

# Human Trafficking

## Definitions, Prevalence, Risk Markers, and Health Consequences

THE CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP EDUCATION IN  
**MATERNAL & CHILD  
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The United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) defines human trafficking as, “The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat, use of force or other means of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the receiving or giving of payment... to a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.”<sup>1</sup>



UNODC states that human trafficking involves a pattern of activities through which people are "...abducted or recruited in their country of origin, transferred through transit regions, and then exploited in the destination country."<sup>2</sup> People may also be trafficked within the borders of their own country or without movement from one geographical area to another. People may even be born into human trafficking. Human trafficking always involves **coercion** and **exploitation**. It is a public health and a human rights issue that affects women and children disproportionately. Almost every country in the world is affected by human trafficking, either as a country of origin, a transit country, or a destination country.<sup>2</sup>

UNODC describes human trafficking as a process, rather than a single offense, that includes three elements:<sup>1</sup>

**The Act:** Abduction, recruitment, transport, harbor, or receipt of a victim.

**The Means:** Threat or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, etc., to control a victim.

**The Purpose:** Exploitation of the victim by forcing her/him into sex work, forced labor or organ removal. Such exploitation often involves violence.

As defined in the US Secretary of State's 2014 report on human trafficking, "People may be considered trafficking victims regardless of whether they were born into a state of servitude, were transported to the exploitative situation, previously consented to work for a trafficker, or participated in a crime as a direct result of being trafficked."<sup>3</sup> Human trafficking victims may include domestic workers (nannies or maids), factory workers, janitors, restaurant workers, migrant farm workers, fishery workers, hotel or tourist industry workers, beggars, prostitutes, and exotic dancers.

There are two major—but not mutually exclusive—forms of human trafficking: sex trafficking and labor trafficking. Coerced organ donation is a rare form of trafficking.

## **Sex Trafficking**

Definitions of sex trafficking vary. The US Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 defines sex trafficking as, "...the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act..." A commercial sex act is any condition in which anything of value is given to or received by any person. Further, "...the 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."<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that this definition clearly states that anyone engaged in a commercial sex act who is younger than 18 years-old is by definition a trafficking victim, regardless of circumstances. This means that pimps involved with minors are by definition traffickers and they can be prosecuted as such under federal law in the US, with enhanced penalties above what pimps are normally subjected to.

Types of sex trafficking may include: forced prostitution, child sex trafficking/tourism, exotic dancing/stripping, escort services, and pornography.

## **Labor Trafficking**

The US Department of State states that the majority of human trafficking is in the form of forced labor, but data are poor. Like sex trafficking, the definitions of labor trafficking are not uniform across agencies, governments, or researchers. In the US, the TVPA defines labor trafficking as, "...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."<sup>4</sup>

Types of labor trafficking includes: forced labor, bonded labor, debt bondage, child labor, and child soldiers. Reports of labor trafficking may also include sex trafficking. According to the Minnesota Human Trafficking Task Force, labor trafficking often involves labor exploitation, with "...low wages, manipulation of...labor laws by employers to restrict employee benefits, requirement of long working hours, poor and dangerous working conditions without proper safety equipment or precautions, and withholding of wages for equipment or tools."<sup>5</sup>

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## **Prevalence of Human Trafficking**

International and national data on human trafficking are estimates, often based on incomplete data from non-standardized sources (e.g., police records).<sup>6</sup> Some nations do not recognize the existence of human trafficking and thus have no official records. Estimating its prevalence is most difficult because trafficking operations and situations are illicit and often covert. Trafficking victims and perpetrators may not be accessible to researchers or law enforcement, because of mobility and/or because they are not registered in formal systems (e.g., census counts). Further, there are no standards for surveillance, including what constitutes "trafficking."<sup>7</sup> Some countries may mix trafficking, smuggling, and irregular migration in their estimates.<sup>7</sup> Further, researchers often do not differentiate between labor and sex trafficking.

When evaluating trafficking data, one must know how trafficking is defined (e.g., labor trafficking may include sex trafficking) and what the quality of the data sources are in terms of surveillance coverage and age of data.



The US Government Accountability Office (GAO) identifies three limits of trafficking data: availability, reliability, and comparability<sup>7</sup> (Table 1).

