

IDENTIFICATION VS. RECOVERY

Identification and recovery are two distinct parts of a survivor's journey out of a trafficking situation. It may start with identification, but is only completed after a full recovery. This occurs when survivors are sufficiently supported and fully separated from the exploitative situation. This process often involves achieving justice for the individuals. It is important to note that every individual's experience on their journey to recovery is different. In fact, there may never be a complete or "full recovery." For many, recovery is a long-term, non-linear process. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the differences between identification and recovery.

► IDENTIFICATION

Identification is the process whereby an individual or potential victim is recognized or accepted to be a victim of trafficking by the authorities, a non-government (NGO) organization, another entity, or through self-identification. The process of identifying a victim of trafficking is often the hinge decision that impacts the survivor's ability to access support such as housing, counseling, or other needs. In this way, identification is often the first step in the journey to recovery.

Contact your local police department about any potential or identified victims of human trafficking. Minor victims of human trafficking should be reported to Child Protective Services, as well as law enforcement. The National Human Trafficking Hotline can receive reports of human trafficking and provide information about local resources for victims and survivors. Foreign national victims of human trafficking will require a report made to the Office on Trafficking in Persons to access certain benefits and services.

► RECOVERY

After identification, the survivor may enter a period of transition to "recover" from the trafficking or exploitative situation. This recovery is multifaceted and can involve a multitude of entities including state entities, government agencies, and NGOs that provide a variety of different support and aftercare services. These aftercare services are based on the needs of the individual, including but not limited to, housing, medical support, counseling, vocational training, and legal services.

While a survivor may be successfully identified and recognized as a victim of human trafficking, the more recent the trafficking, the greater the likelihood that the survivor is still in the midst of recovering, building independence, and learning to reintegrate into society.

IDENTIFICATION

Victim Identification¹

Victim Identification requires proactive efforts before encountering a potential victim of human trafficking, such as educating the general public and specialized training for certain groups of individuals. These groups include frontline professionals in key positions who first encounter potential victims and those responsible for creating and enforcing human trafficking laws and policies, such as government officials or legal professionals.

How are victims identified?

Identification may take place when a victim escapes from a trafficker and seeks help from the authorities or support from an NGO. A more nuanced form of identification occurs when an individual does not self-identify but the authorities or other entities suspect a potentially exploitative situation. This second scenario commonly occurs when frontline professionals encounter a potential victim of trafficking while conducting their daily professional responsibilities.

EXAMPLES

- *Law enforcement encounters a victim of human trafficking either during the course of a criminal investigation or as a result of its proactive victim identification operations.*
- *A nurse or a physician encounters a victim when the victim seeks medical help for injuries sustained as a result of the trafficking.*

¹ "Victim identification," as referenced throughout this report, defines efforts to intervene in possible exploitative situations. "Victims," as referenced in this phrase, include a range of individuals including not only those being actively trafficked, but also those who may be at future risk, which encompasses those in the process of being initially approached, groomed, or recruited, or certain vulnerable populations such as refugees, irregular migrants, and certain marginalized ethnic groups that have been historically targeted by traffickers.

IDENTIFICATION

Specialized outreach activities also serve as a vehicle to identify potential victims. Many NGOs or government agencies proactively conduct outreach activities at targeted locations with a high likelihood of encountering exploited individuals. These locations include detention-centers, refugee camps, hotels, illicit massage parlors, or sexual health clinics, among others. Outreach activities vary in execution, but will always focus on providing information and assistance from trained individuals to those being actively exploited or are at risk of exploitation.

Victims may or may not realize they are being trafficked. They also may or may not want to be recognized as a victim for several reasons. These include psychological factors, such as shame, fear, or even mental exhaustion, that prevent the individual from recognizing the situation. This lack of recognition often enables the exploitation to continue. However, self-recognition is an important start to the recovery process. A key factor in this process is the victim's ability to recognize and make autonomous decisions to leave their situation. This occurs at the intersection of identification and recovery. Self-identification is beneficial, and some would say crucial, for all survivors in the recovery period. For example, once identified, more services can be offered to provide holistic support and bring justice. No matter how the victim exits their trafficking situation, championing the bravery and resilience required for someone to self-identify is key to empowering a recovering survivor. Although self-identification is essential, it may not occur for years post-recovery. At this key time, consistent support rather than forced identification is the best way to assist victims.

Following identification, access to some services depends upon a victim or survivor's age and legal status in the United States.

- Foreign nationals require an Eligibility Letter (minors) or Health and Human Services Certification Letter (adults) to access certain benefits and services.
- A report must be made through the Office on Trafficking in Persons to obtain these letters.
- A report must be made to the Department of Child Protective Services for minors (regardless of legal status) to connect the minor to the appropriate resources; a report should also be made to law enforcement (local, state, or federal) to access potential victim-witness benefits.
- Adult survivors who are citizens in the United States can access services through a screening with law enforcement.
- The National Human Trafficking Hotline can direct callers to local resources.

