

Briefing: Modern Slavery & Human Trafficking in the United States and Globally

Overview:

- **Modern Slavery** is an umbrella term encompassing slavery, servitude, forced or compulsory labor and human trafficking. Victims of modern slavery are unable to leave their situation of exploitation and are controlled by threats, punishment, violence, coercion and deception.
- **Human Trafficking** is a crime that involves exploiting a person for labor, services, or commercial sex. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 and its subsequent reauthorizations define human trafficking as:
 - a) Sex trafficking 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
 - b) 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. (22 U.S.C. § 7102(9)).
- Slavery and human trafficking violate human rights, denying people of their right to life, freedom and security.
- Human trafficking victims can be any age, race, gender identity, sex, ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, and socioeconomic class.
- International law uses a definition based on an Action-Means-Purpose (AMP) Model. This can also be helpful in understanding human trafficking within federal law. Human trafficking occurs when a trafficker takes an Action, and then employs the Means of force, fraud or coercion for the Purpose of compelling the victim to provide commercial sex acts, labor, or services.

Human Trafficking Settings:

- Sex Trafficking: escort services, illicit massage services, street sexual solicitation, residential brothels, bars and strip clubs, pornography production, personal sexual servitude, and livestreaming of sexual exploitation.
- Labor Trafficking: domestic work (such as housekeepers), restaurants, peddling and begging, agriculture, beauty services, construction, hotels, landscaping, entertainment, commercial cleaning services, manufacturing, fishing, mining, carnivals, forestry, healthcare, recreational facilities, and even criminal enterprises (such as illicit drug dealing).

Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Statistics – Global:

- There are **27.6 million people** living in modern-day slavery, with 19.9 million victims of labor trafficking in private or state-run industries, 1.4 million held in domestic servitude, and 6.3 million victims of sex trafficking ([ILO, Walk Free Foundation, and IOM, 2022](#)). *[PLEASE NOTE: You may see references to a different global figure of **49.6 million victims**. This is because in some jurisdictions, the 22 million people in forced marriages are included in the total, but according to US definitions, 27.6 million is the more accurate statistic]*
- Women and girls are disproportionately affected by modern slavery, accounting for 54% of all victims ([ILO, Walk Free Foundation, and IOM, 2022](#)) and 78% of victims of forced commercial sexual exploitation.
- 1.7 million children are trapped in forced commercial sexual exploitation globally ([ILO, Walk Free Foundation, and IOM, 2022](#)). 1 in 4 victims of modern slavery globally are children.
- It is a multi-billion dollar criminal industry. Commercial sexual exploitation generates an estimated \$172 billion a year globally, while forced labor, including domestic work, agriculture and other economic activities generates \$64 billion a year. This totals **\$236 billion** ([ILO, 2024](#)).
- Human trafficking is thought to be the world's joint third-largest criminal enterprise, after counterfeiting and drug trafficking and on a similar scale to illegal logging. ([Global Financial Integrity report, 2017](#)).

Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Statistics – USA:

- On any given day, there are 1,091,000 people living in conditions of modern-day slavery in the USA. This equates to 3.3 victims for every 1,000 people in the country. ([Walk Free / Global Slavery Index, 2023](#)).
- In 2024, the [National Human Trafficking Hotline and website received 32,309 reports of suspected human trafficking cases, involving 21,865 victims](#). Where the trafficking type was known, 6,647 were sex trafficking, 2,220 were labor trafficking, and 1,360 were both.
- The [U.S. Department of Labor](#) has identified 156 goods from 77 countries made by forced and child labor.
- The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) estimates that [1 in 6 endangered runaways reported to them](#) were likely sex trafficking victims. The NCMEC also received [nearly three times as many reports of online enticement in 2024 \(546,000 reports\)](#) vs 2023 (186,000 reports), continuing earlier trends.
- 95% of the world's online CSAM (child sexual abuse material) is located in Europe and the US (Internet Watch Foundation, 2019).

