



# RESEARCH BRIEF: Dismantling Vulnerabilities - Exploring LGBTQ+ Populations Risks, Challenges, Abuses and Barriers to Identification, Intervention, and the Exiting of Trafficking

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## ABOUT

This research brief synthesizes the existing literature on the vulnerabilities, polyvictimization and barriers faced by LGBTQ+ populations in accessing needed services to exit human trafficking.

## FINDINGS

The research findings illuminate the unique vulnerabilities and systemic barriers confronting LGBTQ+ communities in the United States, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive, diverse, and inclusive interventions and policy reforms to mitigate risks and enhance support mechanisms.

## CONCLUSION

This brief underscores the importance of targeted prevention and interventions, inclusive policies and practices, and increased awareness to effectively support LGBTQ+ individuals who are experiencing or exiting human trafficking.

In the United States (U.S.), the LGBTQ+ community faces a plethora of abuses. Some of these traumatic experiences seem to become risk factors for human trafficking (HT) victimization. While studies have explored the connectivity between some LGBTQ+ challenges and trafficking, there is a significant disparity within this literature. Moreover, the diversity within the gender nonconforming community varies greatly; yet, it is seldom recognized in research studies. Although there is no uniformed approach to measuring prevalence of human trafficking among this population, there is some evidence about how their abuse and social challenges increases their vulnerability to victimization. This research brief highlights key findings of the limited literature on the LGBTQ+ community and their risks, experiences, and challenges to be identified and supported in order to prevent, intervene, and exit human trafficking victimization. Thus, this synthesis of literature aims to establish the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional experiences and traumas that heighten this population's risk for trafficking, and the barriers that prevent their identification to best support their exiting, healing, and inclusion. The SocioEcological framework guiding this

research brief analysis was based on 25 peer-reviewed publications from 2015 to 2024. Additionally, it included 2 data reports<sup>1</sup>

## RISK FACTORS & VULNERABILITIES

### Negative Health Outcomes

Due to the limited availability of research considering the diversity found within the LGBTQ+ populations in the context of human trafficking, these subgroups are generally collapsed under a monolithic experience. Despite limitations resulting from the homogenization of this population, there is literature available which considers their overlapping and shared experiences (Georges, 2023; Boswell et al., 2019; Greeson et al., 2019; Dank et al., 2015; Schwarz & Britton, 2015). LGBTQ+ individuals disproportionately experience several types of abuse when compared to their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts. Evidence points to the fact that the multiplicity of abuses lead to their vulnerability for human trafficking victimization (Alessi et al., 2020; Boswell et al., 2019; Barron & Frost, 2018). Demographics of LGBTQ+ youth demonstrate a higher percentile of negative health outcomes including

sexually transmitted infections, cancers, cardiovascular diseases, and obesity (Dank et al., 2015, 2016; Hafeez et al., 2017; Arrington-Sanders et al., 2022). Moreover, in the context of interpersonal relationships, LGBTQ+ individuals, when compared to gender-conforming individuals, experience greater social rejection played out through harassment, bullying, familial rejection and societal isolation (Alessi et al. 2020; Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019; Boswell et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2015; Musicaro et al., 2017; Nichols, 2018). These negative social encounters lead to negative mental health outcomes such as substance dependency, anxiety, chronic depression, borderline personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal thoughts, and suicide (Dank et al., 2015; Hafeez et al., 2017; Langer, Paul & Belkind, 2020; Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019). Due to this wide range of adverse experiences within the LGBTQ+ communities, their susceptibility to trafficking is greater when compared to their non-LGBTQ+ counterpart groups. Their adverse childhood experiences create higher risks that lead to a runaway status, housing and economic instability. Such social statuses have been well established as risk factors for trafficking

1. A glossary, sourced from the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, is included at the end of the document to clarify terminology encountered in the literature on this topic.



(Boswell et al. 2019; Polaris, 2019; Choi et al., 2015; Nichols, 2018).

