

MYTHS & MISCONCEPTIONS

MYTH-BUSTING COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS WITHIN THE ANTI-TRAFFICKING MOVEMENT

There are many myths and misconceptions that surround human trafficking. Media representation, lack of concrete data, and social stereotypes have deeply influenced the narratives about the crime.

RETHINKING THE NARRATIVE

This section aims to highlight common myths and misconceptions in the dominant narratives about human trafficking. Narratives help our brains contextualize and humanize experiences that we may not have ourselves. Despite the narrowness of the discourse surrounding trafficking, victims and survivors have a wide variety of experiences. This section seeks to highlight the diversity of identities and experiences, and to address misconceptions about the crime of human trafficking.

MYTHS

Victims of trafficking are always helpless and want to be rescued

REALITY

This myth perpetuates the idea that all trafficking victims are kidnapped and restrained, or wanting desperately to escape or be rescued by others. Despite this myth, many victims are not locked into conditions of trafficking by physical bonds or restraint. Physical restraint, physical force, or bodily harm are not required in order to maintain control. There are psychological and emotional barriers that may force people into and maintain them within conditions of exploitation.

In addition, victims/survivors may not identify as victims because they feel they have chosen their conditions. They will sometimes participate in poor conditions because it is the best survival mechanism, economic opportunity, or logical option for them, or they may be unaware of their legal and civil rights. Lack of trust, self-blame, and bad previous experiences with service providers may also contribute to a victim/survivor's choice to not cooperate with law enforcement or service providers. The "savior mentality" can be very harmful to people who experience trafficking because their experiences are not 'black and white'. **It is critical to recognize the power and autonomy of individuals who have experienced conditions of trafficking, and to acknowledge the variety of experiences victims may face when they are maintained in conditions of trafficking.**



Only foreign nationals are trafficked

Trafficking can happen to both U.S. citizens and foreign nationals. People of all ages, walks of life, socio-economic statuses, genders, immigration statuses, and more can fall victim to the crime of human trafficking. However, a person can have vulnerabilities that increases their susceptibility to human trafficking. Some of these vulnerabilities include: poverty, history of trauma or physical abuse, compromised legal or migratory status, experiences of homelessness, LGBTQ+ identity, or membership in a marginalized community. Human trafficking is happening all around the world, including here in Louisiana. **There is no 'perfect victim' for this crime: it can happen anywhere, to anybody.**

'Human smuggling' and 'human trafficking' are the same thing

Though these terms are often used interchangeably, there is a marked difference between the two. Human smuggling can happen as as part of human trafficking, or human trafficking can occur without smuggling or movement of any kind.

Human smuggling is the illegal movement of a person across a border. This can happen with or without force, fraud and coercion, and therefore is not necessarily a form of human trafficking. **Human smuggling is a crime against a border.**

Human trafficking is the force, fraud or coercion, of a person for purposes of labor or sexual exploitation. Human trafficking does not requirement movement of any kind. **Human trafficking is a crime against a person.**

Sex trafficking is the only form of human trafficking

Though sex trafficking is the type of trafficking that we hear about most often, labor trafficking is just as exploitative and deserving of attention. According to [IOM global counter-trafficking statistics](#), 17% of victims in the world have been trafficked for sexual exploitation, while 74% have been trafficked for forced labor and services*. Though global statistics often suggest that labor trafficking occurs more frequently than sex trafficking, the majority of the anti-trafficking dialogue surrounds sex trafficking. Forced labor, debt bondage, peonage, forced soldiering, force criminal activity, and domestic servitude are just a few examples of human trafficking that can happen for the purposes of labor. Anywhere that work happens- whether its formal or informal- human trafficking can happen.

In addition, human trafficking happens on a spectrum of exploitation. People experiencing conditions of trafficking may experience sexual trauma while in forced labor conditions, just as people experiencing sex trafficking might also be in conditions of debt bondage or forced labor. The forms of exploitation may overlap. **Recognizing that no human should experience trafficking, regardless of the type, is the first step to better serving all of the members of our communities.**

**See the "unpacking the numbers" and "prevalence problems" section to learn more about the limitations of prevalence estimates.*



Human trafficking and sex work/prostitution are the same thing

According to the U.S. TVPA (Trafficking Victims Protection Act) sex trafficking is "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act, in which the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age"; and labor trafficking is the "recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery."

