



Stop Trafficking!

Awareness Advocacy Action

Anti-Human Trafficking Newsletter • December 2025 • Vol. 23 • No. 12

FOCUS: The focus of this month's newsletter is human trafficking among at risk adults including the elderly and persons with disabilities.

An emerging form of human trafficking is targeting often overlooked “at-risk adults”. This term typically includes individuals who are 65 and older, adults 18 and older with some form of incapacitation, such as Alzheimer’s or dementia, or residents of long-term care facilities. The exploitation of at-risk adults involves profiting from their vulnerability through the use of force, fraud, and coercion. This often takes the form of “benefits trafficking” or exploitation within unlicensed personal care homes.

Some states have expanded the definition of elder abuse to include financial exploitation by family members or caregivers, social isolation by guardians, overmedication to maintain compliance, and the depletion of their hard-earned assets. These are all considered components of human trafficking. The trafficking of at-risk adults often intersects with domestic violence, sexual assault, and other forms of abuse.

Vulnerabilities

Older adults and disabled adults are considered one of the most vulnerable populations. They may have accumulated benefits such as Social Security benefits, food stamps, and retirement benefits, which also make them attractive targets.

However, some may be more susceptible to exploitation by traffickers than others. Vulnerabilities such as poverty and homelessness can create a desperate situation where individuals are targeted with false promises of better lives. Some elderly adults may experience domestic violence, neglect, or mistreatment at home that drives them to seek alternative living arrangements, making them vulnerable to traffickers who offer a false sense of security and care. Older adults are also less likely to report instances of abuse.

Mental health challenges can be exploited by traffickers seeking individuals who may struggle with decision-making or seeking help.

Moreover, some elderly and disabled adults cannot defend or advocate for themselves. It's crucial for society to play an active role in protecting these vulnerable populations by providing support, resources, and education and by advocating for policies that address these issues.

Each state defines the age of an elder differently, and some states do not include a disabled adult as a “protected class”. According to the United States Census Bureau, “by 2060, nearly one in four Americans is projected to be an older adult,” making up about 23% of the population.” It is difficult to determine the number of disabled adults.



Awareness

After several cases of human trafficking were brought to light in the state, the [Pennsylvania Coalitions Against Domestic Violence](#) published an educational flyer on human trafficking, exploitation, and abuse of older adults, which may present as:

- Benefits trafficking- withholding food stamps, social security benefits, Medicaid, veterans' benefits in exchange for sex, drugs, money, or as a tool of coercion.
- Profiting from the sale of explicit pictures of an older adult without their consent.
- Forcing the older adult to provide childcare without payment or not providing appropriate living conditions or food.
- Threatening an older adult's independence if they don't comply with demands for sexual activity.
- Financially exploiting the older adult by abusing their Power of Attorney or Guardianship rights and misusing the older adult's money and assets.
- Sexually exploiting an older adult in exchange for drugs, money, or something else of value.

Benefits Trafficking

[Benefits Trafficking](#) is the systematic recruitment, harboring, neglect, and financial exploitation of an elder or disabled adult who receive government benefits such as Social Security, Veteran's Benefits, Medicaid, and Medicare, food stamps or EBT, the electronic system that allows a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participant to pay for food using SNAP benefits. A [report published by the National Institutes of Health \(NIH\)](#) in January 2024 states that approximately 23 states have identified that Benefits Trafficking is also occurring in their state.

While Benefits Trafficking is a fundamental civil rights violation, it is also a growing public health issue. Victims of Benefits Trafficking are often neglected and at-risk adults who have fallen through the cracks of various mental health systems, are unhoused, and no longer have a social support system in place. This area of human trafficking is unresearched, and its prevalence is largely unknown outside of the few entities working in this space.

"We're discovering older adults are being trafficked for their Social Security benefits, veterans' benefits, labor, sex, yes, sex, and possibly body parts. One example of how it happens is they're being discharged from hospitals to a licensed home where a bed is left open. The following morning, they're moved to a bed or basement in an unlicensed address, or they're sold to a different owner."

[Jacke L. Schroeder, LCSW-C, Baltimore City Health Department's Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program](#), Director of SAFE: Stop Abuse of Elders

The 2024 report from the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, [Nothing About Us Without Us: Human Trafficking and Persons with Disabilities](#), highlights how human traffickers often take advantage of persons in vulnerable situations, including individuals who lack access to services and programs or rely on the assistance of others.

Among this group of potential victims are persons with disabilities, who represent about 16 percent of the world's population, or 1.3 billion people, according to the [World Health Organization](#). Some people have a disability from birth; others experience disability later in their lifetime, with some disabilities lifelong and others temporary.

The authors note that when research about persons with disabilities is conducted, it rarely addresses additional intersecting identities such as age, race, sex, and sexual orientation, and economic status.

Persons with disabilities are at increased risk of being targeted by traffickers, while the experience of being trafficked can lead to or exacerbate existing disabilities.

Persons with disabilities who receive financial assistance may be exploited for those benefits by a “caregiver”. Stealing government benefits provides an added incentive for traffickers to target persons with disabilities.

The terms abuse, exploitation, and trafficking are often used interchangeably when referring to victimization against older adults, but they may mean different things depending upon the situation, and have different legal definitions.



Advocacy

Human Trafficking, Exploitation and Abuse of Older Adults

It is essential to recognize that human trafficking and other types of victimization don't occur in isolation. Instead, there is a marked overlap in the pattern of behaviors that both abusers and traffickers use to exert power and control over a victim, as well as in the impact survivors may experience.

Recognizing the intersection of domestic violence, sexual assault, and trafficking is vital in understanding the challenges faced by survivors and victims. This understanding becomes even more critical when we consider the distinct needs and experiences of those adults with disabilities and those aged 60 and above. To find out more, please click [here](#).

