

# Stop Trafficking!

# Awareness Advocacy Action

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FOCUS: This month's newsletter focuses on human trafficking among people living in rural areas.

## Human Trafficking in Rural Areas

We know human trafficking occurs everywhere; however, it is often portrayed as an urban issue. Rural areas, like urban ones, are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and labor trafficking. People who live in rural communities face challenges and vulnerabilities particular to them, not prevalent in urban areas, that make them susceptible to both labor and sex trafficking, and that may make trafficking challenging to recognize and address. In small communities, traffickers may be familiar faces, making disclosure of abuse difficult.

### Geographical Isolation

In many rural areas, there may be long distances between homes. With fewer people who live further apart from each other, relative isolation can make it harder for victims to seek help and for others to witness suspicious activity or report suspected trafficking.

In cases where a victim is held in a home for human trafficking, it may be too far for the victim to escape and receive help due to the considerable distance from those who can assist.

Along with geographic isolation, rural communities may have less awareness about human trafficking, making it easier for traffickers to operate undetected.

Moreover, in many rural areas, crime rates may be low, and child welfare professionals may be less likely to believe trafficking is a serious problem or may be unskilled in identifying and treating trafficking victims. Meanwhile, traffickers may find rural communities attractive places to operate, given that residents and even local enforcement may tend to underestimate the threat of trafficking. If ordinary citizens are not on the lookout for criminal activity within their communities, for instance, they could miss signs of human trafficking.

### Rural Poverty

A lack of economic opportunities in rural areas and higher poverty can make individuals more susceptible. As a result, victims are more likely to agree to sex trafficking or forced labor to survive financially. Moreover, cultural beliefs in some societies discourage women from entering the workforce, and so being economically dependent on their male partners means that women may be more vulnerable to trafficking, especially when they do not have the means to support themselves on their own. Less economic opportunity makes women more vulnerable, and children may be expected to make money to support the family, leading them to take on riskier

*(continued on page 2)*

## Rural Trafficking in Vermont

*One significant factor in labor trafficking in Vermont is the prevalent isolation of farm workers. Despite Vermont's efforts to make the capability to get a driver's license available to undocumented folks, they still often feel isolated. This isolation, coupled with the use of coercion, leaves immigrants feeling powerless over their situation. In other rural areas, the lack of resources and few people proactively checking on farm workers further exacerbates this issue, highlighting the need for more social support.*

*Furthermore, Vermont's per capita rate of opioid use is the highest in the nation. In addition to isolation, poverty is a significant issue in rural Vermont. These factors, along with the lack of resources in small cities and towns for trafficking survivors, highlight the critical need for resource allocation and more resources to address this issue.*

Click [here](#) to learn more.



# Awareness

## Human Trafficking in Rural Areas (cont.)

jobs. Traffickers may also use such vulnerability to victimize children.

### Isolation and Limited Resources

Rural law enforcement agencies may have fewer resources and personnel dedicated to investigating and combating human trafficking.

Rural areas also have fewer social services, such as clinics or medical facilities, that may aid in detecting possible human trafficking cases. In some states, child welfare systems do not see the issue of human trafficking as something that falls under their mandate.

Finally, one of the most significant vulnerabilities of human trafficking in rural America involves geographical distances from specialized support services for trafficking survivors, such as shelters, counseling, legal aid, and employment opportunities. Many rural towns do not have public transportation, so if a victim does not have a car, they would need to borrow one or ask someone for a ride. These requests for favors can lead to uncomfortable questions about why someone needs to borrow a car or get a ride and where they are going, questions that victims might not want to answer.

### Truck Stops are Common

Truck stops are prevalent in rural areas because of the long highways that stretch across these areas. Truck stops, state-operated rest areas, and welcome centers are common sites where trafficking and exploitation are present. These locations are often isolated, making it convenient for transient customers to purchase sex with minimal concerns of detection. A truck stop can be an easy place for a trafficker to sell their victims to a new group of customers.

### Stigmatization

While it may always be a challenge coming forward as a victim of human trafficking, an additional barrier in a rural community is that everyone knows everyone, and trafficked people are often stigmatized. In a small community, human trafficking may not only be the perpetrator, but they may also be the victim's family member, neighbor, or someone that everyone in town knows and respects. Sympathy for the victim may be limited, and the victim may be seen as a troublemaker, which may cause division among neighbors.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

## Recruitment

[Freedom Network USA](#) states that victims of sex trafficking in rural areas may be recruited through various means. Common recruitment sites for sex trafficking include truck stops and welcome centers due to the extensive highway systems. These usually isolated locations make it easier for recruiters to operate. Control methods for victims, such as forced substance dependency, physical and sexual assault, psychological manipulation, isolation, and monitoring, are similar in rural areas as in other locations in the country.

Labor trafficking recruitment involves false job advertisements, familial recruitment, and outside recruitment agencies. Sectors where labor trafficking occurs in rural communities include agriculture, restaurants, domestic work, and construction. The methods of control for labor trafficking, such as debt bondage, isolation, physical and sexual abuse, document confiscation, threats against friends and family, psychological manipulation, and false promises during recruitment, are similar to those used in sex trafficking.

