

Stop Trafficking!

Awareness Advocacy Action

Anti-Human Trafficking Newsletter • February 2026 • Vol. 24 • No. 2

FOCUS: The month's newsletter focuses on the trafficking of Black women and girls and the response of Black women survivors.

Human trafficking impacts people across all demographics; however, inequalities in society make Black women and girls particularly vulnerable. These survivors confront significant challenges fueled by racism, sexism, and systemic oppression, creating substantial obstacles to their pursuit of justice and healing.

Systemic Racism & Human Trafficking

In June 2021, the United States Department of State Office to Monitor and Combat Human Trafficking in Persons released a statement entitled [Acknowledging Historical and Ongoing Harm: The Connections between Systemic Racism and Human Trafficking](#) which presented data that indicated that globally, human traffickers disproportionately target those who are vulnerable due to socioeconomic or political discriminatory policies, and who are often people of color or part of a racial minority.

Advocates, survivors, and other experts have found that deeply ingrained racial biases and stereotypes, which were created to dehumanize specific racial communities and justify their exploitation and exclusion, significantly impede progress in anti-trafficking efforts. These biases also lead to racially contrasting assumptions about who is a trafficker and who should have access to victim protection and services.

These stereotypes, for instance, influence the communities' law enforcement target for anti-trafficking operations, the credibility the criminal justice system assigns to victims, and the willingness of individuals to recognize their experiences as exploitation and to seek help.

Traffickers, on the other hand, exploit these racial biases and stereotypes to their advantage. They integrate these biases into their strategies to reduce their own risk of getting caught and traffickers admitting that, if caught, they will probably receive a lighter sentence if the victim is a Black girl or woman. This, in turn, increases the risk that law enforcement will improperly penalize victims.

The existence of exclusionary practices, such as redlining, lending discrimination, and restrictions on high-paying jobs, which prevent specific racial communities from achieving financial stability and building generational wealth, provides traffickers with ample opportunity to offer appealing alternatives.

The public perception of people who have survived sex trafficking often does not reflect the reality of who is actually trafficked in the U.S. The real facts:

Black women make up 40% of people who have survived sex trafficking, while Black youth comprise 51% of all prostitution arrests for those under age 18—more than any other racial group.

*Please click [here](#) to view *Shifting the Narrative & Centering Black Survivors of Sex Trafficking*.*





Awareness

Challenges Faced by Black Survivors

Criminalization versus Support

Black survivors of human trafficking are often treated as criminals due to systemic racial bias. They are frequently misidentified as perpetrators. As with many victims of human trafficking, they are often forced to commit crimes by their traffickers, such as theft or possession of drugs, and have a criminal record for these crimes. They are frequently convicted of prostitution, despite being victims of sex trafficking.

The adultification of Black girls often leads them to be viewed as less innocent and more adult-like, resulting in them being criminalized rather than seen as victims. Black girls are arrested for prostitution-related offenses at [rates 4.5 times higher than white youth](#). This criminalization may occur due to these harmful stereotypes and a lack of understanding of trafficking dynamics.

Over-policing and stereotyping the adultification and over-sexualization of Black women and girls contribute to the perception of them as criminals, leading to black girls being arrested for prostitution-related offenses at much higher rates than their white counterparts. Responses to survivors have often been punitive, compounding trauma rather than prioritizing their safety and healing.

Support systems for survivors need to be trauma-informed and prioritize healing over punitive measures, with resources like the National Human Trafficking Hotline offering a path to support.

Systemic Barriers

Black survivors often face systemic barriers to justice, including unequal application of laws, discriminatory attitudes, and a lack of access to resources.

A majority of states have [Safe Harbor laws](#) that recognize youth involved in commercial sexual exploitation as victims, not offenders, aiming to provide support to the victims who need protection and services, instead of punishment for a “criminal”. Safe harbor laws are designed to provide immunity or diversion from the juvenile and criminal justice system for crimes committed as a direct result of being trafficked, such as prostitution, and thus protect victims of human trafficking from criminalization.

Moreover, safe harbor laws mandate access to trauma-informed care, which includes services like safe housing, mental health care, and substance abuse treatment; however, the services provided may not be culturally competent or affirming and may fail to meet the specific needs of Black survivors.

Most states also have “affirmative defense” laws, which provide trafficking victims a defense for any offense related to their victimization. Affirmative defense laws allow survivors to show that their actions, such as self-defense or engagement in criminalized activities, were directly tied to their victimization so that criminal records may be vacated or expunged.