**Table 1. Limitations to the Quality of Trafficking Data**

Availability	Reliability	Comparability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Trafficking is an illegal activity and victims are afraid to seek help from the relevant authorities.</li> <li>▪ Few countries collect data on actual victims on a systematic basis.</li> <li>▪ Data collection is focused on women and children trafficked for sexual exploitation, and other forms of trafficking are likely to be underreported.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Capacity for data collection and analysis in countries of origin is often inadequate.</li> <li>▪ Trafficking convictions in countries of destination are based on victim testimony.</li> <li>▪ Estimates of trafficking are extrapolated from samples of reported victims, which may not be random and thus representative of all trafficking victims.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Countries and organizations define trafficking differently.</li> <li>▪ Official statistics do not make clear distinctions among trafficking, smuggling, and illegal migration.</li> <li>▪ Data are often program specific and focus on characteristics of victims pertinent to specific agencies.</li> </ul>

*Source:* US General Accounting Office, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06825.pdf>.<sup>7</sup>

While there are many—and varied—estimates of the number of trafficked victims worldwide, one common source is the 2012 International Labour Organization (ILO) report. The report considered forced labor to be situations in which “...persons are coerced to work through the use of violence or intimidation or by more subtle means such as accumulated debt, retention of identity papers or threats of denunciation to immigration authorities. Forced labour, contemporary forms of slavery, debt bondage and human trafficking are closely related terms though not identical in a legal sense. Most situations of slavery or human trafficking are however covered by ILO's definition of forced labour.”<sup>8</sup> Using this definition, the ILO report estimated that between 19.5 million and 22.3 million people were victims of forced labor and that:

- 11.4 million of the victims were girls or women;<sup>8</sup>
- Almost 19 million victims were exploited by private individuals or enterprises and over 2 million by the state or rebel groups;<sup>8</sup>
- About 4.5 million were victims of forced sexual exploitation;<sup>8</sup>
- Domestic work, agriculture, construction, manufacturing and entertainment sectors are where most of the victimization is concentrated;<sup>8</sup> and
- Migrant workers and indigenous people are particularly vulnerable to forced labor.<sup>8</sup>

Also at risk are vulnerable and marginalized individuals like runaway and homeless youth, victims of trauma and abuse, sexual minorities, refugees and individuals fleeing conflict or oppression, and impoverished individuals.<sup>7,8</sup>

*“Not all children who are exposed to hazardous work are 'slaves', and not all workers who don't receive a fair wage are forced.”<sup>9</sup>*

ILO concedes that the definition of forced labor is inconsistent worldwide—and that even ILO has changed its definitions over the years. It recommends individuals to not over-count forced labor and instead, consider the context of labor. ILO has convened an expert statistical group to develop a uniform definition by 2018.

### **How Does Trafficking Occur?**

One of the many challenges associated with human trafficking is that it is difficult to identify the victims of trafficking and the traffickers. Trafficking occurs in all race, ethnic, economic, educational, and social groups.

Traffickers lure people through promises of a better life, a marriage proposal, better and high-paying job opportunities, residential or economic stability, and/or a loving and safe relationship. According to the US Office of Refugee Resettlement, in reality, traffickers:

- Restrict victims through debt bondage (i.e., enormous financial obligations or undefined/increasing debt);<sup>10</sup>
- Isolate victims from the public, family members and members of their ethnic and religious communities;<sup>10</sup>
- Confiscate passports, visas and/or identification documents;<sup>10</sup>
- Use—or threat to use—violence toward victims and/or family members;<sup>10</sup>
- Tell victims that they will be imprisoned or deported for immigration violations if they contact authorities;<sup>10</sup> and
- Control victims' money or possessions.<sup>10</sup>

### **Health Consequences of Human Trafficking**

Because of the poor documentation of human trafficking, and the isolation of its victims, it is difficult to clearly identify the magnitude of related health consequences. A 2003 report of a multi-country, 2-year European qualitative study of 28 women and girls trafficked in the European Union found that "...trafficking often has a profound impact on the health and well-being of women. The forms of abuse and risks that women experience include physical, sexual and psychological abuse, the forced or coerced use of drugs and alcohol, social restrictions and manipulation, economic exploitation and debt bondage, legal insecurity, abusive working and living conditions, and a range of risks associated with being a migrant and/or marginalized. These abuses and risks impact women's physical, reproductive, and mental health, may lead to the misuse of drugs or alcohol, diminish women's social and economic well-being, and limit their access to health and other support services."<sup>11</sup>

In 2004-2005, the same research team interviewed 192 women in the European Union, within 14 days of entering post-trafficking services. Ninety-five percent reported physical or sexual violence while being trafficked, pre-trafficking abuse (59%), and multiple post-trafficking physical and psychological problems.<sup>12</sup> The women reported "headaches (82%), feeling easily tired (81%), dizzy spells (70%), back pain (69%), memory difficulty (62%), stomach pain (61%), pelvic pain (59%), and gynecological infections (58%)."<sup>12</sup> Thirty-nine percent of the women reported having suicidal thoughts in the past 7 days.

*"My wounds are inside. They are not visible."*  
- A Moldavan woman, trafficked in Italy<sup>12</sup>

## For More Information

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