### **Familial & Societal Rejection Impact on Homelessness**

LGBTQ+ populations experience negative interpersonal relationships with caretakers and others who they interact with due to their non-conforming-gender-identity, gender expression, or their sexual orientation (Langer, Paul, & Belkind, 2020; Nichols, 2018). These negative interactions are characterized by rejection, isolation, and abuse including emotional, physical, and sexual violence and abuse. As individuals face marginalization throughout their lifetime, this polyvictimization results in LGBTQ+ youths' heightened susceptibility to later revictimizations throughout their lifetimes (Boswell et al. 2019; Musicaro et al., 2017). A 2014 survey of 138 homelessness human service agency providers found that among LGBTQ+ youth, the most prevalent reason for homelessness was being forced out of home or running away as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression (Choi et al. 2015). These interpersonal dynamics are characterized by biases and discriminatory practices that emanate from cultural values that disapprove of those whose expression or gender identities, which are seen as non-conforming and against societal norms (Nichols, 2018).

Unfortunately, another result of these negative interpersonal experiences of rejection, isolation and discrimination result in housing and financial instability as youth find themselves without the social support systems needed to succeed in society (Hogan & Roe-Sepowitz, 2020). Homelessness has been cited as a prevalent issue among LGBTQ+ individuals (Choi et al., 2015;

Dank et al., 2015; Nichols, 2018). Polaris' Report (2019) identified homelessness as a top risk for trafficking victimization. Although there is a limited literature available, it clearly highlights the association of trafficking victimization vulnerability that homelessness creates for LGBTQ+ youth. Additionally, they are overrepresented among diverse homeless populations (Barron & Frost, 2018; Boswell et al. 2019; Hogan & Roe-Sepowitz, 2020; Greeson et al., 2019; Morton & Samuels, 2018). Due to the lack of shelter, LGBTQ+ youth are then more likely to be physically or sexually victimized (Schwarz & Britton, 2015), and forced to meet basic needs through exchanging sex, known as *survival sex* (Dank et al., 2015). These risk factors such as interpersonal conflict, rejection, lack of social support result in financial and housing instability that many times lead youth to alternatives ways of survival.

### **Survival Sex-Pathway or Outcome?**

Studies demonstrate that survival sex is at the intersection of housing and financial instability among LGBTQ+ youth (Dank et al., 2015; Greeson et al., 2019; Nichols, 2018). Yet, it is unclear whether this activity directly leads to trafficking victimization or whether it is an outcome that results after exiting trafficking victimization due to a lack of supporting systems needed to successfully reintegrate back into society (Fehrenbacher et al., 2020). The U.S. federal law has codified any commercial sexual exploitation of a minor through the means of fraud, force or coercion as federal crime under human trafficking law as sex trafficking (TVPA, 2000). Given the lack of direct fraud, force, or coercion involved in survival sex, this activity is many times not considered as part of trafficking victimization. Yet,

*survival sex* when analyzed in the context of risks for abuse among LGBTQ+ youth, raises questions on the unequal social and power dynamics that are at the center of such exchanges between youth and sex buyers. Although more studies are needed to determine these associations, one study demonstrated sex buyers' perpetration of violence to those who exchange sex for goods; especially when dealing with victims of human trafficking. Sex buyers' violence included physical abuse to individuals exchanging sex and refusal of condom use (Richie-Zavaleta, et al., 2023). Thus, some researchers have suggested including *survival sex* into the definition of commercial sexual exploitation (Georges, 2023; Xian, Chock & Dwiggins, 2017; Fehrenbacher et al., 2020). The limits on defining *survival sex* as human trafficking only in the context of youth engagement further constrain the scope of available literature. Whether *survival sex* is a pathway to trafficking or a result of not having enough support when survivors attempt to exit such victimization, addressing the lack of research in this area is greatly needed (Dank et al., 2015; Fehrenbacher et al., 2020). Further investigation can lead to increasing the understanding of the complexities of such activity and its potential association or causation to trafficking victimization.

### **Identification Barriers Among LGBTQ+ Communities**

The identification and interruption of LGBTQ+ populations' trafficking victimization is an urgent social issue that requires immediate attention. Yet, achieving these goals requires understanding and addressing the overabundance of barriers that currently exist. These barriers range from intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional to policy challenges. Lack of self-awareness of victimization status, lack of training and identification protocols among social and medical service providers, and cultural biases lead to discriminatory practices. Monolithic approaches, and the lack of supportive systems translate into obstacles for the

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prevention, intervention, protection, and reintegration of the LGBTQ+ individuals trapped in trafficking (Boswell, 2019; Barron & Frost, 2018; Fehrenbacher, et al., 2020; Forringer-Beal, 2022; Gerassi & Pederson, 2022; Georges, 2023; Hogan & Roe-Sepowitz, 2020; Schwarz & Britton, 2015).

