



RESEARCH BRIEF: Trafficking of Males in the United States - Findings and Gaps

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ABOUT

This research brief explores labor and sex trafficking of males in the United States emphasizing identified patterns of vulnerability, entrapment, reasons for challenges to disclose victimization and highlighted needs to narrow current gaps in practice and research.

The literature on males in the context of Human Trafficking (HT) remains largely underexplored (Hodge, 2019). The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 defines human trafficking as a crime involving the exploitation of someone for the purpose of compelled labor or a commercial sex act through the use of force, fraud, or coercion of any individual. It also designates minors involved in any commercial sex act as victims of sex trafficking. However, it was not until the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act was reauthorized in 2018 that the victimization of males began to be recognized (TVPA, 2018).

Due to the multi-level complexities within worldwide systematic economic inequalities and their geopolitical solutions, male trafficking victimization can easily be misidentified, ignored, or go unreported (Barron & Frost, 2018; ECPAT-USA, 2013; Hodge 2014 & 2019;

QUESTION

What does research state about male trafficking in the United States?

Izcara Palacios & Yamamoto, 2017; Izcara-Palacios 2022; Kenny et al., 2023; Mariaca Pacheco et al., 2023). While there is no uniform and reliable system to fully capture the prevalence of male trafficking at the national, state, or local level, national reports and empirical studies exist, and continue to illustrate males as survivors of both labor and sex trafficking in the United States (U.S.) (Murphy, 2016; Polaris, 2022; Zhang, 2012).

Despite the research gaps., this research brief aims to analyze identified patterns within the current literature to better understand male trafficking within the U.S. Specifically, this research brief focuses on the vulnerabilities, typologies, traffickers' strategies of recruitment, negative outcomes of trafficking trauma, suitable resources needed, and training and research gaps for both labor and sex trafficking. By gaining a deeper understanding of

FINDINGS

Male trafficking in the U.S. is underreported. There is a pattern of vulnerabilities, mental health challenges, disclosure hurdles, and demand-driven smuggling dynamics.

CONCLUSION

Policy shifts, training for identification, research expansion, housing, mental health services, legal support are crucial for intervention of male trafficking victimization.

the complexities of male trafficking experiences and trauma, this analysis has the potential to provide insights for social service providers and other front-line professionals who may interact with this particular population.

LABOR TRAFFICKING OF MALES IN THE U.S.

The prevalence of labor trafficking is unknown due to its underground nature. The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act describes labor trafficking as 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 USC § 7102 (11)(B)). Though the majority of identified cases consist of foreign-born individuals, U.S. citizens can also find themselves trapped

1. In the U.S., two major categories emerge: labor trafficking and sex trafficking. At times, within the context of labor trafficking, debt bondage surfaces as well. Given the multifaceted challenges in understanding these phenomena, researchers have utilized a multiplicity of terminologies over the years to explain male trafficking and address such human rights violations. Throughout this analysis, various terms indicating human trafficking victimization have been noted. Under the umbrella of sex trafficking, the research body utilizes a variety of terminologies, including sex trade, sexual exchange, sex work, escort service, prostitution, pornography, child sexual abuse material, and/or commercial sexual exploitation. Regarding labor trafficking, used terminology encompasses smuggling, illegal employment, long-hours without pay or little pay, debt bondage, bonded labor, child labor, forced labor, indentured servitude, and domestic servitude, among others.

Nonetheless, across this research brief, sex trafficking and labor trafficking were terms used to describe any type of exploitation or abuse findings within the literature, whether researchers named it trafficking, used an aforementioned term, or mentioned it as the means of which victimization occurred. This decision was based on the fact that when the selected studies were closely analyzed, they point towards the acts, the means, or the purpose of their exploitation as described by the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act and its consecutive reauthorizations. The end goal of utilizing labor and sex trafficking was to reduce the lack of specificity found within the literature when describing abuse, exploitation and human rights violations that denote trafficking victimization. Naming the exploitation as trafficking could create pathways to better prevent and protect male victims from current abuses.



in some typology of labor trafficking (Department of Justice, 2011; Murphy, 2016; Polaris, 2022).

Labor Trafficking of U.S. Youth

The understanding of U.S. male youth within labor trafficking is very limited. Nonetheless, one multi-city study on the trafficking of unhoused males has begun to reveal some possible patterns. This study illustrated social exclusion and isolation as well as low economic opportunities as risk factors that led to labor trafficking (Murphy, 2016). Additionally, the findings of this study revealed that male victims of labor trafficking were predominantly exploited through the drug trade by family members or foster care givers. Moreover, other types of exploitations identified included domestic labor, factory work, agriculture, and commission-based sales. Furthermore, this study demonstrated that the participants who experienced labor trafficking were characterized by being part of an ethnic minority; especially, Latino(a), Asian, and Native American. These minorities experienced a higher percentage of labor trafficking when compared to Whites and African Americans (Murphy 2016).

