

REFUGEES & ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

PROTECTING VULNERABLE POPULATIONS FROM SEX TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking is undoubtedly one of the most complex and pervasive issues facing the United States today. It is difficult to overstate the number of challenges and cautions that face the people working to combat trafficking, and many of those challenges include how the federal government and individual state governments are addressing trafficking. Unfortunately, for as much good as the authority and resources of the government can do for survivors of trafficking, there is an equal amount of harm that can be done to them.

These challenges are amplified for trafficking survivors who are refugees or undocumented immigrants in the United States. On top of their efforts to build a new life in a different country that is largely hostile towards them, refugees and illegal immigrants are much more vulnerable to traffickers. As people seek asylum or new opportunities in the U.S., traffickers take advantage of their unfamiliarity and vulnerability to force, coerce, or trick them into trafficked labor or commercial sex. For unaccompanied minors, the lack of guardianship by family members and the government leaves them particularly vulnerable to exploitation. In addition to these vulnerabilities, traffickers of immigrants commonly threaten to have their victims arrested, jailed, or even deported in order to convince them that they have no access to resources or assistance from law enforcement. The combination of these tactics leaves victims feeling helpless, isolated, and worthless in a country they are unfamiliar with and unable to find help.

Ineffective and inappropriate legislation, on both the state and federal levels, has an enormous effect on survivors of trafficking. Legislation that works to support survivors and fits into a landscape of care is more often a shift in a system that is currently working, rather than a redesigned system. However, much of the recent legislation has taken the latter course, which inevitably leads to bad outcomes for survivors, in prosecution, re-exploitation, or other damaging responses to their trauma. It is vitally important to build a system that can be readjusted to best meet the current needs of survivors, not beginning again with a new idea built on inspiration that will quickly fade.

Unfortunately, the current systems in the United States are simply

not responsive enough to the needs of survivors, refugees, and undocumented immigrants to successfully lower their vulnerabilities to being targeted by traffickers. Of course, it is impossible for a single agency or organization to fully address the complex needs of these individuals to adequately prevent exploitation, but there is much room for improvement.

The following points outline the most pressing improvements in caring for survivors, refugees, and illegal immigrants to better prevent future trafficking in the United States:

- **Funding of comprehensive services** — On both the federal and state levels, there is a distinct lack of funding and systemic resources for organizations and agencies that seek to provide these individuals with resources. As they come to the United States, the vast majority do not have access to the resources they need to build stability, including housing, food, and work opportunities. It is an irrefutable fact that a lack of stability leaves an individual more vulnerable to exploitation. Traffickers take advantage of people who have a pressing need, meeting that need and then forcing them into exploitative situations as payment. By addressing these basic needs through government or independent organizations, these vulnerable people will be better protected against such manipulation.
- **Prosecution and investigation of potential trafficking situations** — Particularly in cases of labor trafficking, there is a distinct lack of accountability for the individuals and companies that continue to exploit undocumented immigrants and minors through labor trafficking. Compared to sex trafficking cases, which are also heavily underreported, labor trafficking cases simply do not take priority in funds or manpower for investigations. Very few sex or labor trafficking defendants are prosecuted each year, which undoubtedly leads to further instances of exploitation. Many of the trafficking individuals feel trapped in those situations because they have no other option to gain financial stability, especially for those who are undocumented.

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- **Building a system that supports independence** — It is vitally important for both the health of the individuals served through the programs and the programs themselves that an emphasis on independence exists. Any program that seeks to serve trafficking survivors, refugees, or undocumented immigrants needs to focus on empowering them to eventually lead healthy lives independent of government support. Unfortunately, many governmental programs today do not have this emphasis and end up encouraging dependence rather than freedom. Including elements such as life skills classes, home ownership programs, and work opportunities helps programs truly meet their mission of helping these vulnerable individuals find lasting freedom.

These points are high-level solutions to specific elements of the problem — the intersection of human trafficking and vulnerable refugees and illegal immigrants in the United States. True, comprehensive solutions to this pervasive problem will require many more discussions and collaborations between government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and survivors themselves.