A few states also have or are considering “survivor justice” laws that allow courts to take into consideration a survivor’s experiences of gender-based violence, like domestic violence or intimate

partner violence, as mitigating factors in those cases. We must advocate for strengthening and expanding these laws in all states and ensure that survivors are given opportunities to heal rather than face punishment.

We not only need these laws in all states, but we also need legal officials to understand how trafficking works in practice and the actions that surround it, including grooming and abuse. Child welfare personnel and judges may lack resources and training, hindering their ability to properly implement these laws. Racial bias and lack of culturally competent support services often undermine these protections for Black girls..

Marginalization in the Anti-trafficking Movement

Historically, the voices of Black survivors have been ignored within the anti-trafficking movement, resulting in a severe lack of funding, resources, and support tailored to the specific needs and experiences of Black survivors. A lack of representation and understanding also leads to services that are not culturally competent and may not address the particular compounding oppressions Black survivors face. There is a need to create spaces for survivors from marginalized and underserved populations to contribute and lead while being careful not to assume people of the same ethnic background have the same beliefs or cultural practices.

Vulnerability Due to Socioeconomic Factors

Historical and ongoing discrimination can lead to higher levels of poverty and fewer opportunities in communities of color, making individuals more susceptible to exploitation. Black communities experience disproportionately high rates of poverty and lack of economic opportunities due to a legacy of systemic racism, and this financial desperation makes individuals more likely to be vulnerable to both labor and sex trafficking. Black people are more likely to experience housing instability or homelessness, involvement in the child welfare system, or unaddressed mental or behavioral health concerns, vulnerabilities that put them at risk for trafficking.

Black children are disproportionately represented in the foster care system. Black girls make up 23 percent of girls in the foster care system, while they are only 15% of the population nationally. Moreover, the tendency to treat Black girls as more sexually mature than their peers contributes to their vulnerability.

Traffickers often admit that trafficking Black women is perceived to carry less legal risk than trafficking white women. Traffickers acknowledge that they believe trafficking Black women will result in less prison time than trafficking white women. This perception not only highlights the devaluation of Black lives and the risks faced by Black women but also highlights the broader systemic failures in holding traffickers accountable.

Advocacy

Black women survivors of human trafficking are working to end both sex and labor trafficking by creating support programs, advocating for policy changes, and raising public awareness. Several of these programs are included below.

St. Josephine Bakhita

February 8 is the Feast Day of St. Josephine Bakhita in the Catholic Church. Josephine was born in the Daju village of Olgossa in Darfur in 1869 and was kidnapped at the age of 7 and enslaved by Arab slave traders. The terrified girl was bought and sold at least two times over the next few months and forced to walk hundreds of miles on foot to a slave market in Al-Ubayyid in south-central Sudan.

One of her early captors forced her to serve as a maid. As punishment for clumsiness, she was beaten so severely that she was incapacitated for a month and was sold again when she recovered. Another owner, a Turkish general, gave Josephine to his wife and mother-in-law, who would beat her daily. She and other enslaved women were forced to undergo a traditional Sudanese practice that left her permanently scarred with 114 patterns cut into her skin and rubbed with salt and flour. Of that traumatic mutilation, she reportedly said, “I thought I would die, especially when salt was poured in the wounds...it was by a miracle of God I didn’t die. He had destined me for better things.” Over the next decade of enslavement, Josephine was passed from owner to owner, bought and sold so many times that she forgot her birth name. At some point during her captivity, she was given the name Bakhita, which is Arabic for “fortunate.” At one point, she was purchased by the Italian Vice Consul, Callisto Legani, who brought her to Italy. In 1889, Italian courts ruled that she was a free woman, as slavery was illegal.

Upon regaining her freedom, Bakhita was introduced to the Catholic faith by the Canossian Sisters in Venice and was baptized in 1890, receiving the Christian name Josephine. She entered the Canossian Sisters in 1896 and dedicated her life to service, dying on February 8, 1947. Josephine was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1992 and canonized a Saint in 2000. She is the Patron Saint of Victims and Survivors of Human Trafficking, and her Feast Day in the Catholic Church is on February 8, which is also designated as the International Day of Prayer to Stop Human Trafficking. Please click [here](#) to view this one-minute video on St. Josephine Bakhita.