Labor Trafficking & Foreign-Born Male Workers

Although there is not a reliable estimate of the prevalence of labor trafficking among foreign-born males, there are a few patterns that are consistent throughout the existing literature. First, the majority of those identified as victims of labor trafficking are undocumented young adults (Barron & Frost, 2018; Hodge, 2019; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018; Izcara Palacios, 2022; Izcara Palacios & Yamamoto, 2017; Zhang, 2012). Some of the industries where male trafficking survivors have been recognized include agriculture, cleaning, construction, hospitality, restaurants, catering, manufacturing, food packing, forced transportation of drugs, and/or forced migrant smuggling (Barron & Frost, 2018; Hodge, 2014 & 2019; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018; Izcara Palacios, 2022; Murphy, 2016; Polaris,

2022; Zhang, 2012).

Typically, undocumented migrant workers find themselves transported into the U.S. through smugglers known as coyotes. In the context of labor trafficking, coyotes have become the intermediaries between traffickers and undocumented laborers (Izcara Palacios, 2022). Being in the U.S. without proper employment documentation heightens workers' vulnerability of becoming trapped in labor trafficking (Barrick, Lattimore, Pitts & Zhang, 2014; Zhang, 2012). Unfortunately, the political discourse on immigration within the U.S. creates a negative perception of undocumented migrant workers. Thus, this perception heightens their risk of exploitation. Within this context, undocumented workers are perceived as unworthy of human rights protections designed for U.S. citizens and law-abiding foreign-born workers (Izcara Palacios, 2022). To better understand these complexities and their connection to labor trafficking, further analysis must be done.

Geopolitical and Economic Dynamics in the Trafficking of Males

To understand how undocumented male migrant workers become victims of labor trafficking, the demand-driven smuggling of male migrants into the U.S. must be better analyzed (Izcara Palacios, 2022). This dichotomy of demand-driven smuggling is characterized by countries classified as origination and destination countries (Hodge, 2014; Izcara Palacios, 2022). Origination countries tend to be economically unstable. At times, these countries also lack a strong justice system that protects their citizens from traffickers. When compared to origination countries, destination countries have more employment opportunities and a greater need for workers. Given destination countries need for workers and origination

countries need for employment, an unequal relationship between employer and employee is created. Additionally, employment opportunities offered in the destination countries tend to be low-paying and unsafe manual labor for those who have low levels of education. As a result, identified cases of survivors of labor trafficking represent

“...Undocumented workers are perceived as unworthy of human rights protections designed for U.S. citizens and law-abiding foreign-born workers”

migrant workers whose characteristics represent low or non-levels of education and the lack of economic earning power (Barrick, Lattimore, Pitts & Zhang, 2014; Izcara Palacios & Yamamoto, 2017; Zhang 2012). Moreover, geopolitical dynamics

at times create disparate opportunities for traffickers, traffickers' workers, and/or smugglers to trick vulnerable males in origination countries to work in destination countries without going through the proper legal channels. Therefore, labor trafficking recruitment can be intertwined with legitimate businesses, making it difficult for victims and law enforcement to detect (Barron & Frost, 2018; Hodge, 2019; Izcara Palacios, 2022).

Risks & Vulnerabilities of Males

Based on the scant research body on male trafficking in the U.S., undocumented migrant workers largely represent two regions of origin: Latin American and Asian countries (Barrick et al., 2014; Hodge, 2019; Izcara Palacios, 2022; Izcara Palacios & Yamamoto, 2017; Zhang, 2012). Available studies describe similar narratives of workers' recruitment from both of these regions. These patterns reflect deceiving practices during the recruiting phase by utilizing false promises, deceiving practices, and trickery (Izcara Palacios, 2022; Hodge, 2019; Litternber & Baldwin, 2017; Murphy, 2016; Zhang, 2012).

