



# Stop Trafficking!

# Awareness Advocacy Action

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FOCUS: This month's newsletters explores human trafficking among the LGBTQ+ community.

## Human Trafficking and the LGBTQ+ Community

Traffickers target vulnerable individuals, those who lack significant support networks, are facing financial insecurity, have experienced violence in the past, or are marginalized by society. Those who identify as a sexual and gender minority are among those most vulnerable to human trafficking, especially sex trafficking.

According to [Human Dignity Trust](#), which works in areas around the world where adult, consensual, same-sex intimacy is criminalized, 65 countries had jurisdictions that still criminalize LGBTQ+ people in 2023. In twelve of these countries, the death penalty is a possible sentence for private, consensual same-sex sexual activity. Six countries, Iran, Northern Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and Yemen, implement the death penalty, while the death penalty is legally possible in Afghanistan, Brunei, Mauritania, Pakistan, Qatar, UAE, and Uganda. Even when not enforced, these laws sanction discrimination and can lead to violence and harassment.

For these reasons, little is known about human trafficking in the LGBTQ+ communities in many countries throughout the world. Most research and information on the impact of human trafficking in these communities is from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, where antidiscrimination laws exist, although discrimination still exists. In these countries, identifying as a sexual minority can create barriers to legal employment opportunities, housing and shelter, the provision of services such as health care, and protection by law enforcement.

Please click [here](#) for a list of definitions for terminology relating to LGBTQ+ identities & people, sexualities, and genders. This list may not be comprehensive.



*In Afghanistan, the re-emergence of the Taliban has left LGBTQ+ individuals, especially young people who are more mobile, at higher risks of both homelessness and sex trafficking. Due to being left out of social services and coercion and fear due to their sexual orientation, they fear passing through checkpoints or going into a passport office. Therefore, they seek informal methods to escape Afghanistan and, consequently, face an increased risk of trafficking. In addition, the Taliban prohibits women from traveling without a mahram, a family member with whom marriage would be considered permanently unlawful, which is often a male member of the family, leaving young lesbians and bisexual women not able to escape exploitative situations on their own.*

US Department of State, 2022



# Awareness

## Barriers to Identification

The image many people have of sex trafficking is that of a young woman being trafficked by a heterosexual male. This societal misperception of who is a victim of human trafficking leads to a lack of understanding that those who identify as lesbian or gay, bisexual and transgender boys or girls, or any gender minority are victims of this crime.

There are barriers to identifying trafficking and sexual abuse among LGBTQ+ youth, which may start with language. Service providers and law enforcement need to follow the lead of the person they are speaking with, who may describe their experiences in terms such as “in the life,” being a part of the “underground street economy,” or other terminology. Otherwise, the victim may not feel heard and disengage from support services.

At times, providers may overlook behaviors and indicators of human trafficking in youth who identify as LGBTQ+ that they would otherwise respond to in cisgender girls. This leads to the under-identification of human trafficking among gender-nonconforming youth, leading to less access to services for these victims.

Moreover, LGBTQ+ youth are often perceived as engaging in commercial sex on their own free will, regardless of their age. Survival sex, trading sex to meet one’s needs, which many, especially homeless victims, are forced into, is considered by law human trafficking for youth under 18 years of age.

Some victims also do not identify as being victims of human trafficking or sexual abuse due to fear of being “outed” as LGBTQ+. For some of these victims, the impact of being “outed” could lead to harassment both among their age peers and by their family, and even being evicted from their homes. For those living in a survivor community, there is a fear of being forced to leave, especially if it is a faith-based community. Therefore, some victims of human trafficking feel it is better to continue with the abuse of trafficking than be “outed.”

Click [here](#) to learn more.

## How are LGBTQ+ Youth More Vulnerable to Human Trafficking?

Youth and persons who identify as LGBTQ+ face an increased risk of being rejected by their families. [Freedom Network](#) reports that 30 percent of LGBTQ+ youth report physical violence from family members after disclosure. Unstable or abusive families that express intolerance or hatred toward the LGBTQ+ community and reject sexual minority family members increase the likelihood of sexual minorities being trafficked.

