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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAW
ENFORCEMENT & SURVIVORS OF
TRAFFICKING

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Identifying survivors of sex trafficking is notoriously difficult. Currently, experts estimate that less than one percent of all human trafficking victims in the United States will be identified in their lifetime, leaving hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children in exploitative situations. This problem is especially pertinent for law enforcement, who come into contact with trafficking victims more often than the general public but still often fail to recognize them as survivors.

Along with healthcare providers, law enforcement officers are a key group to raising the identification rate of trafficking victims in the United States because they are one of the first points of contact for many survivors. Individuals are commonly identified as trafficking survivors after being detained or questioned for another incident or for a connection to someone else. Officers and agents from local, state, and federal organizations have some of the greatest opportunities to interact with and recognize trafficking victims, but many survivors report that they were overlooked by law enforcement on multiple occasions.

This oversight can be partially attributed to the difficulty law enforcement officers can have in recognizing the signs and symptoms of trafficking, as well as the subversive nature of the crime. [Effectively responding](#) to trafficking requires officers to notice victims who have often been hidden from or had poor relationships with law enforcement in the past, such as women in the commercial sex trade, migrants, immigrants, and people living in poverty. People of color also tend to have strained relationships with law enforcement due to widespread mistrust. In addition, the signs of trafficking may be hidden behind other issues, such as drug use or domestic violence.

BARRIERS TO IDENTIFICATION

Unfortunately, a significant portion of the gap in identification by law enforcement is due to many officers' belief that trafficking simply doesn't happen in their jurisdiction. This is particularly true for officers in smaller local communities, about [75%](#) of whom believe that sex trafficking is rare or nonexistent in their local community. Of the few who recognize the pervasiveness of human trafficking, most believe that the majority of victims are foreign, which is simply not true — in the United States, at least [83%](#) of trafficking victims are U.S. citizens.

Another barrier to identification is the age of many trafficking victims. The average age at which an individual is first sold for sex is only twelve to fourteen years old, meaning that many victims are still minors and less likely to interact with law

enforcement officers. However, children who are involved with the juvenile justice system are [far more likely](#) to not only be trafficked but also to be sexually and physically abused while in the system. This vulnerability persists for the rest of those children's lives and their experiences as minors [often lead them](#) to involvement with law enforcement, drug use, or sexual victimization later in life. The interconnectedness of childhood trauma to illegal actions later can add to law enforcement's difficulty in recognizing trafficking victims while investigating other situations.

Additionally, very few law enforcement officers are trained in recognizing the signs and symptoms of sex trafficking. Any kind of anti-human trafficking training is uneven at best and nonexistent at worst in the United States, with the requirements and content of training varying widely between counties and states. Some agencies make sex trafficking education mandatory, while others have no requirements and may not even offer elective training at all. Because law enforcement leadership is often under pressure to adjust their training protocols by the media, the community, or their superiors, training on identifying human trafficking often falls by the wayside. This lack or inconsistency in trafficking education leaves law enforcement officers without the training they need to recognize trafficking victims, help them leave exploitation, and provide them with the resources they need to find healing.

Unfortunately, many trafficking victims have been taught to fear law enforcement or have experienced trauma involving them. Traffickers commonly tell their victims that the police will not believe them or that they will be arrested. Many survivors [refuse to report](#) because they are afraid of being implicated in other crimes committed while being trafficked. Some survivors say that their trafficker threatened to harm family members if they went to the police. Tragically, other trafficking survivors have experienced personal trauma from interactions with law enforcement. Just as victims represent all backgrounds, so do buyers and perpetrators. It is not uncommon for a trafficking survivor to report being sold to an officer while being exploited, which presents unique challenges for law enforcement to build trust with survivors during an investigation later.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE INVESTIGATIONS

Interacting effectively with survivors of sex trafficking can be challenging even for law enforcement officers who have received training. The kind of trauma associated with trafficking is complex and can present in many different ways, making it



difficult for others to understand the best ways to communicate with survivors, especially those who have recently exited exploitation.

However, these challenges are multiplied for untrained officers as they investigate human trafficking. One of the most common mistakes law enforcement makes in these situations is inadvertently using inaccurate or harmful terms to refer to survivors or their trafficking experience. Language can be an incredibly powerful tool in building relationships with survivors, but it can be equally damaging. Using demeaning or inaccurate language can irreparably harm the trust between an officer and a survivor. Many survivors do not yet understand which terms best describe their experience and may use similarly harmful language, but that does not inherently mean those terms are helpful for law enforcement to use.

Sex trafficking is also regularly interconnected with other crimes and abuses, which can add a layer of complexity for investigating law enforcement. For example, it can be very difficult without training to understand the intersection of the commercial sex trade and sex trafficking and [many survivors](#) report being arrested on prostitution-related charges while being trafficked. [About 84%](#) of survivors also experienced childhood sexual abuse and many survivors report experiencing domestic violence, sexual assault, or physical abuse in conjunction with exploitation. Nearly [85%](#) of survivors say they used alcohol or drugs, many of whom report being forced by their trafficker to use substances as a means of control. There are multiple situations in which a trafficking survivor might interact with law enforcement for reasons other than their victimization. Many survivors are only identified as such during investigations that were not originally focused on sex trafficking.

Law enforcement officers who have not been trained to identify and respond to potential sex trafficking are also unlikely to anticipate the deep discomfort many survivors feel toward them. Interacting with an officer can make a survivor feel like they are in trouble or in danger of being arrested. Many survivors find it difficult to trust any authority figure and traditional investigation techniques may trigger traumatic memories. Often, trafficking victims who are interacting with law enforcement are not or have not been separated from their perpetrator for very long and are likely still living in survival mode. Until they receive ongoing stabilizing and supportive services that empower them to stop living in survival mode, most survivors feel unwilling or unable to interact with law enforcement officers at all.