Unfortunately, given workers' lack of legal status, they are without sufficient legal protection. Additionally, workers' understanding of trafficking laws and violations of human rights are limited



and many times unknown. For example, victims of labor trafficking typically are unaware that “debt bondage” (22 USC § 7102 (7)), “threats of harm” or “physical restraint” (22 USC § 7102 (8)), and “transportation” through the use of “fraud” (22 USC § 7102 (11) (B)) with the purpose of exploitation are criminal activities engaged by their employers (traffickers) and smugglers, which are penalized by the U.S. justice system. Moreover, during transit, traffickers can incorporate physical and psychological coercion to create a subservient victim, which also falls under trafficking criminal law (Barrick, Lattimore, Pitts & Zhang, 2014; Hodge, 2014 & 2019; Izcara Palacios, 2022; Izcara Palacios & Yamamoto, 2017; Zhang, 2012). At times, traffickers recruit male workers who are not able to pay the smuggling fee (Izcara Palacios, 2022; Izcara Palacios & Yamamoto, 2017). Consequently, the employers pay upfront and then deduct it from the workers’ wages. When these smuggling fees become unmanageably high, they ensnare workers by preventing them from seeking employment elsewhere or returning to their home country.

Moreover, being newly married and/or having dependents increases a foreign-born undocumented worker’s susceptibility to experiencing labor trafficking. Among male migrants, these sociodemographic characteristics heighten the risks for labor trafficking, which emanates from their limited economic opportunities and accessibility to needed resources for establishing financial stability (Barron & Frost, 2018; Izcara Palacios & Yamamoto, 2017; Hodge, 2019; Zhang, 2012). Additionally, foreign-born-undocumented young adults are desirable in the workforce of destination countries due to their greater physical capabilities. Nonetheless, minors and middle-aged adults have also been identified in labor trafficking victimization (Zhang, 2012). As aforementioned, industries in the U.S. that heavily depend on inexpensive physical labor can easily become hotspots for exploitation due to deceitful employers and the lack of strict labor laws and accountability

systems in place (Barron & Frost, 2018; Izcara Palacios, 2022; Izcara Palacios & Yamamoto, 2017; Zhang, 2012). Lastly, undocumented workers’ lack of English fluency and low-educational attainment increase social isolation, preventing understanding of their destination country and inhibiting legal protection. As a result, such workers become an easier target for labor trafficking victimization (Barrick, Lattimore, Pitts & Zhang, 2014; Zhang, 2012).

Negative Outcomes & Challenges of Disclosure

Victims of labor trafficking experience physical and psychological trauma as repercussions of their trafficking experiences. The findings of analyzed studies demonstrated that male survivors of labor trafficking have developed multiple negative mental health outcomes such as depression, self-blame, a deep sense of shame due to their victimization, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Murphy, 2016; Hodge, 2014 & 2019; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018;). Chronic physical conditions have also been identified as a result of forced labor such as malnourishment, skin rash, and anxiety (Omole, 2016). In Oram. et al. (2012) other ailments which included fatigue, dizziness, back pain, and memory problems were also identified.

Consistent with other survivors of trafficking, male victims of forced labor, especially those who have been granted legal status to work in the U.S., have demonstrated hesitancy in sharing their victimization experience due to fear of losing their work visas (Barrick, Lattimore, Pitts & Zhang, 2014). Therefore, these fears and complexities heighten their underidentification.

SEX TRAFFICKING OF MALES IN THE U.S.

Unfortunately, labor trafficking is not the only identified victimization among male survivors. Although females continue to be overrepresented as victims of sex trafficking, both minor and adult males have been identified as victims as well (International Labour Organization, 2022; San Diego County

District Attorney, n.d.; Department of Justice, 2011).

Findings among male minors demonstrated that their commercial sexual exploitation tends to begin through family, friends, or peers. Unfortunately, the discourse and recognition of male victimization have been challenging and delayed. This is largely due to traditional views of sexual exploitation, which oftentimes prioritizes the experience of female victims (Barron & Frost, 2018; ECPAT-USA, 2013; Edinburgh et al., 2015).

Identified commercial sexual exploitation patterns of males within the research body illustrate that this type of victimization is typically experienced through pornography and prostitution (Barron & Frost, 2018; Hodge, 2019, Mariaca Pacheco et al., 2023). Similar to female victims of sex trafficking, younger males tend to be targeted by traffickers. The younger the male victim, the more lucrative the trafficking becomes (Hodge, 2019).

