

Stop Trafficking!

Awareness Advocacy Action

Anti-Human Trafficking Newsletter • September 2026 • Vol. 24 • No. 9

FOCUS: This month's newsletter focuses on the role of substance abuse in all stages of human trafficking.

Substance abuse is defined as excessive use of a drug in a way that is detrimental to the person using the drug, to society, or both. Substance use implies that the individual has physical and psychological dependence. Substances, such as heroin, cocaine and benzodiazepines (among others), are widely used in human trafficking.

The intersection of substance use disorders and human trafficking is a public health crisis and a public safety issue. A 2022 study found that up to 84% of human trafficking survivors, mainly those exploited in sex trafficking, have struggled with drug use or substance use disorders during their victimization.

Furthermore, the use of drugs is a well-known risk factor and vulnerability for human trafficking. Traffickers actively target persons struggling with addiction and use drugs as a powerful tool of force, fraud, and coercion.

Trafficking victims with no prior history of drug use before becoming victims, such as youth who are homeless or new immigrants, are often administered fast-acting drugs, sometimes without their knowledge, to deliberately create a chemical dependency before the victim realizes what is happening. This forces compliance and strips away the victim's autonomy, leaving victims dependent and highly vulnerable to ongoing exploitation.

Targeting Victims with Pre-existing Addiction

Traffickers actively scout location of high-vulnerability, such as municipal drug courts, substance use treatment facilities, methadone clinics, homeless shelters, and areas with high drug activity, to find individuals already battling substance use disorders.

Traffickers will even open new detox centers, staff treatment centers, or rehab centers to have access to people vulnerable to sex or labor trafficking.

Traffickers will lure victims by exploiting their need for drugs, housing, or financial support by promising a continuous drug supply alongside basic needs.

Traffickers may also initially present themselves as romantic partners, friends, or benefactors, offering free drugs to "groom" the victim and establish trust. However, once the person accepts the free drugs, the traffickers demand labor or sex acts as payment.





Awareness

The opioid epidemic has flooded child welfare systems, leaving an unprecedented number of minors without stable families and highly susceptible to predatory traffickers.

Drugs Used to Control

Traffickers often deepen the chemical dependency of the trafficking victim to force compliance. In addition, compliance is often rewarded with access to drugs. The trafficker may subject the victim to physical or psychological abuse and then provide drugs to numb the trauma. Certain substances are used to keep victims awake for grueling, arduous hours, while others are used to keep them compliant, detached, or too disoriented to seek help.

Traffickers also manipulate the victim by threatening to deprive the person of the drugs they are addicted to. Traffickers know a dependent victim will comply with grueling labor demands or dangerous commercial acts just to avoid the physical distress of severe withdrawal symptoms associated with drugs, especially opioids like fentanyl and heroin.

Victims also may actively seek out drugs to dull the profound physical and psychological trauma inflicted by their exploitation.

The drive to avoid withdrawals and feed the addiction will thus motivate an individual to work for the drug, rendering the trafficker completely in control of the victim. The perpetrator will also use the threat of severe withdrawal symptoms to dissuade attempts to escape.

Traffickers also use the dependency on drugs to isolate the victim from their family, friends, and healthcare resources to ensure the victim is totally dependent on the trafficker for survival.

Traffickers leverage the illicit nature of the substances, threatening to report the victim's use to law enforcement, probation officers, or social services if they try to leave.

Start of Drug Use as Survivor

Drugs and alcohol have long been used as coping mechanisms following the trauma of being a victim of sex or labor trafficking. Once an individual exits the trafficking situation, they are left to deal with many common trauma reactions, including flashbacks and intrusive memories. Finding a way to clear the brain of these extremely painful memories using drugs becomes increasingly enticing as it remains difficult to integrate back into “normal” life.

Traffickers often inflate the costs of the drugs provided, claiming the victim owes significant amounts that can only be worked off through forced sex or labor.



Barriers for Human Trafficking Victims Due to Drug Use

The stigma surrounding drug use often prevents victims from seeking help or medical attention for overdoses or exploitation.

The systemic biases of healthcare providers, law enforcement, and the public towards people who use substances may hinder their ability to recognize the signs of trafficking and mislabel victims as offenders rather than trauma survivors.

Traditional substance abuse programs and shelters often lack services for trafficking survivors' complex trauma and safety needs, leading to service gaps and increased drug use as a trauma response.

Meanwhile, traditional survivor services are often insufficient for victims of trafficking with substance abuse disorders. Therefore, these survivors are often denied shelter. This stigma and the inaccessibility of services under typical case management may lead survivors to use drugs, which are easier to obtain, to manage the aftermath of the trauma of the trafficking experience.

Furthermore, survivors attempting to seek help for addiction are frequently retargeted by traffickers, at times working at the same facility where they are residing and seeking help. Traffickers have actively pulled victims out of recovery programs.



Approximately 25% of human trafficking survivors face an opioid problem, according to data highlighted by the [U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration](#).

In a 2013 [federal case](#), *United States v. Fields*, trafficker Andrew Blane Fields recruited vulnerable women and intentionally increased their drug use to full-scale addiction. He controlled the victims by supplying highly addictive prescription pills and then forced them into prostitution to pay off artificially inflated drug debts and avoid painful withdrawal symptoms.