Chrystul Kizer, a 16-year-old Black girl, met Randall Volar, a 33-year-old White male, on Backpage. Volar abused and trafficked Kizer and other underage Black girls. When he was arrested on child sexual assault charges, police found many videos featuring underage Black girls, including Kizer. Nevertheless, he was released the same day, and the court summons to return him never arrived.

While free on bail, Kizer, now 17, shot and killed Volar while trying to escape. She was charged as an adult with first-degree intentional homicide, which carries a mandatory life sentence. Kizer invoked a Wisconsin statute that provides trafficking victims with "an affirmative defense for any offense committed as a direct result of" the trafficking. Prosecutors argued that the affirmative defense did not apply and alleged that Kizer shot Volar not as a direct result of the trafficking but because she wanted to steal his car. Meanwhile, the judge in the case ruled that the term "any offense" only applied to commercial sex crimes covered by Wisconsin's human trafficking law, not its child trafficking law.

In 2024, Kizer made a strategic decision to plead guilty to one felony count of second-degree reckless homicide, which ensured she would not receive a life sentence. She was sentenced to 11 years in prison, with more than a year and a half of time already served, plus 5 years of extended supervision.

Wisconsin v. Kizer is a landmark case, marking the first time the trafficking victim affirmative defense has been raised in a violent crime case in Wisconsin and likely in any other U.S. state with a similar law.



Evelyn Chumbow is the advocacy and survivor leadership director at the Human Trafficking Legal Center. She is a survivor of child labor trafficking, turned anti-trafficking activist. [The Human Trafficking Legal Center](#) serves to bring justice for trafficking survivors. The Human Trafficking Legal Center connects trafficking survivors with pro bono representation so they can seek justice and thrive. We demand accountability from traffickers, from governments, and from corporations.

Kendra Ross is a survivor-leader in the anti-trafficking movement who also serves as a consultant and advisor to the Human Trafficking Legal Center. She is a survivor of child labor trafficking and uses her expertise as a survivor to advise attorneys on trauma-informed advocacy and support for victims of human trafficking.



Monica Watkins is the co-founder of [Beauty For Freedom](#) (BFF), a non-profit organization that empowers young survivors of human trafficking through creative art therapy. Beauty for Freedom's mission is to battle the crisis of human trafficking and empower survivors, raise revenue for survivors in the U.S.A. and around the World, with a fresh approach of self-worth and empowerment through the arts.

Advocacy



Ashante Taylorcox is the founder and executive director of You Are More Than Inc., a survivor-led nonprofit dedicated to supporting survivors of domestic trafficking and exploitation, with a focus on the LGBTQ+ and BIPOC communities. The organization provides barrier-free access to support services centered on mental health, education, and economic stability, and was founded by Taylorcox based on her own experience as a survivor.

Empowerment For Hope

Society is a survivor-led, community-based, non-profit that offers free counseling and other services dedicated to supporting individuals affected by intimate partner violence, gender-based violence, domestic sex trafficking, and other forms of trauma—particularly those from marginalized and underrepresented communities, including African Nova Scotians, newcomers, and LGBTQ+ individuals. Empowerment for Hope was founded by survivor Wyndolyn Brown, who is also the CEO.



The mission of Breaking Free is to end all forms of sex trafficking and exploitation while helping survivors build safe, stable futures. Breaking Free is survivor-led and is rooted in survivor-centered support. In the past 30 years, they have reached over 11,000 survivors. Core programs include street outreach, long-term housing, advocacy services, and training. Vednita Carter is the Founder of Breaking Free, which was one of the first non-profit organizations based in St. Paul, Minnesota, and in the country, with the mission to end all forms of prostitution and sex-trafficking.

Ernestine's Daughter

After surviving 25 years of sex trafficking across the Midwest, Brenda Myers Powell transformed her trauma into a mission of service and reform. She founded Ernestine's Daughter, named in honor of her mother, which seeks to disrupt the cycle of abuse and exploitation by offering tangible support: food, clothing, hygiene, substance abuse treatment, yoga, meditation, and most importantly, trust and human connection. Through survivor-led outreach, it aims to change the narrative surrounding the sex trade, centered not on judgment, but on emotional and spiritual healing, empowerment, and equity. These practices reflect community care, healing justice, and compassion over criminalization. Ernestine's Daughter envisions a society where survivors of sex trafficking and exploitation are met with empathy, resources, and justice, not stigma.

