

RECOGNIZING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking is a crime affecting every country and industry across the world. While trafficking is often depicted as straightforward in nature, in reality, detecting an exploitative situation can be challenging. This is because traffickers hide victims in seemingly mundane activities of everyday life. Human trafficking has often been coined as a paradoxical crime that is “hidden in plain sight,” as victims are often visibly “working” in places that the community engages with on a regular basis. This includes shops, construction sites, hotels, and/or using the same transportation systems as everyone else.

While no single indicator confirms the existence of a particular type of trafficking, there are various factors that can help highlight the possibility of an exploitative situation or an individual who is actively being targeted and recruited. The demeanor of the potential victims tend to have common themes, regardless of exploitation type. Complex trauma is observed in both minor and adult victims in the United States. It is often caused when an individual has been subjected to multiple forms of trauma before entering a trafficking situation. Such responses can often be hypo or hyper arousal reactions resulting from complex trauma. This resource details some of the general indicators of human trafficking that might be observed by a frontline professional. It also details the working and living conditions that victims of human trafficking may be experiencing.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more detailed information about the indicators of trauma, please see [Victim-Centered Approach](#).

For more information about the specific indicators of human trafficking that may be observable in your industry, [click here](#).

Please see [Identification vs. Recovery](#) for more information about supporting victims of human trafficking.

To report suspected human trafficking and access victim services, call the **National Human Trafficking Hotline (1-(888) 373-7888) or text 233 733**.

Suspected child sex trafficking can be reported to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) at 1-800-THE-LOST or cybertipline.org.

For emergencies, call 911.

General Indicators*

- ▶ The potential victim(s) have minimal-to-no details about the working or living situation.

EXAMPLE *When asked about their job, the individual does not appear to have a clear concept of what the job is, provides vague details, or seems unwilling to share information about the job.*

- ▶ The potential victim(s) are accompanied by someone they do not seem to know or who is not a close friend or family member.

EXAMPLE *They are escorted to the hospital by someone who knows little about their medical history but claims to be a parent or friend.*

- ▶ The potential victim(s) are being controlled and/or are not in control of their identification documents.

EXAMPLE *They arrive at the border and there is a dominant passenger who is holding the passports and speaking on behalf of the other persons. This dominant passenger may hand out identification documents to the potential victims when necessary before collecting these again and keeping them in their possession.*

- ▶ The potential victim(s) have few personal belongings despite the fact they are permanently moving to a new location.

EXAMPLE *They move to a new city for work, but they have only a small bag with few or even no personal belongings.*

- ▶ Potential victim(s) of labor trafficking show signs of physical neglect or abuse (scars, bruises, burns, etc.) and/or seem malnourished or disheveled. However, victims of sex trafficking are less likely to show signs of physical abuse in areas like the face, arms, or legs.

EXAMPLE *They walk into a coffee shop with signs of physical harm (scars, bruises, burns...etc.) and are not dressed for the climate or are disheveled.*

- ▶ The potential victim(s) seem unfamiliar with their surroundings or lost.

EXAMPLE *They are seen waiting at a bus station for a prolonged period of time with limited personal belongings.*

- ▶ The potential victim(s) seem distrustful, fearful, or hostile.

EXAMPLE *They visit the hospital with visible injuries and refuse to give personal information, seem fearful or distrustful, and are anxious to leave as soon as possible.*

EXAMPLE *Creates a false story for medical professionals that does not align with their injuries or reason for needing to be seen. Medical professionals can ask follow-up questions if the suspected perpetrator is not present.*

- ▶ The potential victim(s) are being controlled, abused, or surveilled by their employer.

EXAMPLE *They are a hotel worker and do not look at you when you walk by, appear to be hesitant to answer questions, and when you start to talk to them, the employer is always present or seems to interrupt the conversation.*

- ▶ The potential victim(s) are quick to answer their phone and have frequent phone calls or text messages, from the trafficker or “bottom,” that seem to cause anxiety. Failure to respond quickly will result in repeated calls from the trafficker.

EXAMPLE *They are anxiously checking their phone while waiting at arrivals in the airport and appear fearful or uncomfortable when communicating on the phone.*

Working and Living Conditions Indicators*

While it is unlikely you will ever see someone's working or living situation, something they tell you might raise concerns.

- ▶ The potential victim(s) live and work in the same place.

EXAMPLE *They sleep on the floor of the car wash where they work, or they live out of a hotel and have sex with clients in the same hotel.*

- ▶ The potential victim(s) live in overcrowded and/or dirty accommodation.

