

FORGED IN THE FIRE

Human Trafficking 101

A Foundational Guide for Awareness and Action

Prepared for: Forged in the Fire Knowledge Base

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Educational resource — not legal, medical, or clinical advice

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Human Trafficking 101: A Foundational Academic Overview for Survivor-Centered Nonprofit Practice

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Executive Summary

Human trafficking is a federally prosecutable crime and an internationally recognized human rights violation involving the use of force, fraud, or coercion to compel a person into commercial sex acts or labor and services (22 U.S.C. § 7102; U.S. Department of Justice [DOJ], 2024). It is distinct from migrant smuggling, prostitution as commonly understood, and kidnapping, although those phenomena can overlap in specific cases. The International Labour Organization (ILO) and Walk Free estimated that, as of 2021, 27.6 million people globally were in situations of forced labor, with an additional 22 million in forced marriage (ILO, Walk Free, & International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2022). In the United States, the National Human Trafficking Hotline received 32,309 signals in 2024 alone, including 8,024 contacts from victims and survivors (Polaris Project, 2025).

This paper provides a foundational understanding of human trafficking suitable for nonprofit education, donor and grant writing, staff training, and program design. It defines the federal Action–Means–Purpose framework, explains the elements of sex and labor trafficking, summarizes the best available data while acknowledging substantial measurement gaps, outlines federal and California legal frameworks, surveys empirically supported risk factors and control tactics, describes physical and psychological impacts on survivors, reviews evidence-informed service models, and addresses ethical considerations including survivor dignity, confidentiality, and the responsible use of survivor narratives. The paper concludes with practical recommendations and an annotated bibliography. Throughout, the paper relies on U.S. government, peer-reviewed academic, and high-credibility institutional sources, in keeping with Forged in the Fire's research standard.

I. Introduction

Human trafficking sits at the intersection of criminal law, public health, child welfare, immigration, mental health, economic policy, and social services. Despite high public visibility, the field is shaped by significant data limitations, frequent misrepresentation in popular media, and a persistent gap between cultural narratives and empirical research (Polaris Project, 2017; U.S. Department of State [DOS], 2025). For nonprofit organizations such as Forged in the Fire that aim to support survivors, prevent exploitation, and educate communities, accurate foundational knowledge is essential. Misinformation can lead to ineffective programming, harm to survivors, and donor messaging that does not stand up to scrutiny.

This paper functions as a base-layer reference document. It is intended to be read by program staff, board members, volunteers, faith partners, donors, and grantmakers seeking a credible orientation to the field. Subsequent papers in the Forged in the Fire knowledge base will treat individual subtopics—such as commercial sexual exploitation of children, foster youth vulnerability, online grooming, and California-specific law—in greater depth.

II. Definitions and Scope

The controlling federal definition appears in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA), as amended and codified at 22 U.S.C. § 7102. The statute defines a "severe form of trafficking in persons" as either (a) sex trafficking in which a 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; or (b) 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 (22 U.S.C. § 7102; Legal Information Institute [LII], n.d.).

Federal training materials and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Blue Campaign distill this statutory language into the Action–Means–Purpose (AMP) framework for identifying potential trafficking situations: an Action (recruit, harbor, transport, provide, obtain, patronize, or solicit) combined with a Means (force, fraud, or coercion) for a Purpose (commercial sex or labor and services) (U.S. Department of Homeland Security [DHS], n.d.). Two critical statutory exceptions reshape this framework. First, when the trafficked person is a minor in commercial sex, the "means" element is not required; any commercial sex act involving a person under 18 is trafficking under federal law (22 U.S.C. § 7102). Second, movement across borders is not required; trafficking can and frequently does occur entirely within a single community, household, or workplace (DOJ, 2024).

It is important to distinguish trafficking from related concepts. Human smuggling involves the consensual movement of a person across an international border in violation of immigration law and is fundamentally a crime against the state, whereas trafficking is a crime against a person and does not require movement. Prostitution, where consensual and adult, is not in itself trafficking under federal law, although many individuals in commercial sex meet trafficking criteria upon careful screening (Polaris Project, 2017). Domestic violence, child abuse, and sexual assault may co-occur with trafficking and frequently share dynamics of coercive control, but they are separately defined offenses.

