

# UNACCOMPANIED & UNDOCUMENTED

## THE VULNERABILITY OF IMMIGRANTS TO EXPLOITATION

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The United States has the largest population of immigrants of any country in the world, and by a large margin — it is four times larger than the immigrant population of Germany, the second-ranking country. About one in five of all international immigrants live in the U.S., many of whom come from Central American or South American countries through the southwestern border. Today, more than 40 million people living in the United States were born in another country, with nearly every other nationality represented by U.S. immigrants.

Immigrants live in every community across the nation but often face stigma, stereotypes, and hostile behavior because of their nationality and status. On top of this, immigrants experience mistreatment, abuse, and exploitation at much higher rates than other U.S. populations. For immigrants without documentation and children who immigrate without a parent or guardian, these risks are particularly high and exist both while these individuals are in transit and living in the U.S.

There are many reasons why undocumented immigrants and unaccompanied minors are so vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking, including the following:

- **Many people have nowhere else to go.** People decide to immigrate to the United States for a wide variety of reasons, but very few come simply because they want to. Most immigrants are fleeing poverty, natural disasters, food insecurity, or a lack of sufficient access to healthcare, safe water, or sanitation. Many feel that they have no other choice but to start over in another place, hoping that they will have better luck there. Others leave their home countries because of unsafe situations, such as wars or high crime rates. A significant majority of immigrants share a fear of being deported, which many consider to be a worst-case scenario. People living in this kind of uncertainty and need are highly vulnerable to being taken advantage of by unethical employers and sexual predators.

For unaccompanied children, this risk is exponentially higher. Young children are often fully dependent on a sponsor to stay in the United States, which has a very low

level of supervision and oversight. Industry experts often report that all it takes to change a child's sponsor is signing a form, without any required background checks, waiting periods, or even phone calls. Unaccompanied children are regularly separated from their parents or guardians at the border and depend completely on a stranger to take them in. Traffickers are fully aware of this vulnerability and often gain sponsorship of unaccompanied children for the purpose of forcing them into commercial sex. These children are left with the choice to run away and fend for themselves in a foreign country, where they know no one and may not even speak the language, or suffer silently in the hands of their traffickers.

- **Many undocumented immigrants cannot access public benefit resources.** In general, undocumented immigrants are ineligible to receive federal food assistance, healthcare, and financial help. Only about 50% of U.S. states make undocumented immigrants eligible to receive state benefits, which include food and financial assistance. For undocumented immigrants who are being exploited for labor or sex, it can be incredibly difficult to access or even know about these resources. In fact, the inability to provide for themselves and their families is a common reason many people stay in trafficking situations — they believe that there is no other option.
- **A significant number of undocumented immigrants and unaccompanied minors cannot speak English fluently.** Language barriers can be a considerable obstacle for vulnerable individuals. Without the ability to communicate or understand other people's speech, many people are likely to be deceived, manipulated, or taken advantage of by unscrupulous individuals. In addition, immigrants experiencing language barriers are far less likely to report crimes or contact the authorities for help.

This is particularly true for victims of labor trafficking. Many immigrants arrive in the United States expecting to have a certain job, only to find themselves working longer hours in worse conditions for less pay. These people may be forced

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to choose between fulfilling contracts they cannot understand or navigating a legal system they are entirely unfamiliar with.

Unaccompanied minors are also susceptible to exploitation due to language barriers. Children who are given into the custody of a sponsor may not have any idea where they are going, who they are in the care of, or whether they will be able to communicate with that person. Traffickers posing as sponsors often take advantage of this and tell their victims that if they leave, no one will be able to understand them or help them. These children are also commonly told that if they tell anyone about the abuse, they will be deported and may never see their families again.

- **Often, undocumented immigrants and unaccompanied minors have existing trauma that compounds their vulnerability to exploitation.** People leave their home countries for many reasons, which often involve traumatic experiences. Previous trauma is a widely recognized risk factor for sexual exploitation, with as many as 49% of survivors of sex trafficking reporting childhood sexual abuse. In addition, children who have been involved with the juvenile justice or foster care systems experience much higher rates of sexual abuse and later vulnerability than other children. It is reasonable to assume that, since the experience of crossing the border and having a sponsor holds similarities to the juvenile justice system and foster care, the vulnerability of unaccompanied immigrant children would also be similar.

Unfortunately, there is a distinct lack of education, research, and data on the crisis of exploitation of immigrants in the United States. In addition, the structure of resources for undocumented immigrants or unaccompanied minors is lacking, amplifying these individuals' vulnerabilities. There are very few standard preventative or protective measures taken by immigration authorities, and it is likely that the estimated numbers of exploited and trafficked individuals in this population severely underrepresent the reality.

Currently, the solutions to this crisis are unclear. As members of the anti-trafficking movement, we should be collectively working toward understanding the unique vulnerabilities of undocumented immigrants and unaccompanied minors in order to better protect and serve them. However, that goal is incredibly difficult to achieve without comprehensive research on the problem, which simply does not exist at this time.

Therefore, the first step to building a better response to the

trafficking of immigrants must begin with extensive data collection and analysis. Until we can understand the problem, we cannot design effective solutions.

The goal of this article is not to provide solutions, but rather to encourage their development. It is our fundamental belief at Safe House Project that eradicating trafficking requires the collaboration of all kinds of individuals, and this sector is no exception. Instead, our desire is to promote the conversation, raise awareness, and actively seek solutions, and we ask for your help.

Share your ideas at [info@safehouseproject.org](mailto:info@safehouseproject.org) and kickstart the conversation.