EXAMPLE *Victims share a small two-bedroom house on a farm with 15 other people.*

- ▶ The potential victim(s) are not free to come and go as they please.

EXAMPLE *If the victim leaves to go to a store, the trafficker calls every few minutes to determine their whereabouts.*

EXAMPLE *Traffickers may live with sex/labor trafficking victims, or live nearby, to monitor the victims' movements closely.*

- ▶ The potential victim(s) are underpaid or receive no pay.

EXAMPLE *They are not paid regularly or at all because of the "debt" they owe their employers for basic amenities such as food or rent.*

EXAMPLE *Victims are not in possession of their own finances and believe their "lover/boyfriend" will provide for their needs.*

- ▶ The potential victim(s) work excessively long hours, perhaps without any break.

EXAMPLE *They work 15-hour days on a fruit farm, are not given any breaks until they have finished their daily quota, and are threatened if they try to leave.*

EXAMPLE *Sex trafficking victims appear overly tired, as they have a high quota of "clients" they must meet per day.*

- ▶ The potential victim(s) have a debt that they are working to pay off.

EXAMPLE *They have not been paid despite having worked in a massage parlor for two months because their employer told them they have to work to pay off the cost of their travel to the United States.*

- ▶ The potential victim(s) are subjected to violence or threats of violence.

EXAMPLE *Their friends and family are threatened if they don't obey the trafficker.*

- ▶ The potential victim(s) are doing work that is different from what they initially agreed to.

EXAMPLE *Victims may have the correct H2-B or H2-A work visas, but the work, pay, or conditions do not equate to the visa stipulations. Victims may be hesitant to speak with law enforcement about this or will not seek help because of threats against their loved ones back home and misinformation about deportation.*

*It is important to note that the indicators stated here are not exhaustive and represent only a selection of possible indicators. Moreover, indicators on these lists will not all be present in each trafficking case. However, they serve as a representative sampling of the type of human behavior that signifies the likelihood of exploitation.

Specific Indicators by Type of Exploitation

SEX TRAFFICKING

- ▶ The potential victim(s) use language that mimics familial relationships, such as referring to the trafficker as “husband” or “boyfriend” or other victims as “family.” This language is to enforce loyalty and prevent victims from leaving or speaking out.
- ▶ Adult domestic sex trafficking is reflective of domestic violence relationships.
- ▶ Many victims may be allowed to travel alone, but they must call or text frequently to check-in. They may have rules about who they can and cannot speak with while out. Uber and Lyft are commonly used for transportation; multiple rideshares may be booked in one evening to multiple residential locations or hotels.
- ▶ The potential victim(s) have tattoos or other marks indicating ownership by the trafficker (i.e. a boyfriend’s street name, crown, dollar signs, or pimp/prostitution-related language).
- ▶ The potential victim(s) are in possession of items or clothing that are commonly used for sexual purposes. (e.g. condoms, lingerie, sex toys, etc.).
- ▶ If the potential victim(s) do not speak the local language, they may know a few words relating to the sex industry.
- ▶ The potential victim(s) have no money or personal finances and depend on someone else to pay for them.
- ▶ The potential victim(s) may have no identification, or possess fraudulent documents, or someone else may be in possession of their identification documents.

EXAMPLES

- *They are traveling to meet their partner whom they met on social media. They are not in possession of their own finances and believe their new “lover” will provide for their needs.*
- *They seek emergency medical assistance and have severe bruising that is not easily detectable, such as on their lower back or on their head underneath the hair, so injuries are not observed by “clients.”*
- *They are traveling out of state to “make money” for the week or weekend in a different city.*

FORCED LABOR & DOMESTIC SERVITUDE

- ▶ The potential victim(s) live in unsuitable housing, such as outhouses, sheds, or agricultural/industrial buildings.
- ▶ The potential victim(s) have no access to their finances. They may have bank accounts opened in their name which they do not have access to or control over.
- ▶ The potential victim(s) have no labor contract or the contract may be unsuitable or illegal.
- ▶ The potential victim(s) depend on the employer for employment, transportation, housing, and meals.
- ▶ The potential victim(s) lack suitable training or professional qualifications.
- ▶ The potential victim(s) are forced to pay for work equipment, including tools or workwear.
- ▶ The potential victim(s) are forced to eat leftovers or insubstantial meals.
- ▶ The potential victim(s) are rarely/never allowed to leave premises without the employer or supervision.