Polaris Project's foundational typology disaggregates U.S. trafficking into 25 distinct business models, ranging from pimp-controlled sex trafficking and illicit massage businesses to agricultural labor trafficking, domestic servitude, and labor trafficking in restaurants, traveling sales crews, and forestry (Polaris Project, 2017). Each model carries distinct recruitment patterns, victim demographics, and control mechanisms, and effective intervention requires understanding the specific model in question rather than applying a single cultural template of trafficking.

III. Current Research and Data

The empirical literature on human trafficking is uneven. Strong descriptive data exist on hotline contacts, federal prosecutions, and identified survivors; rigorous prevalence estimates remain difficult to produce because trafficking is hidden, definitions vary across jurisdictions, and survivors often do not self-identify (Macy & Graham, 2012; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2013). Researchers and federal agencies have urged caution about widely circulated statistics that lack methodological grounding (DOS, 2025).

Within those constraints, several data points are well documented. The ILO–Walk Free–IOM (2022) Global Estimates concluded that approximately 27.6 million people were in forced labor on any given day in 2021, an increase of 2.7 million since 2016, with 86% of forced labor cases occurring in the private economy and an estimated \$236 billion in annual illicit profits. In the United States, Polaris Project (2025) reported that the

National Human Trafficking Hotline received 32,309 signals in 2024, including more than 17,900 phone calls and approximately 5,000 text messages, with 8,024 of those signals coming from victims and survivors directly. Cumulatively since 2007, the hotline has identified 112,822 cases involving 218,568 victims, making it one of the largest publicly available U.S. data sets on trafficking, though it is a sample of identified cases and cannot be read as a population estimate (Polaris Project, n.d.).

Federal prosecution data provide another partial window. The annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report compiles U.S. and global government anti-trafficking activity and ranks countries by tier based on minimum standards for elimination of trafficking (DOS, 2025). The 2025 TIP Report, the 25th edition, documented 13 countries with a documented "policy or pattern" of trafficking and a Child Soldiers Prevention Act list of 17 governments (DOS, 2025).

Researchers continue to debate the relative prevalence of sex versus labor trafficking in the United States. Hotline data report substantially more sex trafficking cases than labor trafficking cases, but multiple studies suggest labor trafficking is more underidentified due to reduced public awareness, victim concentration in immigrant and low-wage workforces, and weaker law enforcement infrastructure for labor trafficking investigations (Owens et al., 2014, Urban Institute; Polaris Project, 2017). Covenant House research with youth experiencing homelessness in 13 U.S. and Canadian cities found that 19% of those interviewed reported a trafficking experience, including 27% of LGBTQ+ youth, with labor trafficking representing a substantial share of identified cases (Covenant House, 2018; Murphy, 2017).

Where data are limited, this paper uses cautious framing. Statistics about the "average age of entry" into commercial sex, the dollar value of trafficking globally, and the number of victims in any given U.S. state are frequently miscited. Practitioners and grant writers should rely on documented federal, ILO, and peer-reviewed sources and should clearly cite methodology when statistics are used.

IV. Legal and Policy Framework

At the federal level, the TVPA of 2000 (Pub. L. 106-386) established the modern U.S. anti-trafficking framework, including criminal statutes (codified at 18 U.S.C. §§ 1581–1597), the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons at the U.S. Department of State, mandatory benefits and services for certified victims through the Office on Trafficking in Persons within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), and the T nonimmigrant visa for noncitizen survivors (DOJ, 2024; ACF, n.d.). Reauthorizations in 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2017, and 2018, along with the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act of 2015 and the FOSTA-SESTA package of 2018, expanded protections, restitution, training, prevention funding, and certain criminal liability provisions (DOJ, 2024).

Federal criminal statutes prohibit forced labor (18 U.S.C. § 1589), trafficking with respect to peonage, slavery, involuntary servitude, or forced labor (18 U.S.C. § 1590), sex trafficking by force, fraud, or coercion or of a minor (18 U.S.C. § 1591), and document servitude (18 U.S.C. § 1592). Federal criminal cases are prosecuted by U.S. Attorneys' Offices and the DOJ Civil Rights Division's Human Trafficking Prosecution Unit, supported by the FBI, Homeland Security Investigations, and federal task forces (DOJ, 2024).