Immigrants, particularly those holding H2A agricultural visas ("guest worker visas"), are among the most vulnerable. The structure of this visa program allows their employers to control their ability to work and remain in the country, leading to fear of job loss and deportation if they challenge unfair or illegal labor practices. Employers take advantage of this by using forced labor, visa fraud, wage theft, sexual harassment, and gender-based violence to control these workers. Changes to these visa programs could significantly impact human trafficking in rural communities.

*"In more rural areas, especially in East Tennessee, we see a lot of familial trafficking in disadvantaged areas, areas where there is a lot of drug addiction, poverty."*

*Gabi Smith, Johnson City's branch of "Grow Free Tennessee" Community Coalition Against Human Trafficking, Knoxville, TN*

*The most common way for children to be trafficked in the state of Tennessee is not through abduction or kidnapping. For the overwhelming majority of cases, it starts in the home or with someone the child trusts.*

Click [here](#) to learn more.



## Human Trafficking in Appalachia

Appalachia is situated in the central and southern sections of the Appalachian Mountains of the eastern United States. Its boundaries, stretching from the western Catskill Mountains of New York into Pennsylvania, continue through the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Great Smoky Mountains and reach into the northern regions of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. West Virginia is the only state entirely within the boundaries of Appalachia. As of 2023, over 26 million people live in Appalachia.

The region is known for being economically depressed with generational poverty, geographic isolation, and, more recently, being plagued by the opioid epidemic, all considered risk factors for human trafficking. Three states that are part of the Appalachia region, Mississippi, Georgia, and Ohio, are three of the top states for human trafficking in the United States. Much of the trafficking in Appalachia is familial, with victims being trafficked by family members, often in exchange for drugs or money.

The geography of Appalachia makes it particularly vulnerable to trafficking due to rural isolation. Moreover, it is easy to move victims across long distances quickly. In addition to its rurality, major interstate highways connecting large cities crisscross the region. These highways bring drugs and buyers into the region and ship men and women, boys and girls, out into the commercial sex and labor market. Victims are trafficked along the nation's highways at truck stops, gas stations, and rest areas.

Sexual and gender minorities are especially vulnerable in Appalachia, where there is an overall lack of LGBTQ+ specific resources. This is especially true for transgender individuals who are particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

Victims of human trafficking in Appalachia are a particularly vulnerable population, and accurate data about them is scarce. Educational strategies are essential in dispelling myths and accurately identifying these victims. As in other rural areas, strengthening networks of existing community resources is vital in combating human trafficking. Lastly, improving the availability of data about trafficking from the Appalachian region is crucial to understanding the extent of the problem. Understanding is the first step to identifying, supporting, and protecting the victims and potential victims of trafficking in the Appalachian region.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

*Relink.org and Eyes Up Appalachia teamed to create directories of services in the Appalachian Ohio Counties which may be accessed by clicking [here](#).*



**HUMAN  
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2022



## Human Trafficking in Appalachian Ohio

This special report features Dr. Christi Scott Bartman, founder of Eyes Up Appalachia, an organization dedicated to raising awareness and creating community initiatives and partnerships to combat human trafficking in Southeastern Ohio.

Please click [here](#) to view this short video on human trafficking in Ohio.

## Human Trafficking in Rural Areas Around the World

A sample of human trafficking in the rural areas of several countries as outlined in the 2024 [Trafficking in Persons report](#):

### Mexico

In the 2024 Trafficking in Persons report, Mexico was cited for the lack of overall services for victims of human trafficking, especially for male victims, forced labor victims and victims in rural areas. Moreover, prevention campaigns insufficiently reached high-risk groups such as children, rural and Indigenous communities, and non-Spanish speakers.

Although those living in rural areas, particularly Indigenous and Afro-Mexican communities, faced severe trafficking risks, prosecutor offices in these areas were particularly understaffed and lacked sufficient resources to prosecute trafficking crimes effectively.

### Brazil

Traffickers exploit Brazilian men – notably Afro-Brazilian men – women, and, to a lesser extent, children in situations that could amount to forced labor in rural areas, including in charcoal production, ranching, agriculture, salt industries, logging, and mining.

### China

The government continued to coerce minority communities designated arbitrarily as “rural surplus labor” to participate in labor transfers to other areas within Xinjiang and other provinces as part of a “poverty alleviation” program and exploit them in forced labor.

Highly organized criminal syndicates and local gangs subject PRC women and girls to sex trafficking within the PRC and abroad. Traffickers typically recruit them from rural areas and take them to urban centers, using a combination of fraudulent job offers and coercion by imposing hefty travel fees, confiscating passports, confining victims, or physically and financially threatening victims to compel their engagement in commercial sex.

PRC nationals may experience conditions indicative of forced labor at large-scale rare earth mining operations within the PRC, and rural communities displaced by these activities and by concomitant environmental contamination may themselves be vulnerable to sex and labor trafficking.

