

the power of language
IN SERVING TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS



SAFE HOUSE
PROJECT

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Words have power — This is a truth well-known to survivors of human trafficking. When it comes to the language used to describe these individuals and the crime of trafficking itself, the words chosen can be the difference between empowerment and real harm.

Unfortunately, many trafficking survivors report being actively or passively harmed by misused or incorrect language. Certain words perpetuate a specific stereotype about victims, traffickers, or buyers, which can make it much more difficult to identify, support, and protect survivors or prosecute buyers and traffickers. Some language choices directly sensationalize human trafficking, which distracts from the real issues and challenges facing survivors in the United States today. For trafficked individuals still in exploitative situations, harmful language can even be used to discourage them from seeking help.

Survivor leaders and other anti-trafficking experts recognize that using precise terms and agreeing on certain definitions of those terms is a critical step in building an effective national response to human trafficking. Using accurate terms and definitions is particularly important in the legislative process on both a state and federal level. Correctly defining language helps to protect adolescents from coercive sexual situations, prosecute buyers of trafficked individuals, and avoid loose interpretations and loopholes in investigations.

To appropriately make this change, the anti-trafficking movement must be listening to, asking for, and elevating the voices of lived experience experts. These individuals are uniquely qualified to inform the process of defining the language around human trafficking and should be involved in all levels of combatting trafficking in the United States.

The purpose of this guide is to outline common terms in the anti-trafficking movement and provide recommendations for whether they are accurate and helpful to continue using.

TERMS TO AVOID

The U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking is convened by several prominent lived experience experts who offer their insight in the anti-trafficking field to provide recommendations and advise on improving federal policy.

In their [2022 Annual Report](#), the Council addressed a list of terms that are problematic and should not be used. A summary of the list is included below:

- **CHILD PROSTITUTE / CHILD PROSTITUTION**

There is no such thing as a child prostitute. This phrase incorrectly presumes a child's capacity to consent to sexual activity. Using this term perpetuates a harmful perspective and reflects the interests of individuals who profit from the exploitation and abuse of children.

- **CHILD PORNOGRAPHY**

While this term is currently used in treaties, conventions, and federal statutes, it takes away from the severity of the heinous realities of child sexual abuse material (CSAM). It is a horrific crime to involve a child in sexual activity, and it is even more so to document it for the sexual enjoyment of others. To accurately reflect the severity of this crime, only "CSAM" should be used to describe it.

- **SEX WORK / SEX WORKER**

These terms imply that people can be bought and sold. Additionally, the term "work" suggests that individuals in the commercial sex industry are provided with work-related benefits and protections. This language desensitizes and disregards the experiences of many individuals in this industry who rights have been violated. Individuals who truly and voluntarily consent to engage in commercial sex should instead be referred to as "individuals" in the commercial sex industry.



- **SEX SLAVE**

Unfortunately, this dehumanizing term is used in many legal definitions. It should not be included in efforts to end human trafficking, nor should it be used to label those individuals who are experiencing trafficking or those who have overcome it. The term “sex slave” encourages an image of bondage and suggests a demoralizing infringement on a person’s choices and freedom, as well as their dignity. To describe an individual experiencing commercial sexual exploitation, the term “sex trafficking victim” should be used instead.

- **RESCUE**

This term evokes images of victims who are restrained and physically freed by a rescuer. Images like these promote the White Knight Syndrome through an uneven power dynamic between the “rescuer” and the victim. In reality, many survivors fight their own way out of a trafficking situation and should not be considered weak, powerless, or in need of rescue. The term “assisted” should be used instead of “rescued” to more accurately represent how the anti-trafficking industry works to support survivors as they seek freedom.

TERMS TO ADOPT

In their [2022 Annual Report](#), the Advisory Council also suggests certain terms to be included in the language of the anti-trafficking movement. This language promotes respect for all individuals with lived experience, enables greater accountability for organizations and individuals, and reflects the severity of trafficking without sensationalizing survivors’ experiences.

A summary of key terms from this list is included below:

- **CLIENT**

In the context of service provision, the term “client” reflects an individual who has autonomy and choice in seeking and receiving support or services. In contrast, the terms “beneficiary” and “recipient” suggest passive engagement or

experience where an individual does not have choice or control. Survivors receiving restorative care services after a trafficking experience should be considered “clients”, “partners”, or “collaborators” to emphasize their agency and choice.

- **PIMP**

This term should be used by federal agencies interchangeably with “sex trafficker”, “perpetrator”, or “exploiter”. Each of these terms reflects destructive behaviors and actions and encourages real conversations about the unique connotations. It is harmful to only associate the term “pimp” with “pimp-hoe” culture, because perpetrators of sex trafficking often have influence, money, and power not typically found in that street culture. Because sex trafficking occurs in all sectors of society, the term “pimp” should apply to all types of perpetrators.

- **THE LIFE**

A term used to describe a lifestyle or experiences associated with sex trafficking.

- **REVICITIMIZATION**

A term used to describe how victims experience exploitation from additional sources to a primary source. In the context of sex trafficking, an understanding of both the prevalence and severity of revictimization is necessary to support victims in seeking restorative care and accessing resources. Revictimization can occur through a previous trafficker or abuser or from navigation the justice system or service delivery process.