Survivors of trafficking have specific federal rights and remedies. Mandatory restitution under 18 U.S.C. § 1593 requires sentencing courts to order restitution to trafficking victims for the full amount of losses, including the value of services compelled. Survivors may pursue civil damages under 18 U.S.C. § 1595. Noncitizen survivors may apply for T nonimmigrant status (T visa), which provides temporary lawful status of up to four years for severe forms of trafficking victims who comply with reasonable law enforcement requests, with statutory exceptions and exemptions for minors and those unable to cooperate due to physical or psychological trauma; T visa holders may eventually adjust to lawful permanent resident status (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], n.d.). The U visa is available to victims of certain qualifying crimes, including human trafficking, who have suffered substantial physical or mental abuse and are helpful to law enforcement (USCIS, n.d.). Continued Presence is a separate temporary immigration designation that

federal law enforcement may request for victims while investigations are pending (Office for Victims of Crime [OVC], n.d.).

In California, California Penal Code § 236.1 criminalizes human trafficking with three subsections: (a) labor trafficking, (b) sex trafficking of adults through force, fraud, or coercion, and (c) sex trafficking of minors regardless of force, fraud, or coercion. Penalties range from 3–5 years for adult labor trafficking to 15 years to life for trafficking of a minor with force, fraud, or coercion (Cal. Pen. Code § 236.1). California's Penal Code §§ 236.14 and 236.15 provide vacatur relief, allowing survivors to petition to vacate convictions arising from their trafficking victimization (California Office of the Attorney General, 2023). California also funds vertical prosecution through legislation such as SB 236 (2023) and provides victim restitution and services through the California Victim Compensation Board.

Mandated reporting laws intersect with trafficking response. In California, child welfare professionals, healthcare providers, educators, and law enforcement are mandated reporters under the Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act (Cal. Pen. Code § 11164 et seq.). Suspected commercial sexual exploitation of a minor must be reported to child welfare or law enforcement. Adult survivors generally retain decision-making authority about disclosure and reporting except where overlapping mandates (e.g., elder or dependent adult abuse) apply.

V. Risk Factors and Vulnerabilities

Empirical research consistently identifies a constellation of overlapping individual, family, community, structural, and digital vulnerabilities associated with trafficking victimization. Vulnerability does not equal blame; traffickers deliberately seek out and exploit unmet needs and structural inequities (DOS, 2025; Polaris Project, n.d.).

At the individual and family level, prior childhood abuse and neglect, disrupted attachment, exposure to domestic violence, untreated trauma, mental health conditions, learning and developmental disabilities, and substance use are well-documented risk factors (Reid et al., 2017; Hopper, 2017a). At the structural level, poverty, housing instability and homelessness, foster care involvement, juvenile justice involvement, undocumented immigration status, language barriers, racism, anti-LGBTQ+ stigma, and economic precarity heighten exposure (Murphy, 2017; Greeson et al., 2019). The intersection of these factors—rather than any single one—often defines the highest-risk profiles.

Foster care and child welfare involvement is a particularly well-documented vulnerability pathway. An ACF analysis of nearly 37,000 youth in Florida foster care between 2011 and 2017 found that approximately 19% experienced at least one runaway episode, and 7% of those running youth had at least one human trafficking allegation while on runaway status; trafficking allegations were concentrated among youth with prior abuse, more frequent placement disruptions, and earlier first runaway episodes (Hartinger-Saunders et al., 2020, as cited in ACF Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation [OPRE], 2020). The federally mandated Sex Trafficking Identification and Response provisions of the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-183) require state child welfare agencies to identify, document, and serve children who are victims or at risk.

Youth homelessness is similarly load-bearing. Covenant House's multi-site study of 911 homeless and unstably housed youth across 13 cities found that 19% reported a trafficking experience, with elevated rates among LGBTQ+ youth (27%) and Black youth (Murphy, 2017; Covenant House, 2018). Survivors frequently entered survival sex while unhoused, and the presence of even one supportive adult was associated with reduced risk.