Discrimination may also lead to fewer employment opportunities. This leads to higher rates of economic instability and homelessness, often leading to desperation to meet their basic needs. Of particular concern are those who identify as transgender. In need of money for hormone treatments, they are especially vulnerable and at risk of trafficking. Traffickers exploit these vulnerabilities, offering housing, a sense of community and protection, and so grooming the person to engage in commercial sex.

Once an individual who identifies as a sexual minority is involved in sex for profit, it is difficult for them to reach out for help and assistance, especially those who have been mistreated in the past due to sexual orientation. Traffickers specifically target transgender people because they think that most transgender people will not contact law enforcement. The underreporting of sex trafficking amongst LGBTQ+ populations make it difficult to understand the specific nature of trafficking and the total number of people who have been affected by it worldwide.

Polaris reports that LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented in detention for prostitution-related offenses and report higher levels of police misconduct than their straight peers. It is important to remember that under federal law, any person under the age of 18 who trades sex for anything of value is a victim of trafficking – no force, fraud, or involvement by a third-party exploiter is necessary.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

*“LGBTQI+ children and young adults can be especially vulnerable to trafficking in persons for forced labor and sexual exploitation. First, their high vulnerability arises from their young age, as they are assumed to be easily manipulated and unable to protect themselves. Second, their LGBTQI+ identity increases their vulnerability, as they are often marginalized in society and ostracized by friends and relatives who may force them out of their home. This combination is particularly appealing to traffickers who seek persons who are at the margins of societies and are less protected.”*

UNODC, 2020



## Law Enforcement

Survivors of human trafficking who identify as LGBTQ+ are less likely than other survivors to access resources to escape trafficking and receive assistance and necessary services. This is often due in part to discrimination by law enforcement and the criminal justice system.

There is a significant history of mistreatment towards the LGBTQ+ community by law enforcement, both globally and in the United States. This deters anyone identifying as a gender minority to depend on law enforcement and the criminal justice system for help.

Law enforcement may be trained on human trafficking, but these trainings often focus primarily on the sex trafficking of girls and women. These misperceptions of who is a victim will distort the lens through which law enforcement encounters and interacts with trafficking victims who do not fit this gender identity. Police have even been reported as saying that there is no such thing as the trafficking of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Those who identify as transgender are more often perceived by law enforcement as offenders and perpetrators rather than victims when they are trafficked for sex or in forced labor. These misperceptions, along with the lack of trust in police, may contribute to ongoing exploitation. Also, because of the known history of police brutality concerning people who identify as trans, traffickers specifically target transgender people, knowing that they probably will not contact the police.

Survivors who identify as LGBTQ+ are disproportionately represented in detention centers for offenses committed while trafficked compared to their age-related peers.

Law enforcement agencies and service providers have benefitted from partnerships with organizations that have expertise on LGBTQ+ issues to expand their service referral networks and learn how to develop inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ victims of human trafficking.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

## Homelessness

In a [2023 report from Covenant House](#), LGBTQ+ young people experience a much higher risk of homelessness than their peers. Once on the street, they face additional hardships because of stigma and discrimination. Covenant House observed that this is a reality for homeless LGBTQ+ young people across the six countries where Covenant House operates: the United States, Canada, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua. Indigenous youth and youth of color are particularly at risk.

Often, the lack of housing is due to rejection by family members or discrimination in placements and foster care. On the streets, they often turn to the sex trade to survive and for a sense of acceptance.

*1 in 5 transgender individuals are refused housing.  
1 in 3 are turned away from shelters.  
42% are forced to stay in the wrong gender shelter.*

*Freedom Network*

## Child Welfare

LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system, and they are there often for the same reasons as those in their age peer group. Unfortunately, even in the foster care system, they often continue to experience the same rejection or mistreatment that caused them to enter the system.



In a recent [report from the National LGBTQ+ Health Education Center](#), LGBTQ+ youth are about three times more likely than straight youth to be placed in foster care, and more than half of these report feeling safer on the street than in their foster home. Many turn to survivor sex to support themselves outside of foster placement.

