



The Nexus Between Human Trafficking and Forced Migration

*Alliance to End Human Trafficking & National Advocacy Center
of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd*

Human Trafficking is a Crime against Humanity

Human Trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery that involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to exploit another; to obtain labor or a commercial sex act. It is a crime under both U.S. and international law. It is a crime against humanity.

Human trafficking dehumanizes and commodifies human beings, depriving those who are victimized of their dignity, as persons made in the image of God. It denies the person's basic human rights: the right to life, security, freedom of movement, and the freedom from torture and degrading treatment. It is antithetical to the tenets of our faith and the values of this nation.

In an address on April 11, 2019, the Holy Father Pope Francis said, [Human trafficking] “constitutes an unjustifiable violation of the freedom and dignity of the victims, constitutive dimensions of the human being wanted and created by God. This is why it is considered a crime against humanity. Trafficking seriously damages humanity as a whole, tearing apart the human family and the Body of Christ.” ([Catholic News Service](#))

The nature of human trafficking makes it difficult to accurately describe its scope and number its costs. The National Human Trafficking Hotline reports that, “[d]espite growing awareness about this crime, human trafficking continues to go underreported due to its covert nature, misconceptions about its definition, and a lack of awareness about its indicators.” ([National Human Trafficking Hotline](#)). While the 2020 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons estimates that in 2018 approximately [50,000 people](#) were identified as living in conditions of human trafficking on any given day, the data only reflects trafficked persons who were in contact with authorities. It does not reflect the actual prevalence of the crime or the hidden number of victims of commercial sexual exploitation, forced labor, and forced marriage. The International Labor Organization estimates that their suffering earns their traffickers approximately [150 billion dollars annually](#). What we do know for certain is that human trafficking returns huge profits to its perpetrators while inflicting incalculable costs on its victims, their families, and society.

The elimination of human trafficking is a priority issue for the Catholic Church and all people of good will. Every life is a gift from God and is sacred. Every human being deserves to be protected and nurtured. We each have a responsibility to fight against the violation and degradation of our brothers and sisters.

Those Forced to Migrate are Especially Vulnerable

Traffickers thrive where vulnerability is high; where people are desperate, and their options are limited or nonexistent. People on the move and recent immigrants are at particular risk of exploitation by traffickers because of their precarious social and economic circumstances.

The International Organization for Migration estimates the number of international migrants to be at least [281 million people](#). They are refugees, asylum seekers, labor migrants, and those displaced by conflict or natural disasters. They are fleeing floods, famine, war, violence, endemic poverty, organized crime, and political corruption and the effects of climate change. They are both desperate and resilient.

The adverse circumstances that force people to flee their homes can lead migrants to be deceived in exploitative recruitment abroad. Migration routes too often lead migrants into the hands of organized trafficking networks, exploitative employment, or situations of extortion. The very status of people as migrants, especially irregular migrants, exposes them to possible negative legal consequences, including fines, detention, or deportation. “Moreover, irregularity often leads migrants to work in sectors prone to exploitation, such as in the fishing industry in South-East Asia, the agricultural sector in Europe, and construction jobs in Northern America.” ([World Migrant Report 2022](#), Chp 10, 258)

Immigration and human trafficking are clearly interconnected, especially in the United States. Polaris estimates 77 percent of persons trafficked in the United States each year are immigrants ([Polaris Analysis of 2021 Data from the National Human Trafficking Hotline](#), pg. 8 of 29). Migrants and immigrants, including children, are sold for sex and labor and exploited across a range of industries in the United States.

A recent *New York Times* report, “[Alone and Exploited, Migrant Children Work Brutal Jobs Across the U.S.](#),” revealed how U.S. companies are exploiting immigrant children.

The *Times* spoke with more than 100 migrant child workers in 20 states who described jobs that were grinding them into exhaustion, and fears that they had become trapped in circumstances they never could have imagined. . . .

In town after town, children scrub dishes late at night. They run milking machines in Vermont and deliver meals in New York City. They harvest coffee and build lava rock walls around vacation homes in Hawaii. Girls, as young as 13, wash hotel sheets in Virginia.

The current situation at the U.S. border with Mexico provides a perfect setting for those who would exploit desperate people. Sister Tracey Horan, associate director of education and advocacy at the Kino Border Initiative, has seen the vulnerability of migrants created by U.S. border policy.

At the Kino Border Initiative, we regularly hear stories of families for whom waiting weeks or months in Mexican border towns has meant being kidnapped, extorted, or abused by organized crime groups.

These families are an easy target for traffickers because they are stuck in limbo in an unfamiliar place and do not have local contacts they can trust. Confusing and constantly changing U.S. policies make it easier for bad actors to take advantage.

Sister Mary Jean Doyle, a case manager of the Trafficking Victims Assistance Program, Catholic Charities, D.C., works directly with immigrant people who have been trafficked. She cautions,

It is very important that we understand the issue of migration itself and the dangers it presents to the promotion of the trafficking of innocent people. Until we understand the situation of a vulnerable person, how can we possibly attempt to fix the difficulties they face in becoming whole?

Cristian Eduardo cautions that no one group or type is immune from becoming vulnerable and exploited; and as the United States, “We can do better.” As a young man in his early 20s fearing persecution, Cristian fled from Mexico to Canada where he then found himself trafficked. He again was trafficked in the U.S. after escaping from Canada. Cristian reminds his audiences that immigration officials and support organizations often don’t recognize the signs of trafficking in young adults like him that have “no visible harms.”

Unfortunately, the root causes of human trafficking, including the significant and unique vulnerabilities faced by those forced to migrate, have been largely overlooked. In the past, U.S. anti-trafficking policy has taken a primarily criminal justice approach. While interdiction and prosecution of traffickers is essential, it alone is not sufficient. If there is any hope of putting an end to this horrendous crime, government, law enforcement, social service agencies, and anti-trafficking advocates must focus on its root causes. Today that means mitigating the risks to populations most at risk for sex and labor trafficking - immigrants, especially women and children, who are forced to leave their homes.

Sister Ann Scholz, consultant and director of corporate social responsibility for the SSND Cooperative Investment Fund, observed, “Those who are forced to flee their homes because of violence, corruption, poverty, or persecution are easy targets for those who would deny their dignity and exploit their labor.”

Catholic sisters and their colleagues have a long history of accompanying migrants and those who have been victimized by human traffickers. They know their strength and their vulnerability. They are prepared to address the threat human traffickers pose to those forced to flee their homes, and they are committed to finding practical solutions to this root cause of human trafficking.