Substance use and trafficking have a bidirectional and complicated relationship. A study of antitrafficking service providers in Maine found that 66% of clients reported substance use that preceded and contributed to trafficking, while 4.5% reported substance use disorders that developed because of trafficking; the majority of survivors in the sample experienced both pathways at varying stages (Stoklosa et al., 2020). Polysubstance use and opioid involvement are common among survivors presenting in emergency departments, and integrated trauma- and substance-use treatment is frequently necessary (Goldberg et al., 2022).

LGBTQ+ youth, immigrant populations, and people with disabilities face elevated risk profiles attributable largely to structural exclusion, family rejection, language and legal barriers, and reduced access to safe employment, all of which traffickers actively exploit (DOS, 2025; ACF, n.d.). Digital vulnerabilities—including online recruitment via social media platforms, gaming environments, and dating applications—are increasingly central to recruitment of minors and young adults and are documented in research from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and Thorn (NCMEC, 2024; Thorn, 2022).

VI. Recruitment, Grooming, and Control Tactics

Traffickers rarely use the kidnapping-by-strangers narrative depicted in popular media. Instead, the most consistently documented pattern across research is a deliberate, gradual process of identification, cultivation, and entrapment that exploits unmet emotional, material, and developmental needs (Polaris Project, 2017; Hopper, 2017b; Reid, 2016).

Identification and recruitment typically occur in places where vulnerable individuals can be reliably found: schools, group homes, shelters, social media platforms, online games, dating apps, transportation hubs, malls, and informal labor markets. Traffickers may pose as romantic partners, friends, mentors, recruiters, or employment agents, and many survivors describe an initial relationship that felt protective, validating, or financially generous (Reid, 2016). Labor traffickers frequently rely on fraudulent job offers, recruitment fees, debt bondage, and document confiscation, particularly with migrant workers (DOS, 2025; Owens et al., 2014).

Grooming in trafficking shares many features with grooming in child sexual abuse and intimate partner violence: identification of unmet needs, isolation from existing supports, normalization of progressively boundary-violating behavior, creation of secrets and shame, and reframing of exploitation as a chosen relationship or arrangement (Reid, 2016). Online grooming has been extensively documented, including the use of platform features to escalate contact, request explicit images, and exploit them as leverage (NCMEC, 2024; Thorn, 2022).

Control tactics generally rely far more on psychological coercion than on physical confinement. Documented mechanisms include (a) trauma bonding and trauma-coercive bonding, in which intermittent abuse and affection produce powerful attachments to the trafficker that survivors frequently describe as involuntary and persistent (Casassa et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2018); (b) threats of harm to the survivor, family members, children, or pets; (c) financial control through debt bondage, withholding of pay, and confiscation of wages or identification documents; (d) manipulation of immigration status, including threats of deportation; (e) shame-based control rooted in fear of family, faith community, or law enforcement reactions; (f) drug-induced dependency; (g) physical violence and threats of violence, especially during initial victimization or attempted exits; (h) isolation from family, friends, and community; and (i) digital surveillance through GPS tracking, account access, and threats to release explicit images or information (Hopper, 2017b; Polaris Project, n.d.).

Trauma-coercive bonding has emerged as a distinct construct in the peer-reviewed literature. Sanchez et al. (2019) and subsequent researchers argue that bonds formed under conditions of developmental immaturity and ongoing coercion differ qualitatively from adult intimate partner trauma bonding, with longer-lasting effects on attachment, identity, and capacity to trust (Casassa et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2018). These dynamics are essential for service providers to understand because they explain phenomena that are frequently misread as consent, complicity, or "uncooperative" survivor behavior.

VII. Survivor Impact

Trafficking causes physical, psychological, social, legal, financial, educational, and spiritual harm. The peer-reviewed literature documents a profile of complex trauma exposure that often exceeds the diagnostic criteria captured by classic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with high rates of co-occurring conditions and substantial functional impairment (Hopper, 2017a; Oram et al., 2016; Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017).

Physical health sequelae include injuries from violence, sexually transmitted infections, reproductive health complications, untreated chronic conditions, dental and vision problems resulting from neglected care,

traumatic brain injury, and chronic pain (Lederer & Wetzel, 2014; Oram et al., 2012). Adolescent survivors may experience growth and developmental disruption.