Sex Trafficking Vulnerabilities

Much like labor trafficking, males from low-income households face an increased risk of becoming victims of sex trafficking (Barron & Frost, 2018; Murphy, 2016). Additionally, childhood or previous trauma increases the vulnerability of being commercially sexually exploited by perpetrators. Trauma experiences such as rape, child maltreatment, parental-neglect, or any adverse childhood experiences (ACE) are widely reported among male survivors of sex trafficking (O’Brien, Li, Givens & Leibowitz, 2017; Reid & Piquero, 2014; Barron & Frost, 2018; Mariaca Pacheco, Buenaventura & Miles, 2023; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018). Moreover, studies demonstrated that being part of a minority group heightens the risks of sex trafficking among male survivors. Overrepresented minority groups include being African American, being part of the foster care system, and being part of the LGBTQ+ community (Barron & Frost, 2018; ECPAT-USA, 2013; Edinburgh, Pape-Blabolil, Harpin & Saewyc, 2015; McNeal, 2020 Murphy, 2016; Reid & Piquero, 2014; Trudeau et



al., 2021).

Although negative mental health outcomes can be a result of trafficking, some studies illustrate that preexisting mental health conditions, such as psychotic symptoms, can increase the risk for sex trafficking among males (Cole, 2018; Reid & Piquero, 2014; Reid, Fox, Bilali & Diaz, 2021; O'Brien et al., 2017). Similarly, substance misuse has been identified as conducive to commercial sexual exploitation of male youth. Additionally, parental substance abuse was found to be a risk factor for male victimization (Barron & Frost, 2018; Cole, 2018; Moore et al., 2020; Reid & Piquero, 2014). Analyzed studies also displayed that severe physical disabilities such as difficulty with walking, standing, extending, grasping, or holding items, blindness, deafness, as well as low-cognitive abilities are identified risks for sex trafficking victimization (Cole, 2018; Franchino-Olsen, Silverstein, Khan & Martin, 2022). Lastly, the research body also reports that delinquent activity among males is common behavior prior to sexual exploitation (McNeal, 2020; Murphy, 2016; O'Brien et al., 2017).

Recruitment & Challenges of Disclosure Among Male Survivors of Sex Trafficking

Based on this analysis, traffickers seem to capitalize on the various vulnerabilities that research has linked to men and boys. Recruitment within familial sex trafficking of males, findings reveal abuse of parent-child relationship to develop a normalization to sexual exploitation (Cole, 2018; Mariaca Pacheco et al., 2023; Moore et al., 2020; Murphy, 2016; Reid, Piquero & Sullivan, 2014). Another pattern of recruitment among unhoused male survivors involves strategies of trickery to meet basic needs through sexual exploitation (Murphy, 2016). Legal adoption is yet another strategy utilized by sex traffickers to trap men, especially among foreign-born (Hodge, 2019). Additionally, at times, traffickers manipulate peers to recruit male victims into sex trafficking. Some identified locations included homeless shelters, bus stations, among other

locations where youth or young adults may gather (Barron & Frost, 2018).

In terms of identification, male survivors of sex trafficking face various barriers to disclose their victimization status. These barriers can be analyzed at multiple levels. First, frontline personnel tend to lack the appropriate training to recognize and assist any potential male victims. For example, law enforcement or service providers around potential male survivors of sex trafficking are usually not prepared to understand, believe, and support (Chaffin, 2020; Cole, 2018; Barron & Frost, 2018; Kenny et al., 2023; Mariaca Pacheco et al., 2023; ECPAT-USA, 2013). Second, cultural norms around masculinity portray victimization as inherently weak and feminine, which results in a lack of actions that can lead to identification and support for male survivors of sexual exploitation (Barron & Frost, 2018). Third, just as female survivors of sex trafficking, male survivors experience stigma and shame, which inhibits self identification and at the same time decreases opportunities to be identified by frontline personnel (Cole, 2018; ECPAT-USA, 2013). Thus, the identification of male survivors of sex trafficking remains a complex challenge..

DISCUSSION

This research brief sought to highlight the identified patterns within the scant literature of male trafficking in the U.S. The current research body illustrates empirical findings concerning trafficking vulnerability in both labor and sex trafficking. One consistent finding throughout the literature was the heightened risk for victimization among males with extremely low economic opportunities. In some studies, limited fluency in English and low levels of education were found statistically significant as a variable that was associated with risk of trafficking victimization (Barrick, Lattimore, Pitts & Zhang, 2014; Zhang, 2012). Additionally, one study demonstrated that those who had no legal status were less likely to share about their victimization when compared to survivors with legal

status (H-2A visa for example) (Barrick, Lattimore, Pitts & Zhang, 2014). More empirical studies are needed to better understand male disclosure of victimization. More than a few studies and reports identified male survivors of labor trafficking as particularly vulnerable to physically demanding labor, such as agriculture, factory work, and cleaning. Although young adults are sought after for such extraneous manual jobs, minors and middle-aged adults have also been identified as survivors of labor trafficking. Debt bondage in particular is a common practice utilized by traffickers to exert control over victims. Drug trafficking through a family member is also a widespread cause of victimization among U.S.-born, male survivors of labor trafficking (Murphy, 2016). In contrast, the most predominant vulnerabilities for sex trafficking include illness, mental health challenges, and low cognitive abilities. Perpetrators of sex trafficking can range from a family member, friend, peer, or adoptive parent, to a corrupt employer (ECPAT-USA, 2013; Mariaca Pacheco, 2023; McNeal, 2020; Murphy, 2016).