- **POLY-VICTIMIZATION**

A term used to describe how individuals often experience multiple types of victimization, whether concurrently or separately. Specifically, survivors of human trafficking also commonly experience victimization through other crimes before, during, or after their trafficking experience. An understanding of poly-victimization is necessary to comprehensively identify, protect, and support survivors of trafficking in their journey to freedom from exploitation.



TERMS TO UNDERSTAND

The Advisory Council makes other important distinctions about anti-trafficking language in their [2022 Annual Report](#). Since the language of the movement is continually shifting and being refined to better serve survivors, recognition of the appropriate uses of certain words can be significant.

A list of terms that are relevant to this discussion, as well as commonly used terms, are included below:

- **VICTIM vs. SURVIVOR**

The term “victim” is used to describe someone who has suffered direct physical, emotional, or monetary harm as a result of a crime; however, “victim” does not reflect the strength, resilience, and agency of an individual who has experienced victimization and overcome it.

The term “survivor” is used to describe an individual who suffered harm as a result of criminal conduct while recognizing the strength it takes to continue on a journey toward healing in the aftermath of a traumatic experience.

Both terms can be used to describe individuals who have experienced sex trafficking. “Victim” is appropriate in situations in which an individual has not yet reached freedom from their trafficking experience, while “survivor” is appropriate to describe an individual who is no longer living in exploitation through trafficking.

- **SURVIVOR LEADER vs. LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERT**

Similar to the above terms, both “survivor leader” and “lived experience expert” have a place in the language of the anti-trafficking movement.

The term “survivor leader” describes an individual who has experienced human trafficking while simultaneously highlighting their strength and expertise to help end human trafficking. However, this term can imply that the person’s hardship existed solely in the past and was only related to human trafficking.

In contrast, the term “lived experience expert” describes an individual who has experienced human trafficking while also encompassing their past, current, and generational experiences, including systemic injustices and other traumas.

Lived experience experts are able to expand the anti-trafficking field’s capacity to understand and research trafficking, provide services for those in need, and identify and address gaps as survivors’ needs shift.

The terms “survivor leader” and “lived experience expert” are often used interchangeably in the movement, but individuals with lived experience may prefer one over the other.

- **VICTIM-CENTERED APPROACH**

A mentality that places the needs, priorities, and interests of a crime victim at the center of work with the victim. This approach includes providing nonjudgmental assistance, emphasizing self-determination, and assisting victims in making informed choices. Promoting a victim-centered approach in trafficking investigations, restorative care, and legislation ensures that restoring victims’ feelings of safety and security is a priority. This mentality also serves as a safeguard against policies and practices that may inadvertently re-traumatize victims.

A victim-centered approach should also incorporate a trauma-informed, survivor-informed, and culturally competent approach.

- **TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH**

A mentality that recognizes signs of trauma in individuals and emphasizes the need for a response that integrates knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, practices, and settings. A trauma-informed approach actively seeks to protect victims from re-traumatization. This approach includes an understanding of the vulnerability and experiences of trauma survivors, including the prevalence and physical, social, and emotional impact of trauma. Trauma-informed programs, services, and communities place priority on restoring a survivor’s feelings of safety choice, and control.

- **SURVIVOR-INFORMED APPROACH**

A mentality that designs, implements, and evaluates programs, policies, interventions, or products with intentional leadership, expertise, and input from a diverse community of survivors. A survivor-informed approach elevates and dignifies the experiences and guidance of



survivors to ensure that the program, policy, intervention, or product accurately represents their needs, interests, and perceptions.

- **CULTURAL COMPETENCE**

The ability of an individual or organization to interact effectively with people of different cultures. This includes drawing on knowledge of culturally based values, traditions, customs, language, and behavior to plan, implement, and evaluate service activities. Cultural competence is also known as cultural accountability and cultural responsiveness.

survivors of human trafficking as our mission statement.

Learn more about the power of language in the anti-trafficking movement in our most recent webinar, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzhgQlluryc?feature=shared.

CONCLUSION

As the anti-trafficking movement grows and develops, the importance of its language becomes increasingly clear. To quote the Advisory Council, the goal of refining this language is “to strengthen the understanding that this fight against human trafficking is not one that is fought for survivors – but is one that we wage together, through strong collaboration with survivors” (2022 Annual Report). This language will prove powerful in legislation, prosecutions of perpetrators, and restorative care for survivors as individual champions education themselves and their peers to bring incredible change to the movement.

At Safe House Project, our fundamental belief is that language in our work is powerful. We strive to maintain an open conversation about the way the language we use affects survivors, recognizing the impact those words have today rather than leaning on yesterday’s understanding.

To do this, we emphasize the voices of survivors on our team and those we collaborate with externally and seek their expertise on the best ways to express our mission and work. SHP’s platform is regularly used to promote the conversation about the language of the anti-trafficking movement, including our social media, webinar series, and blog posts. We have made it a habit to ask for the guidance of the lived experience experts on our own team in our written content, working to include their perspective in every aspect of our work. We believe that our language should be as focused on the empowerment of