Psychological sequelae are extensive. Meta-analyses and systematic reviews report high prevalence of PTSD, complex PTSD, depression, anxiety, dissociation, suicidality, sleep disturbance, and substance use disorders among survivors of both sex and labor trafficking (Oram et al., 2016; Ottisova et al., 2016). Self-blame, shame, and identity disruption are nearly universal in clinical samples and are reinforced by the systems with which survivors must interact.

Social and relational impacts include isolation, distrust of helping systems, disrupted family relationships, child custody complications, and the loss of educational and vocational trajectories. Legal and financial impacts include criminal records arising from offenses committed under trafficker coercion, civil judgments and collections, immigration consequences, debt, identity theft, damaged credit, and the absence of work history or educational credentials (DOJ, 2024; OVC, n.d.).

Spiritual and existential impacts are frequently reported by survivors and are particularly relevant for faith-affiliated nonprofits. These may include rupture of meaning systems, alienation from faith communities, and complex relationships with forgiveness, guilt, and identity (Hodge, 2014). Trauma-informed spiritual care that is voluntary, non-coercive, and survivor-led is supported in the literature when offered as one option among many.

Recovery is non-linear, often spanning years. Disclosure typically occurs in fragments, frequently long after the initial encounter with services, and is shaped by safety, trust, and the responses survivors receive from prior helpers. "Resistance" to services is more accurately understood as adaptive self-protection forged during exploitation (Hopper, 2017a; Hickie, 2017).

VIII. Service Needs and Intervention Models

Evidence-informed service for trafficking survivors rests on three integrated foundations: (a) trauma-informed care principles, (b) survivor-centered and survivor-led practice, and (c) comprehensive coordination across systems (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014; Macy & Johns, 2011; National Survivor Network [NSN], n.d.).

SAMHSA's (2014) framework specifies six guiding principles for a trauma-informed approach: (1) safety; (2) trustworthiness and transparency; (3) peer support; (4) collaboration and mutuality; (5) empowerment, voice, and choice; and (6) cultural, historical, and gender issues. These principles are foundational across the trafficking service field and align directly with survivor leadership principles articulated by the National Survivor Network (NSN, n.d.).

Core service domains include emergency safety planning and crisis response; short-term and long-term safe housing, including specialized models for adolescent and adult survivors; medical care, including reproductive, dental, and behavioral health; mental health treatment with trauma-specialized clinicians; substance use treatment integrated with trauma care; legal advocacy including immigration, criminal record relief, family law, and restitution; case management and benefits navigation; education and vocational support; financial empowerment; and reintegration into chosen communities (Macy & Johns, 2011; HEAL Trafficking, n.d.; OVC, n.d.).

Healthcare settings warrant particular attention. Multiple studies have found that 28% to 50% of trafficking victims encountered a healthcare professional during their exploitation but were not identified (Lederer & Wetzel, 2014; Chisolm-Straker et al., 2016). HEAL Trafficking's Protocol Toolkit and the PEARR Tool (Provide privacy, Educate, Ask, Respect, and Respond) provide a trauma-informed framework now used by hospital systems and community health centers nationally (HEAL Trafficking, n.d.).

Housing is consistently identified as the single greatest service gap in the field. Federal and state surveys repeatedly find shortages of trafficking-specialized emergency, transitional, and long-term housing, particularly

for adult male survivors, LGBTQ+ survivors, survivors with substance use disorders, survivors with children, and labor trafficking survivors (OVC, n.d.; Polaris Project, n.d.). Promising models include voluntary, choice-based housing with on-site case management; scattered-site housing with mobile services; and housing-first approaches adapted for survivors.

Survivor leadership is increasingly recognized not as a programmatic add-on but as essential to ethical and effective service design. The NSN, the U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking, and the OVC Survivor Engagement Initiative all advance the principle that survivors must shape the policies and programs intended to serve them (NSN, n.d.; OVC, n.d.). Survivor leadership development, peer mentorship, and compensated lived-experience expertise are evidence-aligned investments.

IX. Prevention and Public Awareness

Effective prevention operates across the social ecology, addressing individual, relational, community, and structural levels (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022; ACF, n.d.). Single-strategy approaches—particularly those relying on awareness alone—have limited evidence of reducing victimization and may produce iatrogenic effects when based on inaccurate or fear-driven messaging (Polaris Project, 2020).