This means that according to U.S. law, adults who consent to participate in the commercial sex industry are **not** sex trafficking victims. However, by federal law any person under the age of 18 who participates in a commercial sex act is automatically considered a victim of human trafficking regardless of the presence of force, fraud, or coercion. **Federal law distinguishes between sex work and sex trafficking except in cases involving minors OR cases that involve force, fraud, or coercion. Bottom line: not all sex workers are trafficking victims.**

UNPACKING THE NUMBERS

This section aims to highlight commonly shared statistics that may be problematic, incorrect, or misleading. Data is an important part of understanding the scope of a problem. However, when those numbers are inaccurate, it can negatively impact policy, response, and services for victims of human trafficking. Below each section you'll find a button to explore resources that disprove these widely shared claims.

STATISTIC

The average age of entry into human trafficking is 12-14 years old

EXPLANATION

This statistic has been attributed to a number of different sources. However, the original source has never been verified and also the statistic has been disproved in a number of ways. The first problem is that this statistic is based on the average age of entry into commercial sex. This means that victims of labor trafficking are not included in this statistic. Secondly, victims can be trafficked multiple times in their lifetimes, for various amounts of time during each period of victimization. Victims can also be trafficked at any age—not just in childhood. Finally, given the fact that trafficking victims are a hidden population, meaning they are not easily identifiable to study or create a prevalence estimate, there is no way to accurately determine the average age of entry of human trafficking victims.



The average age of entry into human trafficking is 12-14 years old

This statistic may falsely lead people to assume that only children are trafficked, or that all victims/survivors experienced victimization starting in childhood. People can be trafficked at any time in their life- young or old. Recognizing the diversity of experiences of victims/survivors is an important step to improve our understanding of the crime.

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There are 100,000-300,000 trafficked children in the United States

This statistic is often cited without a source. The first time it was shared was during a 2010 congressional hearing discussing child sex trafficking that featured Ernie Allen, who was the president of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at the time. Following his testimony, this statistic spread rapidly to leading anti-trafficking organizations including the ECPAT-USA. However, under examination Allen stated that the statistic was a guess- not scientific empirical data. Additionally, this statistic specifically talks about sex trafficking, not all forms of trafficking. **There are currently no reliable estimates on the number of people in the commercial sex industry in the United States, let alone a number for how many of those people are under the age of 18.**

The Dept. of Justice conducted a study on youth involvement in the sex trade in 2016 and found that the number of youth in the sex trade (any youth under the age of 18 involved in the commercial sex trade are considered trafficking victims per the TVPA trafficking definition) is likely closer to 9,000-10,000. However, the study provides a large population estimate range, and recognizes the limitations of determining a hard number. The study states that by its estimates the number could be as low as 4,457 youth or as high as 20,994 youth.

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80% of all trafficking victims in the world are children

This statistic is often shared by child sex trafficking response organizations. The claim is based off of a statement made by John Cornyn during a Congressional hearing on child sex trafficking. When asked later to cite his sources, he claimed the statistic was based on an International Labor Organization report. However, that report had stated that that 80% of all human trafficking victims were women and girls, and that child trafficking victims only accounted for 20% of all trafficked people. Given the fact that trafficking victims are a hidden population, meaning they are not easily identifiable to study or create a prevalence estimate, **there are serious limitations to our ability to accurately determine the percent of trafficking victims who are children.**

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Runaways will be trafficked within 72 hours

A 2009 Department of Health and Human Services report stated that this claim had been made by several experts in the anti-trafficking field. When the Modern Slavery Research Project at Loyola University New Orleans went 'down the rabbit hole' to find the original source, they found the first source they could find was a 1996 Christian Science Monitor article by Mark Clayton. The article stated that within 48 hours runaways would be lured into commercial sex, and the article did not list a source for the claim.

