

FORGED IN THE FIRE

Myths vs. Facts About Human Trafficking

Correcting Common Misconceptions

Prepared for: Forged in the Fire Knowledge Base

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Educational resource — not legal, medical, or clinical advice

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Myths and Facts About Human Trafficking: An Evidence-Based Correction Framework

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Executive Summary

Public misconceptions about human trafficking are widespread and consequential. Cultural narratives shaped by film, viral social media content, and decades of fear-based awareness messaging have produced a public image of trafficking that diverges substantially from documented reality. The most empirically robust U.S. data sets—the National Human Trafficking Hotline (Polaris Project, n.d.-a), the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) and Department of State Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Reports, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS, 2024), and peer-reviewed research—consistently demonstrate that traffickers usually know their victims, rely on psychological coercion, target identifiable vulnerabilities, and operate across many industries beyond commercial sex (Polaris Project, 2017; DOS, 2025; BJS, 2024). Initial consent does not negate trafficking; movement is not required; commercial sex involving minors is always trafficking under federal law (22 U.S.C. § 7102); and U.S. citizens, LGBTQ+ individuals, men and boys, and labor trafficking survivors comprise substantial—and frequently under-recognized—populations of identified survivors.

This paper provides an evidence-based correction of fourteen recurring myths, examines how those myths harm survivors and weaken anti-trafficking efforts, and offers practical guidance for Forged in the Fire and partner organizations seeking to communicate accurately. It is intended for use in donor education, community awareness curricula, training, and content review for messaging produced by partners.

I. Introduction

Anti-trafficking messaging has unintended consequences when it is inaccurate. Polaris Project's analysis of National Human Trafficking Hotline data found that widely circulated rumors—zip ties used as abduction markers, drugged flowers in parking lots, and the Wayfair child-trafficking conspiracy—generated zero confirmed trafficking cases over multi-year reviews while substantially burdening hotline advocates and emergency response systems (Polaris Project, 2022a, 2022b). Beyond resource diversion, myth-driven messaging has identifiable victims: survivors who do not "look like victims" go unrecognized, communities of color are subjected to stereotype-driven surveillance, real labor trafficking victims are rendered invisible, and donor and policy attention is misallocated (Phillips et al., 2024; Polaris Project, 2022a).

This paper is therefore not a stylistic preference for accuracy. It is an operational requirement. Forged in the Fire's credibility with funders, partners, healthcare systems, schools, faith communities, and survivors will rest in significant part on the organization's ability to deliver myth-correcting content with calm precision and respect.

II. Definitions and Scope

For clarity, "myth" in this paper refers to a widely held belief about human trafficking that diverges meaningfully from what the best available evidence shows. "Fact" refers to a position supported by

federal data, peer-reviewed research, or the most credible institutional sources, with appropriate caveats where data are limited.

The federal definition of trafficking remains controlling: a "severe form of trafficking in persons" is either sex trafficking induced by force, fraud, or coercion (or any commercial sex involving a minor) or labor or services compelled through force, fraud, or coercion (22 U.S.C. § 7102; DOJ, 2024). Several myths in circulation reflect confusion about what the federal definition actually says. This paper integrates the statutory text into the corrections.

The scope of this paper is corrective and educational. It does not aim to catalog every false claim in circulation; rather, it addresses fourteen recurring myths that arise consistently in Polaris's analyses, peer-reviewed research, and *Forged in the Fire*'s likely community context. Closely related topics—recognition of trafficking, racial bias in identification, and ethical storytelling—are treated separately in this knowledge base.

III. Current Research and Data on Public Misconceptions

Polaris Project's national survey research found that public "awareness" of human trafficking has expanded substantially over the past decade, but accurate "understanding" has lagged (Polaris Project, 2022c). The clearest empirical anchors for myth-correction include the following.