Male survivors have also illustrated the following negative health outcomes: depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and possessing a deep sense of humiliation for not meeting cultural norms of masculinity due to their victimization (ECPAT-USA., 2013; Hodge, 2019 & 2020; Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018; Mariaca Pacheco, 2023; Murphy, 2016). Although some spiritual practices have been identified as helpful coping strategies for enduring and healing from trafficking (Hodge, 2020), a greater understanding of prevention, protection, and rehabilitation models is needed to address the wide range of risks and negative outcomes for male survivors of trafficking, as well as to create needed support.

CONCLUSION

This research brief explored the current research body on male victimization within labor and sex trafficking. This analysis revealed patterns in the areas of trafficking vulnerabilities, outcomes of victimization,



Figure 1 Recommendations to Address Male Labor and Sex Trafficking**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The following figure represents a summary of the recommendations found within the literature on both labor and sex trafficking. These highlighted suggestions depict multi-level approaches that could potentially tackle the urgent social and public health issues of trafficking concerning male victims and survivors (See Figure 1).

	Labor Trafficking	Sex Trafficking
Policy	Shift accountability to employers that recruit and employ undocumented laborers (Izcará Palacios, 2022; Izcará Palacios & Yamamoto, 2017).	The legal system should explicitly recognize male victimization in its various forms (Izcará Palacios, 2022; Mariaca Pacheco et al., 2023). Youth aging out of the foster care system require additional support systems in place to reduce their vulnerability (Murphy, 2016).
Training	Government agencies and service providers interacting with this population can implement case-scenario training (Hodge, 2014).	Implement training among frontline personnel to identify and refer male victims to adequate services (Barron & Frost, 2018; Kenny et al., 2023; Mariaca Pacheco et al., 2023; ECPAT-USA, 2013). Foster care service providers can adopt a screening protocol that is inclusive of male minors (Mariaca Pacheco et al., 2023; ECPAT-USA, 2013, Murphy, 2016).
Research	Further research on male labor trafficking within the U.S. and its outcomes is critical to build on necessary services and prevent future victimization. There is little understanding of labor trafficking within the drug trade among U.S. born males. Further research could inform policy changes (Murphy, 2016).	Expand research focused on male victims and survivors in the context of sex trafficking to improve direct services and assistance to the population (Trudeau et al, 2021).
Resources	<p>Housing: Safe homes can be equipped to receive males by developing trauma-informed and wrap-around services (Barron & Frost, 2018; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Kaye, 2018; Mariaca Pacheco et al., 2023; Murphy, 2016).</p> <p>Mental health services: Trained counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists are needed to address the multiplicity of mental health challenges faced by male survivors of sex and labor trafficking (Barron & Frost, 2018; ECPAT-USA, 2013; Hodge 2019; National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center, 2022; Omole, 2016).</p> <p>Legal Services: Victims require support to navigate the legal system. Male victims often need criminal records expunged due to crimes related to their exploitation. A severe distrust of legal systems requires additional support, particularly for those appealing for their immigration status (Hodge, 2018).</p>	

and major gaps within the areas of prevention, protection, rehabilitation and prosecution. The analysis also demonstrated that male victims, particularly young, undocumented foreign-born adults, are victims of labor trafficking in the U.S., especially in industries that require strenuous manual labor. For sex trafficking, males

who are part of a minority group such as the LGBTQ+ community have an increased likelihood of commercial sexual exploitation. Challenges in disclosure among male victims of sex trafficking arise from cultural norms around masculinity, affecting victim identification and support. For labor trafficking survivors, fears of losing their

legal status, having a limited working knowledge of the English language, and having low educational levels increase their likelihood of not disclosing abuses. These findings emphasize the great need for further empirical inquiry to better comprehend the complexities of male trafficking in the U.S., and in so doing, create targeted interventions



that address the multiple current challenges of such crime.

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