Unlicensed Care Homes

Benefits Trafficking often occurs when a person is living in an unlicensed personal care home, which are usually more profitable than a licensed home due to regulation requirements.

The at-risk adult is recruited by a trafficker from the hospital. The trafficker usually has one licensed care home and multiple other homes that are unlicensed. The victim is first sent to the licensed home and then transferred to an unlicensed home, creating an opening in the licensed home for the next victim. The unlicensed facility is often operated by family or friends of the trafficker. Residents may also be transferred from one unlicensed care home to another to avoid detection by both law enforcement and the licensing regulatory authorities.

Traffickers also may “sell” the victims to other owners and operators of unlicensed personal care homes. If a victim receives a larger monthly benefit amount, the trafficker will sell the victim to another unlicensed care home for a partial monthly amount. To learn more, please click [here](#).

Signs of Unlicensed Care Homes

The following [list includes signs](#) that the resident may be in an unlicensed care home. This list is not inclusive:

- Chains on the refrigerator
- Residents are locked in rooms.
- Residents look malnourished and neglected.
- Residents are coached on what to say.
- Residents receive fewer than three meals a day.
- Residents are required to provide benefits.
- Resident food stamps are provided to the operator of the home, but the food provided does not match the resident's dietary needs.



Intimate Partner Violence in Later Life

A [statement](#) by the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence defines intimate partner violence in later life (IPVILL) as the physical, financial, sexual, and/or emotional abuse of an individual aged 60 and older by a current or former intimate partner, spouse, or family member. Older adults experience various types of domestic abuse; however, the impact can be compounded by implicit and explicit societal biases regarding older adults, actual or perceived mental health issues, and/ or people with disabilities. These biases leave older adults more vulnerable to abuse and trafficking by exploitation.

Variations in State Laws

While all 50 states have laws criminalizing human trafficking, exploitation, and coercion inherent in benefit trafficking align with the principles of human trafficking, not all states explicitly consider benefit trafficking as human trafficking in their definitions. Specific definitions and elements required for a conviction on this offense can vary.

Some states may address benefits trafficking as a separate crime, such as theft, financial exploitation, or abuse of older adults and individuals with disabilities, rather than explicitly as a subset of human trafficking. Other states have expanded their definitions of human trafficking to include activities like purchasing, benefiting, or profiting from exploitation, which could potentially encompass benefit trafficking.

In some states, a disabled adult is treated the same as a child in the case of human trafficking. In the cases of adults, force, fraud, or coercion must be proven, but not in the cases of children, and these states, disabled adults.

In 2009, the [U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#) brought a case involving Henry's Turkey Service, which exploited 32 intellectually disabled men at a farm in Atalissa, Iowa. For more than 30 years, the men endured physical and mental abuse and received virtually no pay. The jury awarded the men what at the time was the largest-ever award in an employment-discrimination case – \$240 million – although it was later reduced to \$1.6 million due to a federal cap in the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA)

was promulgated in part as a reaction to the Supreme Court's decision in [United States v. Kozminski](#), 487 U.S. 931 (1988), a case involving two men with intellectual disabilities held in what justices referred to as "slave-like" conditions on a farm. In this case, the Court held that the law banning "involuntary servitude" was limited to circumstances involving "the compulsion of services by the use or threatened use of physical or legal coercion."

However, Congress subsequently passed the TVPA, which recognized that psychological coercion and threats of nonviolent coercion can be every bit as powerful as physical force in overcoming the will of targeted individuals.

TIP Report

The Trafficking In Persons (TIP) Report continues to enhance its coverage of the intersection of persons with disabilities and human trafficking, with the 2023 TIP Report referencing persons with disabilities in 65 country narratives, up from about 50 in the 2022 TIP Report. This intersection was also a *Topic of Special Interest* in the 2024 TIP Report. These references also highlighted the existence or lack of specialized services for persons with disabilities who are victims of trafficking, and the challenges faced by persons with physical or intellectual disabilities.

Invisible Victims

This paper provides an overview of the existing links between disability and trafficking in human beings, how persons living with disability are affected by trafficking, and to what extent legal standards, policy frameworks, and anti-trafficking measures integrate concerns associated with disabilities.

This analysis is approached from four distinct perspectives: disability as an enhanced vulnerability factor that traffickers target; disability as a feature of exploitation; disability because of trafficking and exploitation; and disability of trafficking survivors as a factor in accessing justice, protection, employment, health, and rehabilitation services.

Finally, the paper presents a series of recommendations and potential strategies aimed at elevating awareness and prioritizing the disability dimension within efforts to combat human trafficking.



Housing Older Survivors of Human Trafficking

This webinar from the Freedom Network discusses the intersection and importance of serving older human trafficking survivors in need of housing. It also addresses the unique needs and challenges



faced by older survivors and ways providers may accommodate these needs. Please click [here](#) to view this webinar.

Locked Away: Human Trafficking of At-Risk Adults

Please click [here](#) to view this webinar by the California Elder Justice Coalition.

Adult Protective Services



To obtain the contact information for Adult Protective Services in your area, call the Eldercare Locator, a government-sponsored

national resource line, at 1-800-677-1116 or visit the [website](#)

Nothing About Us Without Us

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High school students across the United States are invited to participate in a short video contest responding to the prompt: *What Would You Do?* to help prevent human trafficking.

STOP HUMAN TRAFFICKING: PATHWAYS TO PREVENTION

High School Video Contest

Win \$1,000 for 1st place, \$750 for 2nd and \$500 for 3rd!

Deadline for video submissions:
MARCH 1, 2026

www.alliancetoendhumantrafficking.org/high-school-contest



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