



# Issue Brief

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## SEX TRAFFICKING AMONG RECOVERING PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS

From the RCORP Rural Center of Excellence  
on SUD Recovery at the Fletcher Group

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Human Trafficking

*Human trafficking is a form of exploitation that involves force, fraud, or coercion to achieve commercial control over individuals<sup>1</sup> and compel them into involuntary labor or commercial sex trade.*

*"As a woman who was once purchased, I am often placed into one of two categories: I am either victimized as a survivor of human trafficking, or my trauma is dismissed since I chose to enter the commercial sex industry."*

**Deanna Lynn**

Quoted in  
"Purchased: Leaving the Sex Trade,"  
produced by Alpaca Love  
Productions in 2019

## A WORLDWIDE SCOURGE

Worldwide, millions of vulnerable people are trafficked each year.<sup>2</sup>

The National Human Trafficking Hotline identified over 9,000 cases involving 15,000 victims in the United States in 2022.<sup>3</sup>

Trafficking in rural areas stems from increased vulnerabilities arising from high rates of poverty and fewer employment opportunities; stigmatization resulting in a reluctance to seek services; and few services that recognize or respond to trafficking.

People living in rural areas may be uninformed about trafficking because of geographic and communication (internet and cell phone) isolation.

Trafficking may occur at seemingly safe rural places such as truck stops or hotels, as well as bars or clubs.

As much as three quarters (74%) of rural trafficking cases reported by the National Human Trafficking Resource Center represented sex trafficking.<sup>4</sup>

# Sex Trafficking

*Encompasses the use of force, fraud, or coercion by a trafficker to compel another person to engage in a commercial sex act.<sup>5</sup> This form of trafficking specifically targets individuals by using deception, violence, and manipulation. Women and children are most likely to be targeted for sex trafficking while men and boys represent an underreported segment of these victims.*

*This paper focuses primarily on sex trafficking and acknowledges worker/labor trafficking as a parallel but separate issue.*

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*In general, people who are in recovery are often vulnerable and face increased risk of returning to substance use if not adequately supported.*

*This underlines the necessity of intervention in recovery settings to break the cycle of addiction (recovery, return to use, recovery) and protect individuals from further harm.*

## PEOPLE WITH AN SUD ARE AT HIGHER RISK

Individuals with substance use disorders (SUD) are at higher risk of trafficking.<sup>6</sup> SUD compounds the risk of trafficking because traffickers often target individuals with such vulnerabilities.

The connection between SUD and trafficking is complex. Traffickers may exploit an individual's dependency by controlling access to substances or they may induce addiction as a leverage to exert control.

The cycle of recovery, victimization, and return to substance use creates the potential for traffickers to manipulate individuals who are attempting to overcome their dependency on alcohol or drugs. Survivors may seek mind-altering substances to cope with trauma and self-recrimination. They may become even more entrenched in substance use which makes it increasingly difficult to escape the trafficking situation.



# How Traffickers Exploit SUDs

*Traffickers often exploit SUD as a form of control, promising illicit substances to lure individuals into situations where traffickers capitalize on their dependency. Traffickers may provide their victims with substances to make them more manageable, reinforcing their dependency and strengthening the trafficker's control. To ensure continued compliance with the trafficker's demands, victims' withdrawal symptoms may be used as a means of punishment or control.<sup>8</sup>*



This form of exploitation intensifies the cycle of SUD and trafficking. The use of substances as a control mechanism underlines the complexity of trafficking and SUD, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions in recovery support services.

It is common for victims to enter trafficking when they are under 14 years of age. Survivors may not remember much of their previous life and change is likely to be difficult and intimidating. Even for those who escape the trafficking situation, where they may have experienced sexual violence from both the trafficker and the sex purchaser, attempts at SUD recovery will be complex due to increased trauma and potential for re-exploitation.

## TRAFFICKING AND SUD RECOVERY SUPPORT

In recovery programs and other recovery settings, the risk of return to use due to coercion or manipulation from traffickers is significant. For individuals who have been trafficked, recovery can be an uphill battle that is burdened with triggers that may be exploited by traffickers. Victims may remain at risk of abduction or manipulation by traffickers aiming to draw them back into exploitative situations, complicating their recovery journey.<sup>10</sup> The role of recovery support systems, including safe housing, is crucial in preventing re-exploitation.

Recovery support services, including recovery residences, must provide safe environments where individuals can receive support without being threatened by traffickers. The use of trauma-informed care is essential to supporting survivors of trafficking as they simultaneously focus on recovering from SUD. Trauma-informed care, recognized as an Evidence Based Practice by SAMHSA, encourages service providers to acknowledge the emotional tolls of trafficking and ensures that the emotional safety of survivors is prioritized. Incorporating survivor-centered trauma-informed principles not only supports survivors in building the resilience needed to reclaim their autonomy and reestablish their lives, but it also reduces their vulnerability to re-trafficking.