The U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline received 32,309 signals in 2024, including 8,024 contacts directly from victims and survivors, and has identified 112,822 cases involving 218,568 individuals since 2007 (Polaris Project, 2025; Polaris Project, n.d.-a). The hotline data are not a population estimate but represent one of the largest publicly available U.S. data sets and consistently show that most identified trafficking situations involve psychological coercion, prior relationships between trafficker and victim, and protracted control rather than acute kidnapping.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics' (2024) Human Trafficking Data Collection Activities report documented federal grantee service provision to identified victims: in fiscal year 2021–2022, approximately 63% of clients served by DOJ-funded victim service programs were U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents, 31% were foreign nationals, and 6% were of unknown status. Approximately 62% experienced sex trafficking, 21% labor trafficking, 8% both, and 9% unspecified.

The International Labour Organization (ILO), Walk Free, and IOM (2022) estimated that 27.6 million people globally were in forced labor in 2021, with 86% of forced labor occurring in the private economy. This estimate alone challenges the common assumption that trafficking is primarily sex trafficking and primarily a developing-country phenomenon.

Peer-reviewed research consistently documents that traffickers and victims most often have preexisting relationships. Studies of domestic minor sex trafficking case files have found friends, romantic partners, and family members account for the majority of trafficker relationships, with one study finding 54% of survivors had been influenced into commercial sex by a friend, 31% by a "boyfriend"-turned-trafficker, and 15% through familial involvement (Reid, 2016; Sprang & Cole, 2018, as cited in Reid et al., 2018).

Research also documents systematic under-identification of male, LGBTQ+, and labor trafficking survivors. A frequently cited estimate suggests as many as half of sex trafficking survivors may be male, with substantial likelihood of underreporting; LGBTQ+ trafficking cases comprise less than 1% of hotline reports despite documented elevated risk among LGBTQ+ youth, indicating significant

under-identification (Martinez & Kelle, 2013, in Polaris Project, n.d.-c; Murphy, 2017; Covenant House, 2018).

IV. Legal and Policy Framework Relevant to Common Myths

Several myths are rooted in misunderstanding of federal and state law. The TVPA's federal definition (22 U.S.C. § 7102) does not require movement, does not require physical confinement, treats minors in commercial sex as trafficking victims regardless of "means," and recognizes psychological coercion as fully equivalent to physical force for adult victims. Federal criminal statutes (18 U.S.C. §§ 1581–1597) include forced labor, sex trafficking by force, fraud, or coercion, sex trafficking of a minor, and document servitude. Mandatory restitution (18 U.S.C. § 1593) and civil remedies (18 U.S.C. § 1595) are available regardless of survivor immigration status (DOJ, 2024).

Federal definitions also clarify that trafficking is distinct from human smuggling (which is fundamentally a border-crossing offense against the state), prostitution as such (which may or may not involve trafficking elements), and kidnapping (which involves abduction but is a separate offense). California Penal Code § 236.1 mirrors and in some respects expands federal law and applies regardless of whether victims are U.S. citizens, lawful residents, or undocumented (Cal. Pen. Code § 236.1; California Office of the Attorney General, 2023).

State and federal "consent" doctrines uniformly hold that initial consent to a labor or commercial sex setting does not negate trafficking when force, fraud, or coercion subsequently are present, and that consent is irrelevant for minors in commercial sex (22 U.S.C. § 7102; DOJ, 2024).

V. Risk Factors and Vulnerabilities Relevant to Myth Correction

Several myths persist in part because they conflict with documented vulnerability patterns. Myths that imply trafficking is random, indiscriminate, or a "stranger danger" phenomenon obscure the structural conditions traffickers actively exploit—poverty, housing instability, prior abuse, child welfare involvement, immigration precarity, mental health and substance use conditions, and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation (DOS, 2025; ACF OPRE, 2020; Murphy, 2017; Hartinger-Saunders et al., 2020 as cited in ACF OPRE, 2020). Accurate myth-correction therefore necessarily redirects attention from spectacle to structural conditions.

VI. Recruitment, Grooming, and Control Tactics: Where Myths Misalign with Evidence

The empirical literature on trafficker tactics is now substantial. Most U.S. trafficking proceeds through identification, grooming, isolation, dependency, and coercion, frequently mediated by an existing relationship and built around psychological control rather than physical confinement (Polaris Project, 2017; Reid, 2016; Casassa et al., 2021). Trauma-coercive bonding produces apparent loyalty, denial of victimization, and resistance to intervention that should not be misread as consent (Sanchez et al., 2019). Online recruitment via social media, gaming, and dating applications is well documented, particularly for minors (NCMEC, 2024; Thorn, 2022). These dynamics directly contradict popular myths of stranger abduction, physical restraint, and dramatic rescue.

