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NATIONAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING HOTLINE

Media Guide

FAQs, language and terminology, person-centered storytelling

As the long-time operators of the National Human Trafficking Hotline, Polaris knows how pervasive human trafficking is in the United States. Every year, we answer calls, texts, and chats from tens of thousands of people impacted by human trafficking. We also understand that many people, including journalists and storytellers of all kinds, want to help raise awareness about trafficking.

The media and entertainment industries are powerful sources of information about human trafficking. For many people, the representations of trafficking portrayed in the news or in movies might be the only exposure they have to the topic of human trafficking. That is why it is important that reporters, writers, and entertainment professionals are equipped to tell stories of trafficking accurately, with nuance, and in a way that portrays people with lived experience of trafficking with dignity. This guide is made to help storytellers accomplish this on any news or entertainment platform.



FAQS: HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Before you start your story on human trafficking, it is important to have an accurate understanding of human trafficking and what the Trafficking Hotline does. Here are some of our most commonly asked questions:

How is human trafficking defined?

U.S. law defines human trafficking as the use of force, fraud, or coercion to compel a person into labor, services, or commercial sex acts against their will. The one exception to this definition involves minors in commercial sex. Any situation where a minor is asked or induced to exchange sex for something of value (e.g., money, food, shelter) is human trafficking. Importantly, a person does not need to be moved across state or national borders for their situation to be defined as trafficking. Human trafficking is often confused with human smuggling, which does include the act of transport but does not include force, fraud, and coercion.

Examples of force include physical abuse or assault, or confinement. Examples of fraud include false promises of work/living conditions, withholding promised wages, or contract fraud. Coercion may include threats of harm to self or others, debt bondage, psychological manipulation, or document confiscation.

Who is vulnerable to human trafficking?

Human trafficking can happen to anyone, but some people are more vulnerable than others. Significant risk factors include recent migration or relocation, substance use, mental health concerns, involvement with the children welfare system and being a runaway or homeless youth. Often, traffickers identify and leverage peoples' vulnerabilities in order to create dependency.

Who are the traffickers?

Perpetrators of human trafficking span all racial, ethnic, and gender demographics and are as diverse as people who experience trafficking. Some use their privilege, wealth, and power as a means of control while others experience the same socio-economic oppression as people who experience human trafficking. They include individuals, business owners, members of a gang or network, parents or family members of people experiencing trafficking, intimate partners, owners of farms or restaurants, and powerful corporate executives and government representatives.

How do traffickers control people experiencing trafficking?

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. They make promises aimed at addressing the needs of their target in order to impose control. As a result, people experiencing trafficking become trapped and fear leaving for myriad reasons, including psychological trauma, shame, emotional attachment, or physical threats to themselves or their family.

For more information about human trafficking, how it happens, and who experiences it, visit <u>polarisproject.org</u> and <u>humantraffickinghotline.org</u>.



FAQS: THE HUMAN TRAFFICKING HOTLINE

What does the Trafficking Hotline do?

The National Human Trafficking Hotline helps people who have experienced trafficking get support and stay safe. In all situations, the Trafficking Hotline works to connect people experiencing sex and labor trafficking to local services, including shelter, legal aid, and transportation; receives information about trafficking situations and reports to law enforcement when requested by the person experiencing trafficking or required by law; and documents human trafficking schemes.

How does the Trafficking Hotline collect data?

The Trafficking Hotline's primary purpose is to support people experiencing human trafficking. Information relevant to their needs is collected during a phone, text, or webbased conversation with a Hotline Advocate. Their responses are documented in a case file. These responses are the foundation of the Trafficking Hotline's database.



Does the Hotline data show prevalence of human trafficking in the United States, or in each state respectively?

No. Aggregate data from the Trafficking Hotline should not be interpreted as an indicator of prevalence, or the amount of human trafficking in a particular location at a particular time. It reflects only the situations of trafficking that are shared with the Hotline and the callers who have knowledge of and access to the Trafficking Hotline and a desire for assistance. As human trafficking is an illicit act, it is often hidden. No single source of information is currently sufficient to determine prevalence.

Do you have city- or county- specific data?

The Trafficking Hotline does not always receive specific location information. We may be able to provide county-level data for more populous counties, but generally, state-level data is the most location specific data available.



Can I access the Hotline database, either in part or in whole?