The case set a crucial legal precedent as it successfully established drug-based coercion as a viable and primary means of human trafficking, eliminating the previous necessity to prove physical violence. Fields was convicted of sex trafficking and related drug offenses, receiving a sentence of nearly 34 years in federal prison.



Advocacy

Forced Criminality

Transnational criminal networks involved with drug trafficking often force victims of human trafficking to engage in activities such as drug distribution and act as drug mules to smuggle illicit drugs across borders. This often leads to the arrest of victims for drug-related crimes they were forced to commit by their traffickers.

This can lead to arrest for drug-related crimes, which can further entrench them in the trafficking system.

Convictions for drug offenses may remain on survivors' records for life, creating barriers to securing legal employment, finding housing, or accessing financial aid, and, at times, caring for their own children. The Federal Court in the United States increasingly recognizes drug-induced coercion as a severe form of force. This recognition has directly resulted in enhanced criminal sentencing for traffickers under anti-trafficking statutes.

Substance Abuse Disorder and Sex Trafficking

The [Rand Organization](#), a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization that provides leaders with the information they need to make evidence-based decisions, recently published [an article on Substance Abuse Disorder and Sex Trafficking](#).

When victims of sex trafficking are addicted to drugs, they are often not recognized as victims by both healthcare and the law enforcement system. This may be exacerbated by systemic racism or sexual identity.

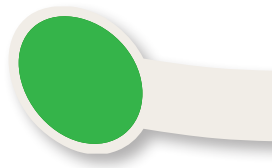
Healthcare professionals, case workers, and staff at homeless shelters and drug rehabilitation centers should all be trained to recognize the signs of human trafficking and how to intervene if a victim presents themselves. It's also important to educate staff and dismantle the stigma associated with substance abuse that can create barriers to identifying and treating victims.

The victims may be seen as uncooperative by first responders or hospital personnel because of their addiction or trauma. Because they do not feel safe in the hospital environment or do not have access to methadone or other treatment, they stay with their trafficker for drugs or money for drugs.

Also, a victim must give consent to contact law enforcement, and they may be reluctant due to the exploitation they experience from their traffickers, so staff should adjust to the victim's resistance rather than opposing it. Policies should also be established to ensure victim services are not contingent on participation in the criminal justice process.

Furthermore, victims may not be seen as credible witnesses by prosecutors, judges, or juries, and so often do not receive legal counsel offered to other survivors of trafficking.





Please click [here](#) to listen to a podcast produced by Roseman University of an eye-opening conversation explicitly detailing the intersection of substance use and human trafficking.



In this episode, Jessica Gobble, Elijah Rising's Recovery Specialist, explains how addiction feeds trafficking and trafficking feeds addiction. Traffickers have learned that they are able to make more profit off of an exploited individual when they exploit them in multiple ways. For instance, if a trafficker coerces a woman into transporting drugs across the border, distributing them, and then engaging in prostitution, they generate more profit compared to solely exploiting them for sex. This overlap between addiction and trafficking is prevalent for numerous reasons.

Understanding the Connection between Human Trafficking and Substance Use Disorder

The role of substance use disorder in human trafficking is powerful and pervasive. Individuals with substance use issues are especially vulnerable to trauma and victimization by human traffickers. This webinar explores these factors, discusses warning signs, types, and venues of human trafficking; and provides intervention, assessment, and treatment strategies.

Please click [here](#) to view this webinar.

Illuminating Justice: Student Research Symposium on Human Trafficking

For ALL
UNDERGRADUATES AND
GRADUATES

Participation is welcomed from all undergraduate and graduate students from any discipline, department, and institution.

Date: TUESDAY, OCTOBER 13, 2026

Location: UCF ROSEN
COLLEGE OF HOSPITALITY
MANAGEMENT

Address: 9907 Universal Blvd,
Orlando, FL 32819

Time: 8:00am-5:00pm

*IN-PERSON AND VIRTUAL

•Students from any college or university are invited to present their research on any aspect of the challenges related to human trafficking.

For more information and to register, click [here](#).

Action

This episode from *Trafficked: Underworlds*, investigates a nefarious scam that tricks elderly Americans into becoming unwitting drug mules. Please click [here](#) to view.

Please click [here](#) to view this webinar by *Survive and Thrive* on Connecting the Dots between substance abuse and human trafficking.

Resources for Help



NCMEC is the nation's largest and most influential child protection organization. We lead the fight to protect children, creating vital resources for them and the people who keep them safe. To report information about a missing or exploited child call our 24-Hour Call Center: 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)

Report child sexual exploitation online at

[CyberTipline.org](https://www.cybertipline.org)

SAMHSA: For confidential, free, 24/7 support for mental health and substance use disorders, reach out to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) at 1-800-662-4357 or via SAMHSA National Helpline.



**NATIONAL
HUMAN
TRAFFICKING
HOTLINE**

1-888-373-7888

National Human Trafficking Hotline: If you suspect trafficking or need immediate help, contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline - call 1-888-373-7888, text "BeFree" to 233733.



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- [Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate](#)
- [Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia](#)
- [Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God](#)
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