VII. Fourteen Myths and the Evidence That Refutes Them (Core Section)

The following myth-fact pairs are presented in standardized form to support direct use in training and donor education. Each correction is grounded in the cited sources.

Myth 1: Human trafficking is primarily kidnapping by strangers. Fact: Documented U.S. trafficking patterns are dominated by psychological coercion within preexisting relationships. Polaris Project's analysis of 32,000+ hotline cases and federal prosecution data show that most traffickers are romantic partners, family members, friends, recruiters, employers, or trusted authority figures (Polaris Project, 2017; Reid, 2016; DOJ, 2024). Stranger abduction does occur but is a small fraction of identified cases.

Myth 2: All human trafficking is sex trafficking. Fact: Globally, the ILO–Walk Free–IOM (2022) estimates that 27.6 million people are in forced labor, the majority in the private economy. In the United States, federal grantee data show that approximately 21% of identified survivors experienced labor trafficking, 62% sex trafficking, and 8% both, with substantial methodological consensus that labor trafficking is significantly under-identified (BJS, 2024; Owens et al., 2014).

Myth 3: Trafficking only happens to undocumented immigrants. Fact: Federal grantee data show that approximately 63% of identified survivors served were U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents, and 31% were foreign nationals, in fiscal year 2021–2022 (BJS, 2024). U.S. citizens are trafficked in every state, and many foreign-national survivors hold valid immigration status (Polaris Project, n.d.-a).

Myth 4: Trafficking always involves physical confinement, locks, or chains. Fact: Most documented control involves psychological coercion: trauma bonding, threats to family, debt bondage, document confiscation, immigration threats, shame manipulation, drug-induced dependency, and digital surveillance. Many survivors appear to move freely in public, hold jobs, attend school, or participate in family activities while being controlled (Hopper, 2017; Polaris Project, 2017; Casassa et al., 2021).

Myth 5: Trafficking requires movement across borders. Fact: Federal statute requires no movement at all. A person can be trafficked in their own home, neighborhood, school, or workplace. Trafficking and human smuggling are distinct offenses (22 U.S.C. § 7102; DOJ, 2024).

Myth 6: Initial consent means it isn't trafficking. Fact: Initial consent to a labor or commercial sex setting is not relevant once force, fraud, or coercion are introduced (22 U.S.C. § 7102). For minors in commercial sex, no force, fraud, or coercion is required, and consent is legally irrelevant. Payment to the victim does not negate trafficking (Polaris Project, n.d.-b; DOJ, 2024).

Myth 7: Only women and girls are sex trafficking victims. Fact: Research suggests as many as half of sex trafficking survivors may be male, though identification of male survivors lags substantially. LGBTQ+ youth and adults are at elevated risk and are frequently underrepresented in identified case data because of stigma, fear, lack of identification by professionals, and reduced service availability (Murphy, 2017; Covenant House, 2018; Polaris Project, n.d.-c; Martinez & Kelle, 2013).

Myth 8: People being trafficked can simply leave whenever they want. Fact: Survivors face documented obstacles to leaving including trauma-coercive bonding, threats of harm, lack of safe housing, financial dependency, immigration consequences, dependent children, criminal records arising from coerced offenses, and identification document confiscation (Polaris Project, n.d.-b; Hopper, 2017; Casassa et

al., 2021). Many survivors do not at the time identify as trafficking victims, complicating exit further.

Myth 9: If they really were a victim, they would just say so. Fact: Disclosure typically occurs in fragments, over time, often long after exit, and is shaped by safety, trust, and prior helper responses. Trauma-coercive bonding may produce active denial of victimization, defense of the trafficker, and resistance to intervention. None of these dynamics negate the underlying trafficking (Hopper, 2017; Sanchez et al., 2019).