### Ireland

National police lacked consistent standards and a specific criterion for “reasonable grounds” when assessing victims; anti-trafficking efforts varied widely from urban to rural areas; and there was no consistently used formal referral mechanism for all police units to assist sex trafficking victims.



*“Those trafficked from rural Alaska are considered “profitable” within two weeks of their abduction. They may even be trafficked by a family member or boyfriend, sometimes a classmate, and often promised something other than money, whether access to substances or the mere promise of escape from current life situations”.*

Click [here](#) to learn more.

When Iowa lawmakers passed anti-human trafficking legislation in 2006, it was commonly assumed that any case the state prosecuted under the new law would likely involve international victims trafficked into that rural state for labor.

Two years later, a jury handed down the first trafficking conviction under state law, finding Leonard Ray Russell guilty of trafficking two Nebraska runaway girls, aged 15 and 16, and forcing them to dance in strip clubs and engage in prostitution in Iowa and Illinois towns, including Denison, Iowa – a rural county seat with just over 8,000 residents.

Since then, Iowa law enforcement agents have investigated several cases involving vulnerable young victims of domestic sex trafficking – runaway and “throwaway” girls as young as age 12 forced to work in strip clubs and as prostitutes in larger cities and remote rural areas.

Accurate numbers are impossible to come by, but it is believed that the United States is experiencing a dramatic rise in domestic child sex trafficking as criminal networks are finding it profitable and relatively risk-free to serially abuse young girls.

But when we think of domestic child sex trafficking, we tend to think of urban centers such as Oakland or Atlanta. The reality is that rural jurisdictions play a critical role in domestic sex trafficking networks, with victims being trafficked from, to, and through farming communities in Iowa and other less-populous states.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

## Action



### Role of Healthcare Professionals

Rural healthcare professionals are positioned to not only identify human trafficking victims but to educate the community on the signs of trafficking within the community.

Research on human trafficking points to healthcare as a critical area of intervention. More than 50 percent of survivors of human trafficking indicate that they had contact with a healthcare professional during the times they were being victimized, though they may not have reported their victimization.

### Coding for Human Trafficking

ICD-10 codes specific to human trafficking were introduced in 2018. The codes are intended to help providers adequately diagnose and plan the resources necessary to provide appropriate treatment as well as track data on human trafficking.





[The Health Partners on IPV + Exploitation](#), an initiative led by Futures Without Violence, works with community health centers to support survivors and those at risk of intimate partner violence, human trafficking, and exploitation, and to support prevention efforts. The Network is a National Training and Technical Assistance Partner (NTTAP) funded by HRSA's Bureau of Primary Health Care.

Please click [here](#) to view a webinar examining Intimate Partner Violence and human trafficking among rural communities with panelists from the National Domestic Violence Hotline, Samaritan Health Services, the Linn/Benton Anti-Trafficking Coalition, and Futures Without Violence.

## [Office on Violence Against Women \(OVW\)](#)

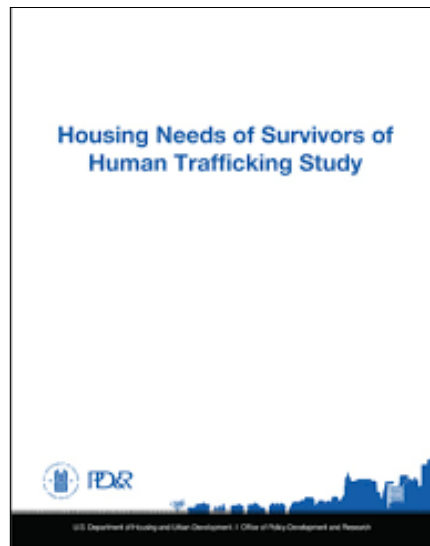
Part of the U.S. Department of Justice, this federal agency addresses legal and policy issues regarding violence against women and child victims. Programs work to strengthen services for women and children who are victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, trafficking, and stalking.



U.S. Department of Justice  
**OVW**  
Office on Violence Against Women

## Resources for Survivors in Rural Communities

In the recent [Housing Needs of Survivors of Human Trafficking Study](#), service provider stakeholders identified a general lack of available housing and service resources in rural areas. Where services or affordable housing resources are available, transportation often becomes an especially important issue because people need to be able to access services regularly, with support like bus passes or help accessing a car.



A service provider working in several counties covering mostly rural land areas with a focal urban center reported that working with survivors in rural parts of their community was especially difficult because of a general lack of services, which tend to be concentrated in cities. In addition, lack of transportation to and from services or the need to move long distances to access housing are significant barriers to survivor stability. Housing can generally be less expensive in rural areas. Still, survivors' ability to earn enough to afford it, find housing that is not substandard, or receive the kinds of support needed to maintain it can be challenging.

## 31:8 PROJECT

[31:8 Project](#)'s mission is to equip and challenge society to proactively address issues regarding human trafficking in rural North Dakota through education, advocacy and raising awareness..



American Hospital Association

## [American Hospital Association's Combating Human Trafficking](#)

Provides support for hospitals' efforts to combat human trafficking through webinars and other resources.



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