Sixty-three percent of young people who have been victims of sex trafficking have previously been involved in the child welfare system and disproportionately identify as LGBTQ+. This is even more so for sex trafficking victims who identify as LGBTQ+ and are people of color.

*“Traffickers frequently target characteristics disproportionately present within the LGBTQ+ population, such as a lack of strong support networks, financial strain, a history of violence, and general social marginalization... Other groups most vulnerable to trafficking around the world include people without homes, young people in foster care, and sex workers, each of whom is disproportionately comprised of LGBTQ+ people.”*

*Thomson Reuters, 2020*

## Shelters

When LGBTQ+ youth are forced to leave their homes or need a place to stay, some shelters openly deny them access because of discrimination. Creating safe shelters for LGBTQ+ youth makes them less vulnerable to traffickers who may use shelter as a control mechanism.

Training staff not within the community to understand the issues and hiring LGBTQ+ staff with lived experience helps create an inclusive environment.

Some recommendations include asking the person about their housing preference and how they wish to be addressed using gender-affirming pronouns. For example, a person who identifies as a trans boy may feel more comfortable in a setting with girls. The person should also be encouraged to give feedback on what clothes and hygiene products they need instead of assuming they will need specific products, such as tampons.

## Service Needs

Youth who identify as LGBTQ+ and who are trafficking victims or victims of sexual assault sometimes do not receive the help they need from service providers or healthcare professionals, most of whom accommodate cis-gender girls who are most often identified as trafficking victims. These youth report that they are sometimes treated as though their interactions in the sex trade are their choice. At times, the provider will not affirm their gender identity and try to define the person's identity for them. Youths also report being refused care by providers because of bias.

Sexual minorities may be made to feel uncomfortable in a residential facility for trafficking survivors, especially if the facility is religiously affiliated. Overall, general social services most often cater to heteronormative populations.

All services should be trauma-informed, provide physical and emotional safety, and recognize each person as an individual with unique needs. Moreover, all programs, housing, public systems, advocates, and partners must understand the intersectional identities and support of youth of color in meeting their individual needs.

Importantly, as with all youth, there should not be an exclusive focus on their victimization or their racial or gender identity in service provision, but rather a recognition of the youth as a whole person.

[Youth Law](#) provides the following recommendations, which are the same as anyone experiencing exploitation and include:

- Short-term and long-term affordable, safe housing options
- Health care, including reproductive health care and gender-affirming medical services (such as access to hormone treatment)
- Mental health care
- Financial assistance to meet basic needs, including food, clothing, hygiene products, childcare products if needed, and transportation
- Employment and education opportunities free of discrimination
- Peer support with LGBTQ+ individuals who have experienced sexual exploitation
- Community-based support groups for LGBTQ+ youth impacted by sexual exploitation
- Legal advocacy, for example, to change name and gender markers
- Gender-affirming care for youth of all genders, including access to clothing, cosmetics, and pronoun usage that aligns with the youth's gender identity or expression
- Substance use treatment programs
- Extracurricular activities aligned with interests.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

## Employment Discrimination

Employment discrimination based on sexual orientation results in economic insecurity among LGBTQ+ youth. For LGBTQ+ youth who are experiencing homelessness, it may be even more challenging to find employment without having clean clothes, a permanent address, a high school degree, or while under the legal age of employment.

A 2021 report by the [Trevor Project](#), a nonprofit in the United States with the mission to prevent suicide among LGBTQ+ youth, found that more than one-third of LGBTQ+ youth who are employed experienced workplace discrimination, with transgender and nonbinary youth reporting significantly greater rates of discrimination. This often leads these youth to leave these jobs, making them vulnerable to human trafficking.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

### Criminalizing Gender Identity

*Those who have been forced into same-sex sexual exploitation tend to be labelled as criminals rather than acknowledged as victims, violating the United Nations Trafficking Protocol, and preventing LGBTQ+ victims of trafficking from exercising their rights and seeking help.*

UNODC, 2020

## The Freedom Network Training Institute

Access to safe and affordable long-term housing is critical for survivors of human trafficking. Affordable housing programs, including transitional and long-term, often have long waitlists and may restrict eligibility based on immigration status, criminal history, rental history, or current income. The housing landscape is genuinely complex and can be challenging to navigate.