Myth 10: Trafficking is rare in the United States and primarily a foreign problem. Fact: The U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline has identified 112,822 cases involving 218,568 individuals since 2007, and federal prosecutions occur every year in every region of the United States (Polaris Project, n.d.-a; DOJ, 2024). The 2025 TIP Report addresses U.S. trafficking domestically and ranks the United States in its own assessment (DOS, 2025).

Myth 11: Visible "warning signs" like zip ties or drugged flowers indicate active trafficking. Fact: Polaris Project's review of National Human Trafficking Hotline data from January 2015 to August 2022 found zero confirmed trafficking cases linked to zip-tie markers, drugged flowers, or related viral memes. The Wayfair child-trafficking rumor has been independently investigated and debunked. These memes consume hotline and law enforcement resources and can produce harmful misidentification (Polaris Project, 2022a, 2022b).

Myth 12: Traffickers are easy to spot and look like obvious criminals. Fact: Traffickers may be employers, recruiters, romantic partners, family members, "managers," religious figures, or community members. Many present as protective, generous, or charismatic during recruitment and grooming, and many continue to maintain socially respectable public lives (Polaris Project, 2017; Reid, 2016).

Myth 13: Trafficking only happens in shady underground places. Fact: Polaris Project's 2017 typology identified 25 distinct U.S. trafficking business models, including agriculture, restaurants, hotels and motels, traveling sales crews, domestic work, illicit massage businesses, escort services, traveling carnivals, forestry and lumber, and door-to-door sales. Many trafficking situations occur in legitimate-appearing workplaces and family homes (Polaris Project, 2017).

Myth 14: The best response is to "rescue" the person yourself. Fact: Federal guidance is consistent: do not approach suspected traffickers, do not attempt to remove the person, and do not interrogate the person in unsafe settings. Direct intervention can place both the person being trafficked and the bystander at risk. The recommended response is to call or text the National Human Trafficking Hotline (1-888-373-7888 / text 233733) or 911 in cases of immediate danger and to allow trained advocates and law enforcement to coordinate (DHS, n.d.; Polaris Project, n.d.-d).

VIII. Survivor Impact: How Myths Harm the People They Claim to Protect

Myths are not merely inaccurate; they have measurable harm.

Survivors who do not match the dominant cultural template—especially Black, Indigenous, Latina, LGBTQ+, male, adult, and labor trafficking survivors—are systematically under-recognized by professionals and community members alike (Phillips et al., 2024; Halter, 2010; Polaris Project, n.d.-c). Black girls are subject to "adultification" that frames them as delinquent rather than victimized; LGBTQ+

youth are missed because services may not exist or may not be perceived as safe; male survivors are often invisible in cultural narratives entirely.

Survivors are blamed for their own victimization when myths suggest they "could have left" or "must have wanted it" (Halter, 2010). This blame reinforces shame, deepens trauma, and discourages disclosure. It also reinforces a "victim/criminal" binary that has produced criminal records for survivors arising from offenses committed under trafficker coercion—records that California's Penal Code §§ 236.14 and 236.15 vacatur statutes are now slowly addressing (California Office of the Attorney General, 2023).

Survivors lose access to services when myth-driven case-management screening fails to identify them. Many service systems have eligibility criteria that, even when not legally mandated, function in practice as cultural templates—privileging the kidnapped-foreign-national archetype while excluding domestic, adult, male, and labor trafficking survivors (Owens et al., 2014; BJS, 2024).

Survivors and survivor-led organizations are forced to expend significant labor correcting myths in public, donor, and policy spaces, often without compensation. This labor is itself an inequity that shapes the field (NSN, n.d.; ACF OTIP, 2018).

IX. Service and Intervention Models: Designing Around Evidence, Not Stereotypes

Service models that align with evidence rather than myth produce better outcomes. SAMHSA's (2014) trauma-informed framework, OTIP's Survivor-Informed Practice (ACF OTIP, 2018), and HEAL Trafficking's healthcare protocols (HEAL Trafficking, n.d.) all explicitly orient service design around the realities of psychological coercion, trauma-coercive bonding, complex disclosure, and structural vulnerability rather than around dramatic rescue narratives.