Vulnerabilities:

- Individuals who are particularly vulnerable to being trafficked include children in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, runaway and homeless youth, individuals with substance misuse issues, American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) communities, and migrant laborers, including undocumented workers (Dept. of State, 2020; US President's Interagency Task Force, 2013).
- Human traffickers exploit many vulnerabilities to victimize people. Vulnerabilities include:
 - lack of safety at home from violence, abuse, and neglect;
 - homelessness or runaway status;
 - mental health concerns;
 - involvement in the child welfare system or juvenile justice system;
 - poverty or economic hardship;
 - isolation from family and/or community;
 - recent migration, relocation, or displacement;
 - unstable living situation; and
 - substance abuse.
- While it can happen to anyone, some evidence suggests that generational trauma, historic oppression, discrimination, and other societal factors and inequities create community-wide vulnerabilities (Polaris, 2021).

Trafficking Tactics:

- Human traffickers use various forms of force, fraud, and coercion to control and exploit victims. These forms include imposing of debt, fraudulent employment opportunities, false promises of love or a better life, psychological coercion, and violence or threats of violence.
- Trafficking is a power and control dynamic- traffickers employ a variety of control tactics, the most common include physical and emotional abuse and threats, isolation from friends and family, and economic abuse.
- Victims become trapped and fear leaving for myriad reasons, including psychological trauma, lack of documentation, shame, emotional attachment and dependency, distrust of systems and law enforcement, or physical threats to themselves or their family.

Why does Hope for Justice prioritize finding missing teenagers?

Evidence and studies show that teens who run away from home are at particularly high risk of being targeted for trafficking. The criminals exploit vulnerabilities and create dependency to control their victims, and runaway teens often have multiple vulnerabilities at once, which might include difficult home environments, alcohol or drug problems, and lack of money or safe shelter. A sample of the academic and expert studies on this issue:

- 36% of runaways in one study had traded sex for a place to stay, or another need. [Source: National Clearinghouse on Homeless Youth and Families](#)
- 19% of runaway and homeless youth across the U.S. experience sex trafficking, labor trafficking or both. [Source: Study by Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice & Research, and the Loyola University Modern Slavery Research Project](#)
- Running from foster care is the most common pathway to sex trafficking victimization. Source: Latzman, N. E., & Gibbs, D. (2020). Examining the link: Foster care runaway episodes and human trafficking. OPRE Report No. 2020-143. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- 1 in 6 of the more than 25,000 cases of children reported missing to National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) in 2021 who had run away were likely victims of child sex trafficking. Source: [NCMEC](#)
- 35.8% of runaway and homeless youth report a history of sex trafficking. Source: [Roe-Sepowitz, D., Brockie, M. and Bracy, K. \(2015\). Youth Experiences Survey: Exploring the Sex Trafficking Experiences of Homeless Young Adults in Arizona, Year 2](#)
- Within the first 48 hours of being on the street, 1 in 3 runaway or homeless children are lured into prostitution. Source: [National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children/NISMART-2](#)

Other studies with similar findings:

- Reid, J. A., Baglivio, M. T., Piquero, A. R., Greenwald, M. A., & Epps, N. (2019). No youth left behind to human trafficking: Exploring profiles of risk. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 89(6), 704–715.
- Greeson, J. K. P., Treglia, D., Wolfe, D. S., & Wasch, S. (2019). Prevalence and Correlates of Sex Trafficking among Homeless and Runaway Youths Presenting for Shelter Services. *Social Work Research*, 43(2), 91–100

Demand:

- Sex Trafficking: Sex trafficking is a market-driven criminal industry based on supply and demand. People who purchase commercial sex increase the demand for commercial sex and likewise provide a profit incentive for traffickers, who seek to maximize profits by exploiting trafficking victims.
- Labor Trafficking: Consumers provide the demand and profit incentive for traffickers. Human trafficking victims make an alarmingly high number of consumer goods and food products, imported to the United States and produced domestically. More often than we realize, elements of forced labor may be present within the supply chain of products we buy or the services we pay for. These consumers can include companies that subcontract certain types of services, end-consumers who buy cheap goods produced by trafficking victims, or individuals who use the services of trafficking victims (Polaris, 2021).

Transportation:

- People often falsely believe *human trafficking* implies victims must be moved from one place to another. However, human trafficking does not require transportation, nor crossing borders to be considered a crime. Many victims are trafficked from their own community and/or home.

Human trafficking vs. Human smuggling:

- Human smuggling is the importation of people into the United States involving deliberate evasion of immigration laws. This offense includes bringing undocumented foreign individuals into the US as well as the unlawful transportation/harboring of those already in the US. These are not interchangeable terms- human trafficking is exploitation-based whereas smuggling is voluntary and transportation- based.

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