### **Intrapersonal Barriers–Lack of Self-Identification**

The identification of victims of human trafficking becomes further complicated when the paradigm of victimhood narrows this lens excluding LGBTQ+ populations and the recognition of their diversity (Boukli & Renz, 2018; Forringer-Beal, 2022; Schwarz & Britton, 2015). Due to this limited definition and inclusion of LGBTQ+ populations, it leads, on an individual level, to not consider themselves as individuals trapped in trafficking (Fehrenbacher et al., 2020; Boukli & Renz, 2018; Alessi et al., 2020). Additionally, LGBTQ+ populations who have become victims of trafficking may reject the label of victim when imposed upon them. The rejection of this label comes with varying reasons, most of which centered around not fitting the ideal victim paradigm (Fehrenbacher et al., 2020; Gerassi & Skinkis, 2020). Consequently, the LGBTQ+ populations are burdened to advocate for their own victimhood, which limits accessing the needed support to exit victimization (Forringer-Beal, 2022; Fehrenbacher, et al., 2020; Boukli & Renz, 2018). Lastly, like other groups trapped in trafficking victimization, the lack of trust of service providers limits their accessibility to the seldom available services that can support their identification, intervention and reintegration (Gerassi & Pederson, 2022). These negative impacts result in barriers that go beyond the intrapersonal level. Therefore, understanding them is an important step towards creating evidence based approaches to reach these populations.

### **Interpersonal & Institutional Barriers–Lack of Suitable Trainings, Protocols, Understanding of Victimization, and Services for the LGBTQ+ Populations**

On the interpersonal level, social and healthcare service providers and other frontline professionals have an opportunity to intervene through identifying victims, but as the literature widely points out, there is disconnect when it comes to providers having the training to do so (Kenny, Helpingstine, Abreu, & Duberli, 2019; Nichols, 2018). Studies have demonstrated that social service providers who work with homeless youth-serving agencies are likely to come into contact with exploited or sexually trafficked LGBTQ+ populations. Yet, these professionals may operate based on wrong assumptions about characteristics of LGBTQ+ populations, creating a stereotype of trafficking victims that only include a primarily white, cisgender, young woman. This *ideal victim* paradigm also creates hierarchy on who deserves services and who does not (Boswell et al., 2019; Boukli & Renz, 2018; Forringer-Beal, 2022; Nichols, 2018). Research has also shown that the ideal victim paradigm leads to biased daily practices and marginalization of clients and seeing survivors of trafficking as individuals who are devoid of agency (Nichols, 2018).

Similarly to the false victim paradigm is the adoption of a linear approach to services of the LGBTQ+ populations by service providers, which results in missing the identification of such victims (Schwarz & Britton, 2015). As a result, this false paradigm extends beyond who is awarded victimhood under the law, impacting how providers, and law enforcement agents in particular, identify victims and connect them to needed services (Fehrenbacher, et al., 2020). This points toward the general lack of training and knowledge on the LGBTQ+ populations, their needs, and lack of training protocols to identify and suitably support such populations.

These deficiencies only exacerbate the marginalization and the continuation of their victimization (Boswell et al. 2019; Kenny et al., 2019; Schwarz & Britton, 2015; Hogan & Roe-Sepowitz, 2020).

Furthermore, institutional level barriers hinder the identification of LGBTQ+ victims of human trafficking within healthcare and social services. These barriers include a lack of resources to implement effective programs, protocols that lack inclusivity in the services provided, and insufficient partnerships and collaborations needed to provide suitable services and resources (Schwarz & Britton, 2015; Hogan & Roe-Sepowitz, 2020; Dank et al., 2015; Gerassi & Skinkis, 2020; Nichols, 2018). As anti-trafficking measures become increasingly focused toward carceral efforts, survivor-centered services that promote eventual social inclusion receive less funding (Schwarz & Britton, 2015; Fehrenbacher, 2020; Boukli & Renz, 2018). The disparity of social service organizations that are trafficking-specific was highlighted in a content analysis of organizations that encounter trafficked individuals, such as those providing services related to housing, mental health, substance use, legal, healthcare, and employment (Gerassi & Skinkis, 2020). There is an apparent lack of adopted protocols, which can be inclusive to best serve the LGBTQ+ communities (Dank et al., 2015; Gerassi & Skinkis, 2020; Gerassi & Pederson, 2022; Nichols, 2018; Schwarz & Britton, 2015).