Runaway and homeless youth are highly vulnerable to human trafficking. The Modern Slavery Research Project performed a study titled "[Sex and Labor Trafficking Among Homeless Youth: A Ten City Study](#)." Though the project found that there is ample evidence to be concerned about trafficking of homeless youth, **there remains no evidence to substantiate sensational claims about the 72 hour myth and other suspicious claims about trafficked youth.**

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The Super Bowl is the biggest human trafficking event in the world

Sporting events, concerts, and other major events bring large quantities of people into a small area. With a large number of spectators, there can be an increase in demand for commercial sex. However, framing the issue as the biggest human trafficking event in the world distracts from several key points. The first is that not all sex work or prostitution is sex trafficking: a person over the age of 18 isn't considered a trafficking victim unless there are elements of force, fraud, or coercion. The second issue is that these assumptions do not address the existence of labor trafficking and exploitative labor that could happen as a result of the big event. Third, though there may be an increase in sex work, and thus a larger pool of vulnerable people present, there is no evidence to suggest that traffickers entice more victims into trafficking (thus increasing the rates of trafficking happening) during these events. This means that there likely isn't an increase in 'trafficking', rather there's a shift in the location where vulnerable populations may be existing. Finally, when we frame the issue as a big annual event, we forget that trafficking was happening before the 'big game', and will continue long after the 'big game'. Human trafficking happens every day, every hour, every minute, and requires a long term commitment to combat trafficking every day of the year.

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Human trafficking is a \$9.5 billion industry in the United States

This statistic has been attributed to several different sources, all of which have been proven to be professional estimates. Overall, this number was created out of several international guesstimates of how many people are being sex trafficked and how much each trafficked person generates annually, which were then divided to attempt to guess the US's portion of that money. Many of these statistics conflate the illicit sex trade with human trafficking, and do not include estimations on labor trafficking revenue. The 2006 US Trafficking in Person's Report also claimed that the FBI released a report that estimated that trafficking generates 9.5 billion annually worldwide. However, the FBI officials have since debunked this claim. **There is no reliable data to suggest the exact amount of money generated by human trafficking.**

It's important to recognize that victims/survivors have a wide variety of trafficking experiences. By attempting to standardize the 'trafficking experience' for the purposes of generating a number, we may be inadvertently erasing or ignoring those victims/survivors who experiences fall outside of the 'average' that our estimations generate. They can experience non-payment or partial payment, be trafficked for 2 days or 20 years, experience trafficking once or many times in their lives, or be trafficked in high-value or low-value work

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[insert city or state] is one of the top cities in America for human trafficking.

One of the most common phrases that we here is that the city or state that we live in is a 'hub' of human trafficking, or one of the top trafficking places in America. However, with the lack of national prevalence data on human trafficking, there is no way to determine which parts of the country are experiencing the most trafficking cases. There are measurements of calls to hotlines, victims identified and served, and trafficking-related arrests or prosecutions, but those numbers represent identified trafficking cases. This means that trafficking cases that aren't identified are not represented in those numbers. Despite this limitation, people often cite National Human Trafficking Hotline data as an explanation that their city or state has more trafficking than other locations, or cite reports that rank cities for the number of trafficking convictions as proof that the city has 'more trafficking' than other places.

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[insert city or state] is one of the top cities in America for human trafficking.

For example, many people cite the 2009 Report on the FBI's efforts to combat child sex trafficking as evidence that their city is a top city for trafficking. This report cites FBI reports of incidences of 'child prostitution' and identifies cities that might receive an Innocence Lost Task Forces, and does not rank the prevalence of the trafficking in each of those cities. It's important to note that this report only discusses children involved in commercial sex, so it doesn't discuss all forms of human trafficking. The misrepresentation of reports such as this have perpetuated the idea that certain cities or states have more or less trafficking than others. **The most important point we can remember is that trafficking is happening everywhere, in many different contexts and industries.**

PREVALENCE PROBLEMS

MANY PEOPLE ASK THE QUESTION: "HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE TRAFFICKED IN NEW ORLEANS? HOW MANY PEOPLE IN THE UNITED STATES ARE TRAFFICKING VICTIMS?"