[The Freedom Network Training Institute](#) (FNTI) provides training and resources on housing options for survivors of human trafficking. This includes guidance for advocates accessing appropriate emergency, transitional, or long-term housing options for survivors. FNTI's Housing Training and Technical Assistance Project consists of a wide array of expert consultants, including a Survivor Advisory Panel, who support the creation and delivery of content.



Freedom Network USA

## Nonconforming Youth and Homelessness

LGBTQ+ individuals experience high rates of homelessness, have a heightened vulnerability of being exploited, and are often excluded from housing programs. This webinar discusses the challenges that LGBTQ+ survivors face in accessing safe and stable housing and explores housing models and practices to enhance access to housing for individuals from the LGBTQ+ community. Please click [here](#) to view this webinar.

### Exploitation and Gender

Please click [here](#) to access the 2023 report *Exploitation and Gender: Increasing the Visibility of CIS male, Transgender, and Gender Nonconforming Youth*. Authors: David Perry, Danna Basson, Selena Cuevas, Charlie Tebow.

## Recognizing & Addressing LGBTQ+ Barriers in Rural & Urban Human Trafficking

The LGBTQ+ community is a broad community that encompasses folks from various racial backgrounds, abilities, faiths, genders, socioeconomic statuses, and nearly every other identifiable way of grouping people.

As we know, anyone can be a survivor of trafficking, including LGBTQ+ folks who exist across a spectrum of marginalization. Compounding factors, including societal ostracization and poverty, can lead to increased vulnerabilities that can culminate into human trafficking, homelessness, and anxiety related to traditional service implementation models.

There is an even further divide in the effectiveness of service provision and outreach in rural and urban areas. This webinar offers a deep dive into the unique situations of LGBTQ+ people and how they may lead to trafficking, as well as the nuances in rural versus urban service implementation for queer survivors seeking housing stability.

Please click [here](#) to view this informative YouTube video from Survive and Thrive.

## Organizations who work with trafficked and homeless LGBTQI+ people—this list is not inclusive:

### Ark of Freedom Alliance (USA)

To prevent the trafficking and exploitation of vulnerable children and young adults through education, mentoring, housing, mental health services and economic empowerment.

### Bob's House of Hope (USA)

Bob's House of Hope is the first safe house in the country for male survivors, 18 and up, of commercial sexual exploitation, also known as human trafficking or sex trafficking. We are the only residential facility to include Ranch Hands Rescue's innovative Equine and Animal Assisted Counseling intervention.

### Human Trafficking Hotline

### Life Way Network

Life Way Network envisions a world in which human trafficking is abolished and every survivor is strong, connected and free. Life Way Network joins the global movement against human trafficking by providing safe housing for women who have been trafficked and offering education about trafficking to the general public.

### Refuge America

Refuge America is dedicated to empowering and supporting LGBTQ+ displaced individuals and refugees in rebuilding their lives in new communities while promoting acceptance and understanding worldwide.

### The Ali Forney Center

The Ali Forney Center's mission is to provide housing for young homeless LGBTQ+ people and individual case plans to help them find employment, continue their education, and learn the tools needed to live independently.

## **How Sex Trafficking Affects the LGBTQ Community**

*Often, sex trafficking focuses on women and young girls. One of several vital ways sex traffickers prey on those within the LGBTQ community is homelessness.*

*Homelessness is one of the critical avenues a sex trafficker uses to lure in victims.*

*Once living on the street, the vulnerability to human trafficking can increase significantly. The risks of sex trafficking to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people are poorly understood.*

*Please click [here](#) to watch this episode of The 411 Live with a talk with Sandra Zapata, Counseling & Advocacy Coordinator for the Milwaukee LGBT Community Center, about how sex trafficking affects the LGBTQ community.*



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