Yet, another challenging barrier exists in the context of legal institutions that prosecute criminal behavior. Unfortunately, law enforcement can exacerbate the barriers to identifying victims through the criminalization of LGBTQ+ youth and the arrests of victims (Nichols, 2018; Fehrenbacher et al., 2020; Eyges, 2016). Scholars have highlighted the significant harassment young transgender women receive from police officers, and the reports of harassment by police officers from LGBTQ+ youth; especially of those who identified themselves as



transgender (Fehrenbacher et al., 2020). Additionally, various accounts detail instances of police requiring transwomen to display their genitalia (Eyges, 2016; Fehrenbacher et al., 2020). Such practices create a distrust of authority figures and police, serving as another barrier to identifying these victims and for them to seek help (Dank et al., 2015; Nichols, 2018). Scholars cite how trans women, specifically, are seen as less exploitable by law enforcement, reflecting part of the underlying assumption of LGBTQ+ individuals' agency and willingness to engage in exchanging sex for goods (Fehrenbacher et al., 2020; Eyges, 2016). In the practice of anti-trafficking interventions involving law enforcement, there is a lack of transparency of how connecting services to potential victims is determined following an arrest of someone who exchanges sex for goods (Fehrenbacher et al., 2020; Eyges, 2016; Boswell et al., 2019). Understanding the multiplicity of barriers that currently exist throughout different levels of interconnection can assist in identifying the current gaps and addressing the pressing issues in order to better identify, serve and support LGBTQ+ individuals found in trafficking victimization.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADDRESS CURRENT GAPS AMONG THE PREVENTION & IDENTIFICATION OF LGBTQ+ POPULATIONS:

The following recommendations were mainly identified through this

literature review synthesis. These recommendations are presented based on the different levels of analysis provided by the SocioEcological Model (See Figure 1).

#### **Intrapersonal Level-Increasing Awareness, Development of Inclusive Curriculum for Prevention of Human Trafficking**

A recommendation that can impact the individual level is to implement human trafficking prevention and education curricula throughout schools; especially those that have a higher number of students who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ populations. Curriculum development for prevention of human trafficking should include education on trafficking risks and vulnerabilities, self-advocacy, resources and typologies of human trafficking victimization that is inclusive of the LGBTQ+ populations (Gerassi & Howard, 2019). This preventive approach could lead to individuals identifying their own victimization. Additionally, when organizations that serve these populations, they can utilize gender-affirming, incorporate inclusive symbols and imagery in advertising and in direct practice and protocols. Additionally, resilience and self-advocacy among the LGBTQ+ populations are essential to empower their decision making process and be able to exit their victimization successfully with the right support (Whaling et al., 2020; Greenfield et al., 2021; Gerassi & Skinkis, 2020; Gerassi & Pederson, 2022; Boswell et al. 2019).

#### **Interpersonal & Institutional Level-Increase Scope of Services that Meet the Multiplicity of Needs of the LGBTQ+ Populations**

Adopting protocols aimed at increasing identification and intervention at service junctions is crucial. This includes providing comprehensive educational training, which should not only prioritize inclusivity but also empower medical and service providers to develop self-efficacy in their interactions with potential victims of human trafficking within LGBTQ+ communities (Boswell et al., 2019; Gerassi & Pederson, 2022). Diverse providers must also be attuned to asking specific questions that will help detect victims of trafficking (Kenny et al., 2019; Langer, Paul & Belkind, 2020). Additionally, established institutions that come into contact with potential victims of HT should develop more extensive organizational networks that allow for referrals to community organizations with necessary services. More over, these organizations should specifically advertise the inclusivity and scope of their services (Barron & Frost, 2018; Gerassi & Skinkis, 2020). Also, services need to be centered around gender-affirming guidelines and protocols (Whaling et al., 2020; Greenfield 2021; Gerassi & Skinkis, 2020; Gerassi & Pederson, 2022; Boswell et al. 2019). Lastly, at the institutional level, frameworks that include survivor-centered, trauma-informed, and public health approaches to care, should be utilized as evidence shows success in reaching these diverse populations with



Figure 1. Recommendations for Addressing Current Gaps in the Identification, Intervention, Reintegration and Support of LGBTQ+ Individuals Trapped in Trafficking.



the LGBTQ+ communities (Schwarz & Britton, 2015; Franco, 2022; Whaling et al., 2020).