At the individual and relational level, evidence-informed prevention emphasizes social-emotional learning, healthy-relationship education, digital safety education that focuses on coercion rather than fear of strangers, and trauma-responsive support for children with adverse experiences. School-based curricula such as those developed by Love146 and Shared Hope International have been deployed widely; rigorous outcome evaluation remains limited (Rothman et al., 2021).

At the community level, prevention includes investment in supportive housing, youth employment, after-school programs, mental health services, recovery supports, immigrant integration services, and community policing reforms. At the structural level, prevention requires addressing labor protections, wage enforcement, child welfare reform, foster care prevention, and immigration policy in ways that reduce the conditions traffickers exploit (DOS, 2025).

Public awareness messaging should be grounded in accurate data, avoid sensationalized imagery and statistics, refrain from racialized or sexualized depictions of victimization, and direct audiences toward credible response options (Polaris Project, 2020). Faith-based and community-based education can be powerful when messaging is trauma-informed, survivor-reviewed, and rooted in dignity.

X. Relevance to Forged in the Fire

Forged in the Fire's mission alignment with this body of research is direct. The empirical record supports a survivor-centered nonprofit model focused on long-term recovery, dignity, and structural opportunity rather than rescue narratives or fear-driven outreach.

Specific program connections include (a) safe housing, which the literature consistently identifies as the highest-leverage and least-funded need (OVC, n.d.); (b) trauma-informed crisis response and case management built on the SAMHSA principles (SAMHSA, 2014); (c) mental health and substance use care integrated through co-occurring-disorder competent providers (Goldberg et al., 2022; Stoklosa et al., 2020); (d) legal advocacy and referrals, including criminal record relief under California Penal Code §§ 236.14–236.15 and immigration relief through T and U visas (Cal. Pen. Code §§ 236.14, 236.15; USCIS, n.d.); (e) education, vocational training, and economic empowerment, addressing the financial harm and disrupted human capital common among survivors; (f) community education and prevention curricula for schools, faith partners, healthcare systems, and employers, anchored in evidence-informed, non-sensationalized messaging; (g) survivor leadership development, treating lived expertise as a compensated and structural element of program design (NSN, n.d.); and (h) faith- and community-based partnerships that adhere to trauma-informed and consent-based standards, recognizing both the strengths and the documented risks of religious settings in survivor recovery (Hodge, 2014).

This research base also strengthens grant applications and donor education by enabling Forged in the Fire to demonstrate (i) alignment with federal funder priorities, including OVC and ACF; (ii) fidelity to evidence-informed service models; (iii) measurable outcomes consistent with field standards; and (iv) commitment to ethical survivor engagement.

XI. Ethical Considerations

Ethical practice in anti-trafficking work centers survivor dignity, autonomy, confidentiality, and the responsible use of survivor narratives. The most widely cited ethical framework is the Survivor-Informed Practice Definition and Recommendations developed by the Office on Trafficking in Persons in collaboration with survivor leaders (ACF Office on Trafficking in Persons [OTIP], 2018). Core commitments include the following.

Survivors retain authority over their own stories. Sharing details for fundraising, public awareness, or media purposes requires informed, ongoing, and revocable consent; survivors should be compensated for content used in fundraising and should have approval rights over framing and identification (NSN, n.d.; Tipton, 2021). Forged in the Fire should adopt and document a written survivor storytelling and consent policy.

Confidentiality and privacy must be protected through trained staff, secure recordkeeping, restricted access to identifying information, and clear protocols regarding mandated reporting, subpoenas, and civil discovery. Confidentiality assurances should be accurate and never overstated; service providers cannot guarantee outcomes regarding law enforcement involvement.

Mandated reporting obligations must be communicated clearly at intake; survivors deserve to know what cannot remain confidential before they disclose. Staff must understand California's mandated reporter requirements and the distinction between reporting suspected child abuse and reporting adult survivors' choices.