For *Forged in the Fire*, this means service eligibility, intake, screening, case management, and outcome metrics should be reviewed for myth-driven assumptions. Common errors to avoid include requiring survivor self-identification at intake (rare and often delayed), prioritizing "rescue" stories in outreach (excluding survivors who exited gradually), and treating denial of victimization as a reason to deny services (a misreading of trauma-coercive bonding).

Healthcare partners should be trained using SOAR (NHTTAC, n.d.) and PEARR (HEAL Trafficking, n.d.). School partners should integrate accurate, non-sensationalized recognition curricula aligned with California Education Code § 51934. Faith partners should be trained to avoid both the "stranger danger" and "savior" framings that dominate religious anti-trafficking culture.

X. Prevention and Public Awareness: Building Accuracy Into the Message

Effective prevention messaging begins by not propagating myths. The following principles, drawn from Polaris's communications research and the broader public-health literature, should guide *Forged in the Fire*'s public-facing communications and content review for partners (Polaris Project, 2021, 2022c).

Awareness should be context- and pattern-focused, not sign-focused. The "Know the Story Not the Signs" framework provides the operational anchor (Polaris Project, n.d.-d).

Awareness should explicitly correct the most common myths. Standardized myth-correction modules can be delivered in 5- to 15-minute formats suitable for community presentations, faith services, employer trainings, and online content.

Awareness should address bias. The under-recognition of male, LGBTQ+, BIPOC, immigrant, labor, and unhoused survivors must be named explicitly (Phillips et al., 2024; Polaris Project, n.d.-c).

Awareness should center survivor voice with appropriate consent and compensation. Survivor leaders should review myth-correction content; survivor stories used in awareness should follow the OTIP Survivor-Informed Practice standards (ACF OTIP, 2018; NSN, n.d.).

Awareness should provide clear safe-action protocols. Every awareness piece should include the National Human Trafficking Hotline (1-888-373-7888 / text 233733), 911 for emergencies, and explicit instruction not to approach.

XI. Relevance to Forged in the Fire

Myth correction is one of Forged in the Fire's most cost-effective contributions to the anti-trafficking field. The organization can build a standardized myth-correction module suitable for short presentations, web content, social media, donor education, and grant narratives. This module can be deployed across audiences with adaptations: a community-facing version for faith partners and civic groups; a professional version for healthcare, education, and child welfare partners; a funder-facing version for donor and grant audiences; and a youth-facing version for school assemblies and online channels.

Forged in the Fire can also offer content review services for partner messaging, helping community partners avoid sensationalism, racialized imagery, fear-based statistics, and stranger-danger framing. This positions Forged in the Fire as a credible content authority and builds long-term partner relationships.

The organization's website and donor-facing materials should themselves model myth-correction. A "Myths and Facts" page rooted in the framework above can serve as a flagship educational resource and a search-friendly landing page for community members encountering trafficking content for the first time.

Finally, myth correction strengthens grant competitiveness. Federal funders such as OVC and OTIP, and major foundations, increasingly evaluate applicants on the rigor and accuracy of their public messaging and on the adoption of survivor-informed practices. A clearly articulated myth-correction posture is a measurable signal of organizational quality.

XII. Ethical Considerations

Myth correction itself must be conducted ethically.

Correction should be done without shaming individuals who have held myths. Many myths are propagated by well-meaning community members, parents, and faith leaders. Shaming reduces engagement and undermines the educational goal (Polaris Project, 2022c).

Correction should not replace one stereotype with another. The corrective should not, for example, suggest that trafficking is "always" within families or "always" online; the empirical record describes patterns and proportions, not absolutes (Polaris Project, 2017).

Correction should resist sensationalization. Even accurate facts can be deployed in ways that exploit or retraumatize. Statistics about minor trafficking, sexual violence, and labor exploitation should be presented with care, with content advisories where appropriate, and without graphic detail.

Correction must protect survivor privacy. Real-life examples, where used at all, should be drawn only with informed, ongoing, and revocable consent, with appropriate compensation, and with survivor approval over framing (ACF OTIP, 2018; NSN, n.d.).