While this is an important question to attempt to answer, it is an extremely difficult question to answer. Human trafficking is a hidden crime, meaning a crime that happens in the black market or "behind closed doors" because it is an illicit trade. In addition, people who have experienced conditions of trafficking often do not come forward because of a variety of factors. As such, it is extremely difficult to determine how many trafficking victims there are in New Orleans, or in the United States. It is important to be cautious when using statistics related to prevalence of trafficking because there is so little methodologically sound data to answer that question.

THE HARM OF SENSATIONALISM, EXAGGERATION, AND MYTHS

"Why does all of this matter? The most immediate problem is that poor information, presented as fact, contributes to poor decision making and sometimes highly damaging, unintended outcomes."

— Anne Gallagher, *"The global slavery index is based on flawed data – why does no one say so?"*

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SENSATIONALISM

Sensationalism is a journalistic approach that uses shocking stories, images, and language that grab public attention at the expense of accuracy. This is unfortunately a common practice in representation of human trafficking and its victims. Though it is often done with good intentions to attempt to entice public involvement, this practice can be harmful to both the movement and the survivors of trafficking.

It can mislead and misinform the general public. It also can be harmful to victims/survivors because it misrepresents their experiences by focusing on the most shocking and horrific aspects of their experiences, rather than their triumphs and strengths. In addition, images and stories of trauma can be particularly triggering or re-traumatize people who have already been victimized by others. Honoring the Task Force's commitment to implementing a victim-centered, trauma-informed approach, we aim to avoid the use of sensational stories and representation.

MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

When we misunderstand the nature of a problem, we will fail to find the correct solutions for that problem. If we believe that all trafficking victims are only women, only kidnapped, or only foreign nationals, we will fail to see the victims who fall outside of those narratives. If we believe that there are specific cities or locations that have more trafficking than other cities, we will stop investigating in those places that we deem 'less bad'.

Nearly all of the narratives and statistics listed above are used with good intention. Sensational and terrifying information galvanizes the public to respond. However, when the information we present is inaccurate it can negatively impact policy, response, and services for victims and survivors of human trafficking. To maintain the credibility of the anti-trafficking movement, and to honor the experiences of all trafficking victims and survivors, we must commit to providing accurate information about the crime. Focusing on the voices and experiences of all victims and survivors, rather than the most shocking or 'compelling' information, will advance the work that we do.

"Rampant misinformation and fear mongering persistently threaten to undermine the credibility of the anti-trafficking movement."

— Laura T. Murphy, *"Anti-Trafficking Sensational Misinformation"*

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TRAINING MODULES

Rethinking Representation: Framing Human Trafficking for Health Professionals

Representation is “the description or portrayal of someone or something in a particular way or as being of a certain nature”. This presentation explores how the anti-trafficking movement represents human trafficking in its public awareness efforts via visual media, stories and testimonies, and data and statistics. By the end of the training, participants will be able to identify common missteps and promising practices to utilize a trauma-informed, survivor-centered approach to authentically sharing information about human trafficking for health professionals.

WATCH THE WEBINAR

HEAL Trafficking Network webinar. Recorded September 12, 2018. Trainer: Task Force Coordinator, Leanne McCallum.

TRAINING MODULES

- [General Myths and Misconceptions](#) from the National Human Trafficking Hotline
- [General Myths and Misconceptions](#) from the DHS Blue Campaign
- [Human Trafficking Myths and Facts](#) from the Polaris Project
- [Hollywood and Human Trafficking Representation](#) from the Conversation
- [“How Should We Talk about Human Trafficking Statistics?”](#) Webinar from HEAL Trafficking
- [“Rethinking Human Trafficking Representation for Anti-Trafficking Professionals”](#) Webinar from the GNOHTTF and the Minnesota Dept. of Health

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