Individuals who are participating in the services of recovery support service organizations and/or living in recovery residences can be targets for traffickers (especially if they have been targeted before), so it is important for housing operators and others who work or volunteer in support services to be able to recognize circumstances, situations, or “red flags” that might indicate that sex trafficking could be affecting one of their residents or clients. While anyone can be trafficked, people with a history of substance use and addiction are far more vulnerable than others. Especially at risk are those who have been living in poverty or in unstable housing situations, as well as people with histories of trauma.

# Indicators of Potential Sex Trafficking

*To effectively address trafficking within recovery houses or other recovery support settings, it is essential to recognize specific indicators of exploitation that may signal the existence of a trafficking situation. Most common among “red flags” are isolation, lack of control, physical signs of abuse and neglect, adaptive survival techniques including dishonesty, manipulation, and trauma-related memory gaps. Isolated victims are often cut off from their family, friends, or support networks, which makes it easier for traffickers to control them. Isolation may be induced by threats to the physical safety of the victim and/or those whom they care about, or by payment (often in the form of substances) for their participation in the trafficking relationship.*

## RISK FACTORS OF POTENTIAL SEX TRAFFICKING

- Isolation from family and friends
- Lack of control—helplessness
- Bruises and signs of abuse
- Branding tattoos
- Malnutrition
- Poor hygiene
- Dressing that is very sexualized
- Depression and withdrawal



Traffickers limit the individual's ability to make decisions regarding personal matters such as setting their own schedules, interacting with others of their choosing, and managing their own finances. This lack of autonomy contributes to a general loss of control for the person being trafficked and may impact their ability to participate in recovery activities, pay fees for services (including rent), and to maintain/form supportive relationships with others. Loss of control may be more subtle – for example, an individual defers to another person before giving information about themselves. Individuals who are being trafficked may have a controlling sponsor, guardian, or romantic partner who seems to be overly involved and may be monitoring the person's movements and conversations.

# Indicators (continued)

*Trafficking is likely to place the individual in a situation where they are at risk of abuse and neglect. Common signs of this are bruises and other physical injuries (such as branding tattoos about money and sex), weight loss resulting from malnutrition, poor hygiene and grooming, dressing inappropriately sexual for the situation, and general declines in appearance as well as changes in behavior that can range from being withdrawn and disengaged to being aggressive or combative if confronted about the observed indicators of distress.*



An individual's current work and living situation, pressing financial needs, and risk factors may offer more clues that they are at risk of exploitation based on their vulnerabilities. For instance, people living in poverty, who have lived in foster care, or are struggling with addiction, trauma, other abuse, or unstable housing, are all at comparatively higher risk for trafficking. Traffickers employ control tactics to take advantage of people with desperate needs, i.e., income or a place to live. A trafficker can fill or pretend to fill these needs. They may promise money, safety, or drugs; traffickers often groom people with the promise of emotional support and acceptance.

## OTHER RISK FACTORS

The Polaris Project, which operates the National Human Trafficking Hot Line (1-888-373-7888), advises that it is not always about looking for certain signs or red flags as there may be none.

Consequently, it is more important to try to understand that an individual's current circumstances and history may be putting them at risk of being trafficked.

The National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center (NHTTAC) has developed an [Adult Human Trafficking Screening Tool and Guide](https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/otip/adult_human_trafficking_screening_tool_and_guide.pdf) that can be helpful in identifying adults who may have experienced human trafficking. The guide can be downloaded at [https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/otip/adult\\_human\\_trafficking\\_screening\\_tool\\_and\\_guide.pdf](https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/otip/adult_human_trafficking_screening_tool_and_guide.pdf).



# Staff Training

*Because recovery service organizations and recovery residences serve people who are potential targets for traffickers, it is important to provide orientation and training about trafficking for staff and volunteers. Staff and volunteers should understand: 1) Risk factors and situations in which trafficking is more likely to occur, 2) How to recognize potential trafficking situations (including using screening tools such as the AHTST), and 3) The organization's policies and procedures for managing the situation.*



It is important for staff and volunteers to understand that people caught in sex trafficking situations often have strong emotional ties to their traffickers. People may not see themselves as victims while they are being trafficked because they have been manipulated or “groomed” to believe they are making their own choices. Although trafficking victims become trapped and fear leaving for myriad reasons, they do eventually want to leave the situation. Traffickers do not fit a stereotype and may represent various populations. They may be strangers or intimate partners or spouses of the victims, family members, friends or benefactors, business acquaintances, and workplace supervisors.

## TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL INTERACTION

- Meet physical needs, offer food, water, or clothing if available
- Adopt an open non-threatening body posture
- Use respectful, empathetic, non-judgmental language
- Avoid probing into unnecessary details
- Be prepared for potential trauma reactions
- Keep the trauma bond in mind, do not criticize the trafficker
- Survivor answers may be hard to hear, be prepared.
- Use empowering words to highlight the survivor's strengths
- Offer other supportive services, but don't force survivors to pursue them; talking with you may be all they can do at this time

# Education & Communication

*Providing information and promoting open discussion and awareness about trafficking will help support and protect recovery service program participants and residents. Here are some tips that recovery support services personnel can use to help empower their participants.*



- Help participants and residents understand how trafficking involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion and how it is different from the commercial sex industry. Be cautious in using the term “trafficking” because victims may see their experiences as simply means of survival vs. being trafficked. If the individual involved is under the age of 18 and engaging in commercial sex, they are experiencing trafficking regardless of whether force, fraud, or coercion is also taking place.
- Discuss how and why some people are more vulnerable to trafficking. Make sure that program participants are aware of local and national resources like the National Trafficking Hotline.
- Advise program participants on how best to bring their concerns to a staff person confidentially should they suspect a potential trafficking situation exists or may be developing.

## POLICIES, PROCEDURES, AND RESOURCES

Recovery service organizations can put policies and procedures in place that establish who is to be notified and what steps are to be taken if staff, volunteers, or participants suspect a possible trafficking situation. Policies and procedures can address how to raise concerns about the presence of someone on-site who may be attempting to engage others in trafficking. Policies can clearly outline the steps to be taken if staff or volunteers are asked for help by a program participant in what may be a potential trafficking situation.

For recovery residences, visitation policies can be used to set boundaries around the types of people who are permitted to come into contact with residents and their frequency of contact.

Staff can establish procedures to routinely provide information about human trafficking awareness and available resources (such as hotlines and onsite support).

The organization may elect to collaborate with other services and organizations that offer services for trafficking survivors. The National Hotline maintains an online local service directory that may help organizations to identify useful local and state resources.



# Responding to Human Trafficking

*If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, it is important to immediately call 911. If you believe you may have information about a trafficking situation, call the 24/7 National Human Trafficking Hotline toll-free at 1-888-373-7888. You can also text the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 233733 (message and data rates may apply). Interpreters are available via phone calls.*



## Human Trafficking Hotline

Call 1-888-373-7888 (toll-free)

Trained hotline advocates are available 24/7 to take reports of potential human trafficking, carefully assess the situation, and provide guidance on possible next steps. With the caller's consent, the next steps might include:

- Follow-up calls for additional information
- Reporting and coordinating with designated law enforcement partners for investigation
- Coordinating with local service partners for emergency assistance and ongoing support
- Referral or live transfer to service partners, to meet a victim's needs as soon as possible

Anticipate that advocates may ask sensitive questions. If individuals are not comfortable answering, they can decline. Conversations with recovery staff are confidential, but if individuals provide information about someone under 18 years who is engaging in commercial sex or is in danger, or if anyone is in immediate danger, the advocate will have to report this to law enforcement.

## STATE LAWS

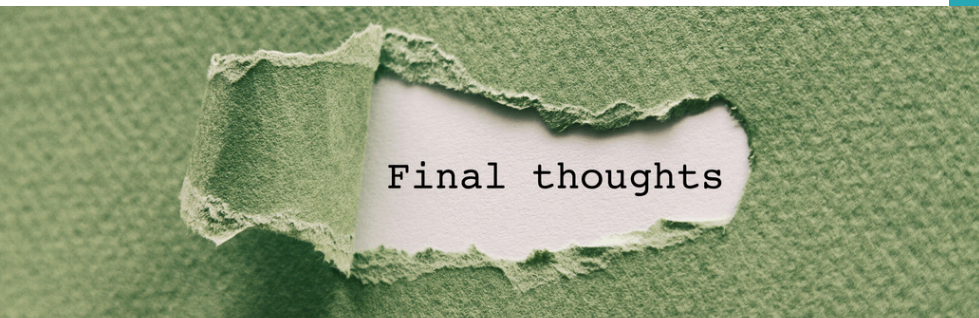
Some states have human trafficking laws that may protect a survivor's identity from public disclosure or prevent them from being arrested for crimes committed while they were being trafficked. Some states have options for survivors to file civil lawsuits against their trafficker.

## STATE RESOURCES

Each state may have additional resources to help survivors. For example, Refuge for Women is the nation's largest housing program for victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. A range of aftercare and housing is provided by Refuge for Women in Chicago, Kentucky, Las Vegas, Pittsburgh, North Texas, and Texas Gulf Coast.

# Conclusion

*Recovery service organizations and recovery residences can offer crucial protection and support for those who are at risk of being engaged in sex trafficking, or who have been trafficked, in several ways:*



- Implement policies and procedures to identify and respond to potential trafficking.
- Foster open communication about potential trafficking among staff and participants.
- Empower staff through training about the risk profiles and red flags of trafficking, making information widely available about local and national resources like the National Trafficking Hotline
- Empower program participants and residents with knowledge and understanding of what can make people vulnerable to trafficking and what they can do if they suspect or experience the use of force, fraud, or coercion within their recovery community. Make sure that participants are aware of local and national hotline resources

These measures can help prevent exploitation and help to restore victims' dignity and autonomy, enabling them to safely pursue recovery from both SUD and trauma.



## Need More Info?

For more information, please see [SAMHSA Trauma-Informed Care.](#)

## ENDNOTES

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