Trauma-informed language is essential. Avoid the term "victim" when survivors prefer "survivor" or alternative self-descriptions; avoid voyeuristic or graphic descriptions of exploitation; avoid imagery that is racialized, sexualized, or that reduces survivors to a single narrative; and avoid "savior" framing that centers rescuers rather than survivors' own agency and resilience (Polaris Project, 2020; NSN, n.d.).

Cultural humility requires acknowledgment that trafficking is shaped by racism, colonialism, anti-immigrant policy, and economic inequality, and that responses must be informed by communities most affected. Faith-based organizations bear particular responsibility to practice non-coercive spiritual care, separating service eligibility from religious participation.

Finally, ethical work requires non-exploitation of survivor stories for competitive grant or donor advantage; the field has documented harms when organizations have mishandled this responsibility (NSN, n.d.).

XII. Gaps and Future Research

Several persistent gaps shape the evidence landscape. Population-level prevalence remains poorly measured; the most defensible national estimates rely on indirect methods, and many widely cited statistics have weak methodological foundations (National Academies, 2013; DOS, 2025). Labor trafficking, despite likely greater prevalence, remains substantially underrepresented in U.S. research, prosecution, and service systems relative to sex trafficking (Owens et al., 2014; Polaris Project, 2017).

Service outcome research is limited. Few interventions have been evaluated with randomized or quasi-experimental designs, and longitudinal studies of survivor recovery trajectories are rare (Macy & Johns, 2011; Rothman et al., 2021). Housing models, prevention curricula, and survivor leadership programs are particularly under-studied.

Specific populations remain under-researched, including adult male survivors, LGBTQ+ survivors over the lifespan, survivors with disabilities, indigenous survivors, rural survivors, survivors of forced criminality, and survivors of forced marriage. Intersectional analyses are increasing but remain scarce.

Funding gaps persist throughout the field. Federal anti-trafficking appropriations have grown but remain small relative to need, and survivor services—especially housing and long-term mental health care—are persistently underfunded (OVC, n.d.). Cycles of competitive short-term grant funding hinder the long-term recovery work survivors require.

Legal gaps include inconsistent vacatur and post-conviction relief statutes across states, gaps in restitution enforcement, uneven implementation of the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act, and continued tension between criminal-legal and public-health approaches to commercial sexual exploitation.

Future research priorities widely endorsed in the literature include rigorous outcome evaluation, long-term survivor-led participatory studies, prevalence research using multiple-systems estimation, integration of trafficking surveillance with public health data systems, evaluation of survivor leadership interventions, and continued development of trauma-coercive bonding measures (Rothman et al., 2021; Casassa et al., 2021).

XIII. Recommendations

For nonprofit leaders and Forged in the Fire program staff, the following recommendations align with the evidence base.

First, anchor program design in trauma-informed and survivor-centered frameworks explicitly modeled on SAMHSA's six principles and OTIP's Survivor-Informed Practice recommendations. Document these in policy and training.

Second, invest in housing, recognizing it as the field's most consistent and severe service gap. Where direct provision is not feasible, develop strong housing partnerships and prioritize transition support.

Third, integrate behavioral health and substance use treatment through formal partnerships with co-occurring-disorder competent providers, recognizing the evidence on bidirectional substance use pathways.

Fourth, build legal partnerships that include immigration relief (T and U visas), California Penal Code §§ 236.14–236.15 vacatur relief, restitution enforcement, civil remedies, and family law.

Fifth, operationalize survivor leadership through compensated lived-experience roles, advisory structures with real authority, and survivor voice in program evaluation and storytelling decisions.

Sixth, adopt an ethical storytelling and consent policy with revocable, written, informed consent, compensation, and survivor approval rights over how stories are used.

Seventh, partner with healthcare and child welfare systems using established protocols (HEAL Trafficking, NHTTAC SOAR) to support identification and response.

Eighth, develop community education that is evidence-based, non-sensationalized, and aligned with credible federal, academic, and Polaris messaging.

Ninth, collect and use data ethically to support program improvement and grant accountability while protecting confidentiality and avoiding extractive research.

Tenth, engage with policy at state and federal levels in coalition with survivor-led and broader anti-trafficking organizations, supporting funding, vacatur, restitution, housing, and labor protection improvements.