### **Research & Policy Gaps—Studies that Aim to Understand the Diversity of the LGBTQ+ Populations and Policies that Increase and Support Changes Across All Levels**

In terms of narrowing the current research gaps some recommendations are to differentiate between subgroups of the LGBTQ+ communities, specifically understanding the different experiences between sexual and gender minorities when delving into deeper studies in order to highlight their unique experiences (Georges, 2023). Consistently, the literature available highlights deficits in the knowledge of LGBTQ+ human trafficking and encourages the facilitating of further research; which we recommend includes the intersections and divergences of HT and survival sex and empirically differentiates between the experiences of sexual and gender minorities (Boswell et al. 2019; Gerassi & Pederson, 2022; Fehrenbacher et al. 2020; Greeson et al., 2019; Nichols, 2018; Georges, 2023; Alessi et al., 2020; Morton et al., 2018; Franco, Sunkel & Sherman, 2022).

Additionally, policy development focuses on the multiplicity of needs and inclusiveness of LGBTQ+ individuals are imperative, specifically, a re-evaluation of the ideal victim paradigm within anti-human trafficking policies. Policies that can lead to practices that would not only benefit in the identification but also in addressing the vast needs of LGBTQ+ individuals and other victims of HT that do not fit into this adopted paradigm. Moreover, structurally, anti-poverty measures such as job training, affordable housing, livable wages could be implemented to address macro-level inequalities that currently exist (Hogan & Roe-Sepowitz, 2020; Greeson et al., 2019).

### **CONCLUSION:**

Through synthesizing the limited available literature on LGBTQ+ victimization in the context of human trafficking, this research brief analyzes the heightened vulnerabilities of this population and the barriers to the identification, intervention, reintegration, and support of these individuals. The increased likelihood of the HT victimization of this population was demonstrated through compounding vulnerabilities such as familial and social rejection, negative mental health outcomes, polyvictimization, housing and financial instabilities, and structural biases that do not support such populations. In lieu of the multiple vulnerabilities that are reflected within the LGBTQ+ communities, the literature revealed a significant institutional deficit in resources, such as, gender-affirming care, education, shelter, diversion services, and organizational networks. These deficiencies demonstrate the need for anti-human trafficking efforts and policy to reform its notions of victimhood to better identify and protect LGBTQ+ victims of HT. Consistently, this brief has expressed an urgent need for further scholarship on the prevalence of HT in the LGBTQ+ communities and to address the educational gap for service providers and healthcare professionals to identify the exploitation of this population. These efforts can also prevent further HT victimization among youth if the right support and assistance is provided in due time. ■

### **GLOSSARY:**

#### **Sourced from Human Rights Campaign Foundation**

**Asexual:** Refers to an individual's complete or partial lack of sexual attraction or lack of interest in sexual activity with others.

**Bisexual:** An individual who is either emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually attracted to more than one gender, although this attraction is not necessarily simultaneous, in the same way, or to the same degree. This term

is sometimes used interchangeably with pansexual.

**Cisgender:** Refers to an individual whose gender identity aligns with their biological sex assigned sex at birth

**Gender Nonconforming:** Refers to the behavior or presentation, whether by nature or by choice, does not align with masculine or feminine gender norms.

**LGBTQ+:** An acronym for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer" with a "+" sign to recognize the limitless sexual orientations and gender identities used by members of the LGBTQ+ communities.

**Non-binary:** Refers to an individual who does not identify exclusively as male or female. A non-binary person may identify as falling completely outside these categories, somewhere in between, or as both male and female; while some may identify as transgender it is important to note not all non-binary people do.

**Heterosexual:** Refers to an individual who is primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to the opposite sex.

**SGM:** Sexual and Gender Minority is an acronym used as a shorthand or umbrella term referring to all those who have a non-normative gender or sexual identity.

**Socio-Ecological Model:** A multilevel conceptualization of health that considers the various dynamics between personal and environmental factors that put people at risk (Barner, Okech & Camp, 2017).

**Survival Sex:** also known as transactional sex, is defined as the exchange of sex for money or any material goods (food, shelter, medicine, clothing, and the like) under the own terms of the person exchanging sex (Dank et al. 2015).



**Polyvictimization:** Prolonged or multiple forms of traumatic victimizations (Musicaro, et al., 2017).

**Queer:** An umbrella term used to express a continuum of identities and orientations, including those who do not identify as exclusively straight and those who have gender-expansive identities.

**Transgender:** Someone whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned at birth.

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