For confidentiality reasons, we do not provide access to the Trafficking Hotline database to any outside party. To advance the anti-trafficking field, we may provide anonymized data for research purposes. Researchers with data requests should contact Polaris with their specific data needs by emailing media@polarisproject.org.

Using person-centered language is one way to help ensure your storytelling is accurate, nuanced, and respectful. Below are a few examples of how you can use person-centered language. Additional guidance is available in the Polaris <u>media guide</u>.

Victim, survivor, and person experiencing trafficking

It is best practice to ask a person who has experienced trafficking how they prefer to be identified, as it can very widely person to person. Both "victim" and "survivor" are commonly used terms. We encourage the use of another personcentered option, such as "person exeriencing trafficking" or "person who has experienced trafficking." We use this term because it helps recognize the whole person, rather than creating a label based on something a trafficker did to them. This is important because one of the biggest things traffickers take from those they exploit is control and power over their own lives. "Lived Experience Expert" is another term you may hear.



Pimp/employer vs. trafficker

Oftentimes, news stories or TV and movies use the word pimp to describe a sex trafficker. It is used because it is easy for viewers to understand, but it erases the criminality of their actions and therefore the accountability. It can also lead to bias and prevent identification of trafficking when the situation doesn't match the stereotype. If a person is a confirmed sex trafficker, use trafficker instead of pimp to ensure accountability is placed where it should be. In situations of labor trafficking, the word employer is often used to describe the person or institution that forced people into dangerous, unpaid, or otherwise coercive labor. If a situation of forced labor is confirmed, there is no employer, only a trafficker.



Gender-neutral terms

Human trafficking can happen to people of any gender identity. Stereotypes about trafficking lead many people to believe that trafficking only happens to women and girls. While it's true that many victims of sex trafficking do identify as female, many are male or other gender minorities. In addition, people who experience labor trafficking are more often male than any other gender identity. Using genderneutral terms, or specifically asking about a person's pronouns, will help correct stereotypes in people's understanding of who experiences trafficking.

Details of exploitation

People who have experienced trafficking should never feel compelled to share the details of their exploitation and trauma. Generally, decisions about what details are necessary or warranted in a story should be made by the person who experienced trafficking. This approach helps to ensure the person who experienced trafficking maintains control over their own story and representation. Many people who have experienced trafficking have told us that in previous engagements with reporters or entertainment professionals, they felt exploited for their story, offering their deepest trauma for nothing in return and for others to earn a profit. This experience can feel similar to how their trafficker made them feel, and discourage them from participating in media or educational and awareness raising activities in the future.

In the event that some details of a person's exploitation are shared, any identifying details, such as location, names of friends, family, or fellow victims, or any images that might be traced back to a specific place, should be removed for safety. In addition, informed consent should be obtained prior to the beginning of an interview, and expectations of compensation should be established. More information on compensation is provided in section 6 of this document.



Commonly used terminology can actually cause public confusion about human trafficking, and can be harmful for anti-trafficking organizations and people who have experienced trafficking. Here are a few examples of terminology to avoid:



Rankings

Data from the Trafficking Hotline is not intended to rank states. The Hotline reports the number of signals we receive per state, but this does not constitute a ranking, as these calls/texts/chats are not representative of the prevalence of human trafficking in any given state or nationwide. Generalizing rankings (e.g., Michigan ranks fifth in human trafficking) can be misleading. The number of signals received from a given location is often influenced by public knowledge of the Hotline in the area, how much people know about human trafficking generally, and how comfortable they feel contacting the Hotline.

Rescue

Evidence based on 16 years of Trafficking Hotline data shows that very few people who have experienced human trafficking exit their situation via third-party intervention. Most exit their trafficking experiences on their own. Best practice is to ask the person you are working with how they would like their trafficking exit described. In situations where no rescue occurred, use language that shows the person left on their own accord. For example, "Brianne exited her trafficking and was able to find support," or "Jose was able to create a safety plan and leave his exploiter." If you encounter a situation where a rescue did occur, a phrase like "removal from the situation" can be less sensationalistic.

"Words like 'rescue' turn people off from getting help. It's too dramatic, like you're hanging off a side of a cliff. But when you are in the situation, you don't think you are being trafficked, you just think this is your life. So you don't recognize yourself."