Brenda Myers-Powell is also the co-founder of the Dreamcatcher Foundation, which fights to end human trafficking in Chicago. This not-for-profit organization works to prevent the sexual exploitation of at-risk youth and helps current prostitutes find confidence and stability beyond the limitations of their current lifestyle. The Foundation fosters confidence, courage, independence, and inner strength within young people in disadvantaged areas. The harm reduction approach allows Chicago's most disenfranchised young women mentoring services to improve their lives through education, empowerment, and prevention.



National Black Women's Justice Institute

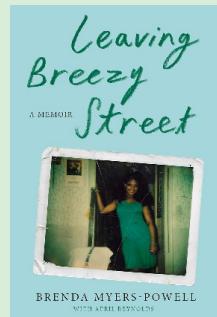
The National Black Women's Justice Institute is a Black women-led national nonprofit that leads research, capacity-building, and public education to advance healing-centered policies and practices that dismantle pathways to criminalization and confinement and increase opportunities and safety for Black women and girls who are directly impacted by the criminal and juvenile legal systems.

Please click [here](#) to access the fact sheet *Sex Trafficking of Black Women & Girls* by the National Black Women's Justice Institute.

JUSTICE FOR YOUTH SURVIVORS INITIATIVE

The Justice for Youth Survivors Initiative is a program co-led by the National Black Women's Justice Institute and the Center on Gender Justice & Opportunity at Georgetown Law, with input and leadership from Black girls. This initiative aims to transform the legal system by promoting trauma-informed and gender-responsive policies and practices that keep survivors safe and out of the legal system.

Leaving Breezy Street: A Memoir
by Brenda Myers-Powell and April Reynolds



We have no say into which worlds we are born. But sometimes we can find a way out.



MISSSEY

Healing Wounds. Breaking Cycles.

MISSSEY works to prevent girls and gender-expansive youth from entering circumstances of sexual exploitation and violence. They also support young people who are experiencing exploitation to exit. Once they've exited, MISSSEY partners with youth so that they may avoid re-entering sexually exploitative circumstances and live free of harmful transactional relationships.



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Housing Needs of Survivors of Human Trafficking

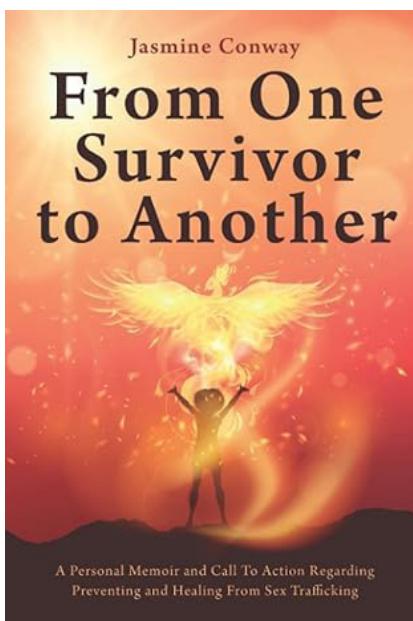
The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 2022 mandated that the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) conduct a study to assess the availability and accessibility of housing and services for individuals experiencing homelessness or housing instability who are survivors of human trafficking or at risk of being trafficked.

Data from the Trafficking Hotline and other research suggest that certain groups, including noncitizens, African-American, Hispanic/Latino, and LGBTQIA+ youth survivors, are disproportionately represented among those who need housing. Survivors' perspectives are especially vital to understanding the unique needs and experiences of key groups that are overrepresented among survivors, namely: youth and young adults, including those with involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice system; LGBTQIA+ individuals and youth, in particular; noncitizens and survivors with certain immigration statuses; and African-American and American-Indian/Alaska Native survivors. Safe and affordable housing helps prevent people at risk of trafficking from experiencing the kind of instability that can increase the risk of victimization, fosters stability that can prevent survivors from being re-victimized, and, ultimately, supports survivors on their complex journeys to healing.

Housing Needs of Survivors of Human Trafficking Study



U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development | Office of Policy Development and Research



From One Survivor to Another: A Personal Memoir

From One Survivor to Another: A Personal Memoir and Call to Action Regarding Preventing and Healing From Sex Trafficking by Jasmine Conway.

On a hot summer day in 2006, Jasmine Conway accepted a ride home from a stranger, which led to her coercion into sex trafficking alongside other young girls. In quick succession, Jasmine left Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and her youth along with it, and journeyed to Las Vegas, Nevada, to enter into a world where young women are taught "the game" by pimps and sold as commodities. Immersed in the facade of family and luxury, Jasmine would spend the next several years under the coercive control of Papi, The Regal Family's trafficker.



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