XIV. Conclusion

Human trafficking is a multidimensional violation of human rights, civil rights, labor rights, and child welfare protections, and it is most effectively addressed through evidence-informed, trauma-informed, and survivor-centered approaches. The empirical record affirms that traffickers exploit unmet needs and structural inequities; that recovery is long, non-linear, and deeply individual; that service systems must be coordinated, voluntary, and rooted in survivor authority; and that prevention requires investment in the conditions that make exploitation possible in the first place.

For Forged in the Fire, the path forward is one of disciplined humility and durable commitment. The organization's strongest contribution will not be drama or spectacle but the steady provision of safety, opportunity, dignity, and partnership—shaped by survivors, grounded in research, and held to the highest ethical standards. This foundational paper is intended as a stable base from which subsequent topical research can be built.

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trafficking; relevant for faith-based partner work.

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Thorn. (2022). Online grooming: Examining risky encounters amid everyday digital socialization. <https://www.thorn.org> Why credible: Established research nonprofit specializing in technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation; methodologically transparent reports.

Tipton, B. (2021). Ethical storytelling in anti-trafficking work. National Survivor Network. Why credible: Survivor-leadership-grounded ethical storytelling guidance; widely used by U.S. nonprofits.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). (n.d.). Victims of human trafficking: T nonimmigrant status and Victims of criminal activity: U nonimmigrant status. <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian> Why credible: Authoritative federal source for T and U visa eligibility and procedures.

U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Blue Campaign. (n.d.). What is human trafficking? <https://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/what-human-trafficking> Why credible: Federal public-awareness lead within DHS Center for Countering Human Trafficking; authoritative for the AMP framework in public education.

U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). (2024). Key legislation and Human trafficking overview. <https://www.justice.gov/humantrafficking> Why credible: Federal lead for human trafficking prosecution; authoritative on federal criminal statutes and DOJ programs.

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Zimmerman, C., & Kiss, L. (2017). Human trafficking and exploitation: A global health concern. PLOS Medicine, 14(11), e1002437. Why credible: Peer-reviewed editorial in a leading medical journal framing trafficking as a global public health issue.

Self-Audit (per Forged in the Fire Quality Control Checklist)

The paper relies almost exclusively on U.S. government, peer-reviewed academic, and high-credibility institutional sources. Major factual claims are cited; statistics are tied to documented sources with caveats about methodological limitations. Federal and California legal claims are tied to specific statutes. Trauma-informed and survivor-centered language is used throughout; sensationalism, graphic detail, and unsupported advocacy claims have been avoided. The paper acknowledges measurement gaps, particularly in prevalence and outcome research, and identifies labor trafficking, adult male survivors, LGBTQ+ survivors, and rural populations as under-researched. Survivor dignity is protected by avoiding individual narratives, gratuitous detail, and savior framing. The paper is structured to support nonprofit website use, grant applications, donor education, and staff onboarding.

22 U.S. Code § 7102 - Definitions (LII)

DOJ Human Trafficking Key Legislation

HHS/ACF Human Trafficking Fact Sheet

DHS Blue Campaign – What Is Human Trafficking?

2025 Trafficking in Persons Report (U.S. State Department)

Polaris – 2024 Hotline Data

Polaris – U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline Statistics

Polaris – The Typology of Modern Slavery

ILO/Walk Free/IOM – Global Estimates of Modern Slavery (2022)

California Penal Code § 236.1

California AG – PC §§ 236.14 & 236.15 Vacatur Toolkit

USCIS – T Nonimmigrant Status

USCIS – U Nonimmigrant Status

SAMHSA – Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach

Covenant House – Human Trafficking and Youth Homelessness

HEAL Trafficking

ACF – Foster Care and Trafficking Research

NIJ – Human Trafficking Among Youth Who Run From Foster Care

Casassa et al. – Trauma Bonding Scoping Review (PubMed)

Sanchez et al. – Trauma-Coercive Bonding Concept Analysis (PubMed)

Goldberg et al. – Polysubstance Use Among Survivors (PMC)

This publication is provided for educational and informational purposes only. It is not legal advice, medical advice, mental health advice, or a substitute for trained professional support. Individuals who may be experiencing trafficking or exploitation should contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888, text 233733, or visit humantraffickinghotline.org. If there is immediate danger, call 911.