BARRIERS TO IDENTIFICATION:

- ▶ Victims may have been exploited by a friend or family member and feel there is no safe place for them to turn to if they were to leave.
- ▶ A victim may have experienced threats of violence against themselves, their family, or loved ones and fear the repercussions of leaving.
- ▶ A victim may fear that the authorities will not believe their story or be able to help them. They may have had prior negative experiences with law enforcement in their home country or traffickers may have told them that they will not be believed.
- ▶ A victim may be dependent on their exploiter either emotionally, financially, or for the provision of alcohol/drugs due to a substance addiction.
- ▶ A victim may lack the capacity to financially support themselves if they leave.
- ▶ A victim may have developed positive feelings for their exploiter or believe that their partner, who is also their trafficker, has their best interests at heart.
- ▶ A victim may have children as a result of their exploitation and fear losing parental custody if they leave.
- ▶ A victim may be unaware or disbelieving of the protection the authorities can provide.
- ▶ A victim may fear legal repercussions due to their undocumented status.
- ▶ A victim may fear their trafficker will not be arrested or prosecuted for their crimes, which would increase the likelihood of being re-trafficked and further victimized.
- ▶ An emotional attachment to the exploiter might further delay the recovery process, especially in the typical “Romeo pimp” scenarios where traffickers form romantic relationships with their victims with the intention to exploit them sexually. As this falsified relationship perpetuates an emotional attachment to their exploiter, a victim may continue to have strong emotional feelings towards the perpetrator, despite suffering abuse or ill-treatment. This illustrates the trauma bonding element that is common in sexual exploitation cases, where traffickers use coercive control tactics to subjugate victims that make them unwilling or feel unable to leave the situation or may cause the victim to return to the situation.
- ▶ A victim may not speak the local language and is therefore unable to communicate their situation to seek help.
- ▶ A victim may be in a situation of debt-bondage and believe they are unable to leave as they have what is thought to be a legitimate debt to repay.
- ▶ A victim may believe that because they signed an employment contract or agreement they are unable to leave.
- ▶ A victim may fear being charged with crimes they committed while they were being trafficked.
- ▶ A victim may have normalized the environment they are in and be fearful of leaving and going into the “unknown.”
- ▶ A victim may feel they have no safe option upon leaving due to fear of how they will be received or perceived by family because of strong cultural or religious beliefs.
- ▶ A victim may be unaware of their legal rights and the availability of support for those who have been trafficked and exploited.

RECOVERY

Barriers to victim identification provide insight into the emotional complexity of the healing process, beginning before identification and continuing through the recovery period. Oftentimes, this process begins after individuals successfully distance themselves from exploitation, so they can receive care that meets their needs during recovery.

Multi-agency holistic care

Recovery should be seen as a necessary step that follows a victim's initial identification. This sequence helps to prevent re-trafficking. Post-identification, survivors should be provided access to holistic support services that aid their recovery and lead them into a life of independence and fulfillment. A multi-agency approach is required to provide comprehensive mental, emotional, and physical support services to assist with their recovery and reintegration into society. Access to services may come through several different governmental or civil society organizations. These may include, but are not limited to, medical treatment, housing, financial support, employment, and access to counseling services, that are culturally appropriate and sensitive. Without access to necessary recovery services, victims remain highly vulnerable to re-trafficking or other unsafe situations.

It is essential to note that recovery is a choice—it takes time and is ever-evolving. The circumstances and outcomes of each survivor's recovery is different, and it is vital not to impose a recovery timeline or framework on their journey. For example, one survivor may view the recovery process as "complete" when they enter a safe house program and complete legal proceedings. However, others may have no interest in pursuing legal action against their trafficker. Rather, their recovery process may be a decision to enter into a substance misuse program after living on the streets with an active addiction.

EXAMPLE

- *A victim may be identified and exit their situation as a result of an outreach activity by law enforcement at a hotel. However, they may quickly re-enter the situation or be re-trafficked when the trafficker manages to re-establish contact with them.*
- *The victim may then be re-identified in a subsequent outreach activity and again choose to leave the situation. This cycle would then repeat, with the victim continuing to return to the situation. This may be due to the lack of support services available where the individual is not granted access to a relevant safe house or aftercare support, increasing the likelihood of the victim returning to the exploitative situation.*

This example illustrates the ineffectiveness of identification by itself when aftercare or support services are inaccessible or lacking.

Each survivor will have unique needs throughout their recovery process, and they may be unaware of all of the available services. Rather than formulating a fixed “recovery plan,” research a broad range of services and the requirements to access them, before offering these options to survivors. This survivor-centered approach empowers individuals to choose what support they would like to receive for themselves. Presenting survivors with options and supporting them as they overcome access barriers fosters an informed, consent-based approach to holistic care. Ideally, showing a survivor how to research available services empowers them with a life skill that sets them up to be independent, which is vital for recovery.

The recovery period can also be influenced by social perceptions of human trafficking and victimization. For example, opinions of sex work or illegal migration might impact the services that a victim can access, even after formal recognition as a victim of human trafficking. The type of support services that a victim can access during their recovery period is often dependent on the individual’s gender, age, exploitation type, legal status, and possibly nationality.

IDENTIFICATION AND RECOVERY

As a standalone process, identification will likely result in continued exploitation. Identified individuals experience true recovery when provided with comprehensive services. Any attempt to assist in the identification of potential victims should always involve a partnership with entities that provide necessary aftercare assistance.