EXAMPLES

- *They state that they live and work in the same location.*
- *They are only permitted to leave the house where they both live and work when accompanied by the employer or employers trusted associate.*
- *They are forced to work on a farm with pesticides, improper equipment, or improper clothing, limiting their protection against exposure to the climate, chemicals, or tools being used.*

ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

- ▶ The child is socially and emotionally isolated from their friends/family.
- ▶ The child becomes withdrawn and/or exhibits secretive behavior.
- ▶ The child spends excessive amounts of time texting or chatting with someone online.
- ▶ The child's behavior and school performance declines.
- ▶ The child is not in school or frequently skips school.
- ▶ The child has gifts that cannot be explained or accounted for.

EXAMPLES

- *They become emotionally and socially withdrawn from family and peers, but spend excessive amounts of unmonitored time online.*
- *They experience barriers that impact their social engagement, but then develop a sudden close friendship with someone who forces them to keep secrets.*
- *They develop a "romantic relationship" with someone who is significantly older who showers them with affection and extravagant gifts.*

FORCED CHILD* CRIMINALITY

- ▶ The child is frequently absent from school for days at a time and has unexplained travel receipts.
- ▶ The child has numerous phones or possessions that do not belong to them or were given to them.
- ▶ The child is found in another town or part of the country without any direct connection to the location.
- ▶ The child is unwilling to explain where they have been going during the day.
- ▶ The child becomes emotionally isolated from their parents or guardians even if they continue to live in their own home.
- ▶ The child shows signs of extreme distress or anxiety when engaging with someone unfamiliar.
- ▶ The child is unsupervised, seems anxious, or is acting under the instructions of someone else.

EXAMPLES

- *A child is found in the back of a car being driven by a much older adult. Their relationship is unknown/unclear, and the child is in possession of illicit drugs.*
- *A child is identified by the authorities traveling on a train alone—hours away from their home.*
- *A child has multiple phones constantly ringing or buzzing and appears anxious to respond.*

**Note: Child exploitation can take on a variety of different formats. The types of child exploitation highlighted in this resource are not comprehensive and merely reflect two of the most prevalent forms currently in the US.*

Responding to Suspected Human Trafficking

One of the most common signs of a trafficking situation is the close monitoring or surveillance of another person. As a result, it is important to recognize the signs to determine if potential victim(s) fall into this category before engaging, in order to properly safeguard them and minimize risk of harm.

IDENTIFYING A POTENTIAL TRAFFICKER OR CONTROLLER

Oftentimes, victims are escorted or accompanied by their trafficker or a controller to ensure compliance and evade detection. Here are some potential signs to look out for:

- ▶ The controller might insist on speaking on behalf of the victim or act as an interpreter.
- ▶ The controller may be resistant to officers speaking to them or the victim.
- ▶ The controller and victim are traveling together, but there is little-to-no verbal communication.
- ▶ The victim and controller may not interact in a manner consistent with the stated relationship.
- ▶ The body language of the victim suggests fear, tension, or agitation around the controller.
- ▶ The controller may be holding onto all of the victim's identification documentation or paperwork.
- ▶ The controller may be a frequent traveler meeting different people or traveling out alone but returning with different people.

HOW DO YOU ENGAGE WITH A POTENTIAL VICTIM?

It is important not to raise any concerns of exploitation with the victim if they are in the presence of their controller or trafficker. Potential victims should be separated from the person traveling with them, even if it is a family member or "romantic partner," as they could be complicit in facilitating exploitation. Also, many individuals may not even recognize their own victimization as a form of human trafficking, which would likely impact any disclosure of their circumstances. For example, some victims who experience sexual exploitation may be so manipulated by the trafficker that they believe they have willingly engaged in a particular "lifestyle."

Traffickers will often traumatize their victims through severe methods of coercion and control to keep them from seeking help. A trafficker may misrepresent how authorities respond to the victim if they reach out. They may go so far as to threaten that the authorities will deport, arrest, or bring criminal charges against the individual instead of safeguarding them. Foreign national victims who may have entered the United States without documents may be concerned about their immigration status and their own violations of the law. Therefore, even if the potential victim declines assistance at that time, providing informational handouts or emergency contact numbers could support future self-identification and recovery.

When engaging with a potential victim of trafficking, a victim-centered approach must be used to minimize re-victimization and allow for open communication. A victim-centered approach is trauma-informed and prioritizes the victim's needs and concerns while engaging with the victim in a sensitive manner without judgment or fear of reprisal. Trauma-informed care is an approach that considers the psychological impact of trauma on an individual and implements that consideration when interacting with and responding to the victim.

Please see [Victim-Centered Approach](#) and [Identification vs. Recovery](#) for more information.

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