Correction should attend to communities affected by misidentification. Black, Indigenous, Latina, immigrant, LGBTQ+, sex worker, and unhoused communities have borne the cost of myth-driven surveillance and stigma. Correction should be partnered with these communities, not delivered to them (Phillips et al., 2024).

Correction should acknowledge limitations. Where data are uncertain, language should reflect that uncertainty. The phrase "available evidence suggests" is preferable to overclaiming (DOS, 2025).

XIII. Gaps and Future Research

Several gaps persist in myth-correction research.

Effectiveness of myth-correction interventions. Few rigorously evaluated curricula exist. Outcome studies on belief change, behavioral change (referrals, false-tip rates), and durability of correction are limited (Rothman et al., 2021).

Online myth dynamics. Social media accelerates myth spread, but the field's countermessaging strategies remain emergent. Platform-specific research and partnerships are increasingly needed (Polaris Project, 2022a).

Faith-community myth dynamics. Religious communities are simultaneously valuable anti-trafficking partners and frequent sites of myth propagation, particularly in narratives that emphasize stranger abduction and supernatural framing. Targeted research and collaboration are needed.

Gendered, racial, and class dimensions of myths. Documentation of how specific myths interact with race, gender, and class identifiers, and how myths shape identification rates and service eligibility, remains underdeveloped (Phillips et al., 2024).

Longitudinal recovery and reintegration data. Better data are needed on whether myth-driven service systems produce poorer survivor outcomes than evidence-aligned systems, which would strengthen the case for systematic myth correction.

XIV. Recommendations and Conclusion

For Forged in the Fire and partners, the following recommendations apply.

First, publish a standing Myths and Facts resource anchored in the fourteen myths above (and updated as new myths emerge), with visible citations.

Second, integrate myth-correction into all training products, ensuring at minimum a five-minute correction module in every curriculum.

Third, offer content review to partner organizations and community campaigns, applying a clear set of criteria (no stranger-danger framing; no racialized imagery; no unverified statistics; clear hotline routing).

Fourth, center survivor leadership in myth-correction content, with appropriate consent and compensation.

Fifth, track myth-correction outcomes where feasible, including referral quality, false-tip patterns where data are available, and partner adoption of evidence-aligned messaging.

Sixth, acknowledge complexity in messaging. Trafficking is heterogeneous; corrections should describe patterns rather than absolutes.

Seventh, pair myth correction with safe-action information, so that myth-busting does not leave audiences without a clear "what to do" path.

Eighth, partner with researchers and survivor-led organizations to keep content current.

Myths about human trafficking persist because they are dramatic, emotionally engaging, and easy to share. Evidence-based correction is slower, less spectacular, and more demanding—but it is also the foundation on which credible nonprofit, policy, and survivor-centered work depends. Forged in the Fire's commitment to accuracy, respect, and survivor leadership will, over time, become one of the organization's most distinctive contributions to the field.

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22 U.S. Code § 7102 (Trafficking Victims Protection Act definitions). <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/22/7102> Why credible: Controlling federal statutory definition.

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

Every myth-fact pair is supported by federal data, peer-reviewed research, or field-leading institutional sources. Statistics are cited to primary sources with appropriate caveats. The paper acknowledges that hotline data are

not population estimates and that several populations remain under-identified in official data. Trauma-informed and survivor-centered language is used throughout; sensationalism, graphic detail, and shaming framings are avoided. The paper integrates legal, public health, and survivor leadership perspectives. It is structured to support nonprofit website use, donor education, partner content review, and grant narratives, and explicitly addresses bias, ethics, and limitations.

Polaris – Myths, Facts, and Statistics

Polaris – Human Trafficking Rumors

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Polaris – Understanding Human Trafficking

Polaris – LGBTQ+ Communities and Human Trafficking

Polaris – Sex Trafficking and LGBTQ Youth (PDF)

BJS – Human Trafficking Data Collection Activities, 2024

State Department – 2025 TIP Report: United States

Martinez & Kelle – Sex Trafficking of LGBT Individuals (PMC)

Successful Criminal Prosecutions of Sex Trafficking and Sexual Abuse of Minors (PMC)

Polaris – Love and Trafficking: How Traffickers Groom and Control

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