— Person who has experienced trafficking

Victim Blaming

Many times, in an effort to understand a survivor's experience, the media or even friends and family can ask questions that place the blame on the person who experienced trafficking. Questions like "Why didn't you just leave?" places the blame the person experiencing violence instead of on the person who exploited them, and ignores the elements of force, fraud, and coercion that define their trafficking. A person may stay with their trafficker due to physical threats made against themselves or their family, or because they would otherwise lack basic needs such as housing and food. Instead of using victim blaming language, ask questions and use terminology that places blame on the trafficker, such as "What did your trafficker do to make you stay?"

Child prostitute/sex worker, teen prostitute/sex worker, minor prostitute/sex worker

By federal definition, a person under the age of 18 who is exchanging sex for something of value is experiencing human trafficking. Legally, there is no such thing as a "child prostitute" or an "underage sex worker." Someone under the age of 18 at the time they engaged in commercial sex should be referred to as a child who experienced sex trafficking.



Preparation

Journalists and entertainment professionals looking to interview people who have experienced trafficking, have them consult on a project, or otherwise contribute to their work should plan to engage them early on. Ideally, you are able to include them as a part of your preparatory work, not just as an interviewee, so that your story can be informed by people's lived experience from the beginning.

Prior to the beginning of your work, you should also ask the person you are working with to have a conversation about boundaries-- what they are and are not willing to share, any boundaries related to physical safety, etc.



Compensation

Importantly, journalists and entertainment professionals should compensate people who have experienced trafficking for their time and expertise. For journalists, while you may not be able to compensate people who have experienced trafficking due to journalistic ethical standards, you should ask the anti-trafficking organization facilitating your engagement with an interviewee or consultant if they may provide compensation.

Compensation for survivors for participating in media interviews and entertainment is a common practice among anti-trafficking organizations. Providing compensation helps to normalize the restoration of power to people who have experienced trafficking, ensure they have control over the portrayal of their own story, and support the financial wellbeing of a community that is actively excluded from economic recovery and prosperity. Polaris does not coach survivors regarding the way they share their story or their experience, nor do we tell survivors what to say. Compensation is strictly for their time and expertise.

Interviews

Media engagement can be traumatizing for survivors of human trafficking for many reasons. One of the primary reasons is because the media often acts in a way that leaves survivors without control over their own story, leaving them feeling exploited for profit by the media in a similar way to how their traffickers profited off of them. For media looking to interview survivors, there are a number of steps you can take to help empower survivors, rather than make them feel used. We recommend using these <u>resources and tip sheets</u> from the Irina Project as a good place to start.



Falsehoods, myths, and conspiracies about human trafficking are widespread, especially online. In addition to confusing the public, it can also create a bottleneck for the Hotline, clogging up lines with well-meaning but misinformed callers and taking away Hotline access for the people who are calling for help. People who are experiencing or have experienced trafficking and others with close proximity to a trafficking situation are best positioned to call the Hotline. When in doubt about statistics related to trafficking in the US, tactics used by traffickers, or other information relevant to the Trafficking Hotline, always reach out to us at the contact email in this document. We are happy to help verify information you are not sure about.

Images are one of the most powerful tools we can use to dismantle harmful stereotypes about human trafficking. Generally, images that show handcuffs, barcode tattoos, or being locked in a dark room are inaccurate representations of the majority of human trafficking experiences. They also contribute to the disempowerment of people who have experienced trafficking. More empowering image options are those that reflect the truth of a person's experience. This can include photos that illustrate the experiences that made a person vulnerable to trafficking, how they were able to leave, different venues trafficking can take place in, or their life after exiting. Images that portray the truth about traffickers, such as showing a diversity of races and ages of traffickers or different settings of trafficking can also be helpful.

For examples of images to avoid and their alternatives, visit the <u>Polaris media guide</u> or the Department of Health and Human Services; <u>Look Beneath the Surface Image Library</u>.



There are many materials available to share the contact information for the Trafficking Hotline. You can <u>download them here</u>. If you wish to include the Trafficking Hotline's information at the end of a news story, please use the following:

If you or someone you know is experiencing human trafficking and is in need of support, contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline by calling 1-888-373-7888, by texting 233733, or online via webchat at humantraffickinghotline.org. The hotline operates 24/7 and help is available in 200 languages. All calls are confidential.

HAVE MORE QUESTIONS?

Write to us at media@polarisproject.org and a member of our team will assist you.

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