Significant barriers exist to the initial identification of survivors by law enforcement, and even more exist to effective investigations into the situation.

IMPROVING THE RELATIONSHIP

Repairing and rebuilding a positive relationship between law enforcement officers and survivors of sex trafficking is easier said than done, but the following action steps have been valuable for many agencies in beginning that process:

Learn and implement accurate and specific language. The terms that officers use to describe survivors, their experiences, and the perpetrators is critical to communicating to survivors that they are safe. Officers and departments that make accurate language part of their regular vocabulary will be far more effective in building relationships with survivors and anti-trafficking organizations. Accurate language can prevent potential trigger words being used in conversation with a survivor and can help them feel more safe, supported, and seen. Understanding specific definitions of these terms also helps investigators to build stronger cases and increases the likelihood of the perpetrators being convicted. To learn more, reference this guide on [The Power of Language in Serving Trafficking Survivors](#).

Mandate basic anti-human trafficking training for all officers. For many departments, anti-human trafficking training is not a priority and survivors are not being recognized even when they interact with officers. Trafficking exists in communities across the United States, regardless of their size, location, or population, but law enforcement in large cities are [far more likely](#) to consider trafficking a serious issue than smaller departments. In studies controlling for the size and location of communities, the degree to which law enforcement is trained to identify human trafficking cases is [closely related](#) to whether or not they actually investigate them.

The need for training is clear – Agencies prepared to investigate trafficking cases are far more likely to identify it in the first place. Even for small departments, mandating anti-human trafficking training for all officers is vitally important to increasing the identification rates of survivors and helping them break the cycle of victimization. At a minimum, this training should include the signs of trafficking for different ages and genders, the legal definitions and distinctions between trafficking and other crimes, the methods of control traffickers commonly utilize, and the intersections between trafficking and other crimes.

Several options for anti-human trafficking training and resources for law enforcement exist in the United States, including:

- [The International Association of Chiefs of Police – Anti-Human Trafficking Training & Technical Assistance](#)
- [The International Association of Human Trafficking Investigators](#)
- State, county, or city human trafficking prevention task forces
- [Safe House Project webinars](#)



Listen to survivor stories and teach officers about trafficking trauma. The personal stories of survivors are incredibly powerful tools for educating law enforcement. Many officers are inspired to learn more about human trafficking prevention after hearing about the severity and variety of trauma a survivor experiences during exploitation. The crime of trafficking often involves multiple other types of abuse and almost universally results in complex trauma, the effects of which can be difficult to understand without education. However, it is crucial for law enforcement to understand the types of trauma survivors often experience and how that trauma may present in their behavior. Learning to recognize the signs of trauma and how to prevent triggers can be incredibly useful for officers looking to build trust with survivors. To learn more, reference this guide on [Understanding Trauma & the Effects of Sex Trafficking](#).

Incorporate a victim-centered investigative approach. The traditional criminal justice response focuses most often on holding perpetrators accountable for their crimes. While this approach is fundamental for most criminal investigations, it does not often function well in human trafficking cases. Instead, the survivors' physical and psychological well-being needs to be considered throughout interactions and steps should be taken to ensure that they don't feel like criminals. The process of investigations and prosecutions can be extremely triggering or retraumatizing for survivors, so ensuring that officers are listening and affirming their dignity is incredibly important. This is best accomplished by implementing a victim-centered approach, which seeks to minimize retraumatization by providing the support of victim advocates, empowering survivors as engaged participants in the criminal justice process, and providing survivors with the opportunities to play a role in seeking their traffickers brought to justice. A victim-centered approach also respects a survivor's decision not to participate and is sensitive to their needs and the effects of trauma on their memory or ability to interact effectively or testify in court. To learn more about a victim-centered approach, reference this report on [Building Trust: Perspectives on a Victim-Centered Approach to Human Trafficking Investigations in Los Angeles County](#).

Build relationships with local anti-trafficking organizations. For survivors of trafficking, the need to seek justice against their perpetrator falls far below their need for emergency support, stabilization, and safety. Until these basic needs are met and secured for the near future, many survivors have little desire to work with law enforcement to build cases against traffickers. In most cases, anti-trafficking organizations like safe house programs are incredibly helpful partners for law enforcement. Survivors who have spent time in a trauma-informed safe house program are far more likely to feel able and willing to collaborate with law enforcement on investigations and prosecutions, so the first priority for law enforcement after a survivor has been identified should always be to provide them with emergency services. Having established relationships with trustworthy safe house programs in the area allows law enforcement to provide survivors with safety and meet their basic needs while also giving them the best chance of a successful investigation. Many safe house programs can also provide victim advocate services, which can make communicating with survivors much more effective and trauma-informed. Local anti-trafficking organizations can often offer ongoing training and introduce departments to survivor leaders, who can help them develop better protocols and policies for human trafficking investigations. Many local anti-trafficking organizations can be found through state, county, or city task forces. Emergency services and placement in a safe house program can also be coordinated through Safe House Project's [Emergency Survivor Support Program](#).

Successfully building a national law enforcement response to sex trafficking is a complex task, but one that must be undertaken by individual departments and agencies to be accomplished. Since trafficking happens in every type of community in the United States, training and education must also be implemented at each level of law enforcement. As awareness, education, and understanding grow throughout the country, more survivors will be empowered to find freedom from exploitation, access the services they need to break the cycle of victimization, and build a future of hope and healing.