also regularly identified and served by individuals and organizations working with related vulnerable populations—such as child welfare systems, runaway and homeless youth programs, and domestic violence shelters.

For more information, please visit www.ovc.gov/trafficking and www.ovcttac.gov/taskforceguide.

