

# HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

## Understanding and Combating Familial Trafficking



### What is familial trafficking?

**Familial trafficking refers to the exploitation and trafficking of individuals by their own family members for various purposes.** This form of human trafficking is especially insidious as it involves betrayal and exploitation by those who are supposed to provide love and protection.

Victims<sup>1</sup> of familial trafficking often suffer in silence due to feelings of shame, fear, and loyalty to their traffickers. It is crucial for communities and law enforcement agencies to be aware of the signs of familial trafficking and provide support and resources to victims to break free from this cycle of abuse.

### Forms of Familial Trafficking

- **Child Labor Exploitation** - Forced to work long hours in work or hazardous conditions, often without proper compensation or education.
- **Domestic Servitude** - Exploited for their labor within their own homes. They may also experience physical, emotional, or sexual abuse at the hands of their trafficker.
- **Commercial Sexual Exploitation** - This can involve engaging in commercial sex acts, or other forms of sexual exploitation in exchange for money, shelter, food, or other basic needs.
- **Forced Marriages** - Coerced into marrying against their will for the benefit of their family, often to settle debts or secure social status.

### How Prevalent is Familial Trafficking?

- **30% of identified trafficking victims were trafficked by a family member** between the years 2012 and 2016 according to one study by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)).
- **50% of trafficking victims, globally, were trafficked by family members** according to one study conducted by the International Labour Organization ([ILO](#)).



**“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter.”**

**—Martin Luther King Jr.**

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this toolkit, language has been chosen intentionally to reflect firsthand experience. “Survivor” is most often used, but in some instances “victim” is used when referencing individuals still experiencing trafficking, as a term used in research, and to reflect that the “journey from victim to survivor is unique to each person.”

## Barriers to Reporting/ Prevalence of Data

### Unreported Cases

Many of familial trafficking go unreported due to complex family dynamics and fear of consequences.

### Emotional Manipulation

Traffickers exploit emotional bonds and manipulate family members, making it difficult for victims to seek help.

### Generational Cycles

Familial trafficking often perpetuates across generations, with victims becoming traffickers within their own families.

### Barriers to Identification

Lack of awareness and understanding of the signs of familial trafficking makes it challenging to identify and intervene.



## Factors that Contribute to Familial Trafficking

- Poverty
- Lack of education and awareness
- Mental health challenges and generational trauma
- Social and cultural norms
- Violence and abuse within the family (e.g., generational trafficking)
- Family dynamics and relationships
- Lack of legal protections and enforcement
- Lack of prevention measures
- Lack of access to opportunities and support

# The Hidden Realities of Familial Trafficking

**Familial trafficking is particularly insidious because it is hidden in plain sight.** Victims often stay loyal to their abusive family members, making external intervention challenging. Traffickers exploit inherent trust within families to manipulate and control victims. Isolation from external support systems and normalization of abuse within the family context obscure the exploitation, making it harder for victims to recognize their plight. Fear of repercussions keeps victims from reporting their family members to authorities, and a widespread lack of awareness about the dynamics of familial trafficking leads to low detection and intervention rates. These factors collectively contribute to why this form of trafficking remains hidden and difficult to combat.

## ● 1. Family Loyalty

Victims often remain loyal to abusive family members, making it difficult for outsiders to intervene.

## ● 3. Isolation from Support

Victims are isolated from outside support systems, further entrapping them in the trafficking situation.

## ● 5. Barriers to Reporting

Victims often fear the consequences of reporting their own family members to authorities.

## ● 2. Manipulation of Trust

Traffickers exploit the inherent trust within families to control and exploit their victims.

## ● 4. Normalization of Abuse

Victims may view the trafficking as a normal part of family life, making it challenging to recognize the exploitation.

## ● 6. Lack of Awareness

Lack of understanding about the dynamics of familial trafficking leads to low detection and intervention rates.

# Signs and Indicators of Familial Trafficking

Although familial trafficking is a complex and devastating form of exploitation that often goes unnoticed, there are signs and indicators that can help identify victims and put an end to this abuse. Common signs include sudden changes in behavior, unexplained absences from school or work, unexplained bruises or injuries, and a reluctance to talk about their family members. Additionally, victims of familial trafficking may exhibit signs of physical or emotional trauma, have a sudden influx of expensive gifts or possessions, or lack personal identification documents.

It is crucial for communities and individuals to be aware of these signs and report any suspicions to authorities. By recognizing these indicators, we can work to prevent and combat familial trafficking and ensure that all individuals are protected and supported.

# Signs and Indicators<sup>2</sup> to Recognize

- Early age of onset of experiencing trafficking
- Reports working for long hours in work positions that are inappropriate for the child's age
- Indicators of other forms of trauma, including domestic violence, without explicit reference to trafficking
- Unexplained physical injuries
- Somatic complaints
- Throat and urinary tract infections
- Interrupted sleep patterns and insomnia
- Difficulty concentrating
- High level of dissociation or “spacing out”
- Memory loss
- Learning disabilities and cognitive impairments
- Feeling unable to talk about family or home life
- Distrust of adults or peers outside of the family system
- Appearing as the ‘keeper’ of family secrets, or maintaining a high level of privacy on behalf of the family

## Language

Here are some examples of how traffickers might use these words<sup>3</sup> to mask exploitation:

- **Vacation** - "You're going on a special vacation to make a lot of money."
- **Trip** - "We're going on a trip to the city to meet some important people."
- **Job** - "This is your special job to help out the family."
- **After-school job** - "You need to go to this after-school job to support your family."
- **Gardening** - "You'll be helping out with gardening at a special farm."
- **The Farm** - "You need to work at the farm to earn money."
- **Work** - "This is what work looks like when you're in the city."
- **The Greenhouse** - "You'll be helping out at a greenhouse."
- **Camping** - "We're going camping in the city for a while."
- **Help** - "You need to help out these men to make money."
- **Perform** - "You need to perform for these people to make money."
- **Act** - "You need to act like you're having fun to make money."
- **Juice** - "Drink this juice to help you relax."
- **Road Trip** - "We're going on a road trip to make money at different places."
- **My Friend** - "This is my friend; you need to do what they say."
- **Be good** - "Be good and these men will give us money."
- **Uncle/Aunt** - "This is your uncle/aunt, you need to do what they say."
- **College Fund** - "The money you make will go to your college fund."

<sup>2</sup>[Navigating the Unique Complexities in Familial Trafficking](#) (U.S. Department of State)

<sup>3</sup>Please note that language looks very different case by case. It is important to understand the nuances of the language used in these conversations. Asking the right questions can help identify potential cases of familial trafficking. It is important to listen to and be aware of body language.

- **Housekeeping** - "You'll be helping out with housekeeping for these men."
- **Chores** - "These are your chores to make money."
- **Cleaning** - "You need to clean the house for these individuals."
- **Landscaping** - "You'll be helping out with landscaping."
- **Assistant** - "You'll be the assistant to these men to make money."
- **Selling** - "You'll be selling things to make money."
- **Restaurant** - "You'll be working at this restaurant to make money."
- **Entertain** - "You need to entertain these individuals to make money."
- **Be nice** - "Be nice to these people and they'll give us money."
- **Going to Disneyland** - "We're going to Disneyland to make money."



### Consider the following questions when it comes to signs and indicators of familial trafficking:

- **Family Dynamics** - Are family members overly controlling or protective of one another?
- **Isolation** - Is the individual isolated from friends, neighbors, or community activities? Are they discouraged from making outside connections?
- **Behavioral Indicators** - Does the person show signs of fear, anxiety, depression, or submissiveness when family members are around?
- **Communication Restrictions** - Is the person reluctant to talk freely or seem to be under constant surveillance?
- **Awareness of Exploitation** - Does the individual seem unaware that their situation may be exploitative or abusive?
- **Health and Wellbeing** - Are there signs of physical abuse, malnutrition, or lack of medical care?
- **School and Work Attendance** - Does the individual have unexplained absences from school or work, or lack access to educational or employment opportunities?
- **Dependence on Family** - Does the victim rely heavily on family members to the point where they seem unable to make decisions independently?
- **Legal Documents** - Are personal identification or other important documents kept by the family members without their consent?
- **Fear of Authorities** - Does the person express fear about the consequences of involving law enforcement or other authorities?

## Standing In Solidarity

To combat familial trafficking, it is crucial that we listen to the voices of survivors who have experienced this crime firsthand. These individuals have invaluable insights and experiences that can help us understand the tactics and methods used by traffickers within families. By amplifying the voices of survivors, we can increase awareness, improve prevention efforts, and hold perpetrators accountable.

**“Survivors are the experts in their own experiences. Centering their voices and choices is essential for providing support that is truly responsive to their needs.”**

**-Survivor Advocacy  
Outreach Program**

## Youth Engagement and Leadership

- **Empower Youth Voices** - Amplify the perspectives and experiences of young people affected by or at risk of familial trafficking to inform prevention and intervention strategies.
- **Develop Youth-Led Initiatives** - Support the creation and implementation of youth-driven projects and programs that address the unique needs and challenges of familial trafficking.
- **Foster Youth Leadership** - Provide training, mentorship, and opportunities for youth to develop essential skills in advocacy, community mobilization, and collaborative problem-solving.
- **Integrate Youth Perspectives** - Ensure that youth representation and input are integrated into the design, implementation, and evaluation of anti-trafficking efforts at all levels.
- **Build Youth Resilience** - Implement trauma-informed, youth-centered approaches that empower young people to build their capacity, self-efficacy, and resilience.

## Survivor-Centered Approach

- **Safety** - Ensure the physical, emotional, and psychological safety of survivors throughout the intervention process.
- **Autonomy** - Empower survivors to make informed decisions about their own recovery and future, respecting their right to self-determination.
- **Trauma-Informed Care** - Adopt a trauma-informed approach that recognizes the impact of trauma and prioritizes the survivor's well-being, healing, and long-term recovery.
- **Holistic Support** - Provide comprehensive, wraparound services that address the multifaceted needs of survivors, including housing, healthcare, legal assistance, and emotional support.
- **Empowerment** - Strengthen the resilience and self-agency of survivors, fostering their ability to navigate the recovery process and regain control over their lives.
- **Confidentiality** - Ensure strict confidentiality and privacy protections to safeguard the identity and personal information of survivors.

# Effective Interventions and Prevention Strategies

These strategies require a collaborative and multi-systems approach. It is essential to prioritize the well-being and empowerment of survivors throughout all efforts.

- **Education and Awareness**
  - Implement age-appropriate curriculum in schools about healthy relationships, boundaries, and exploitation.
  - Conduct community workshops and campaigns to recognize signs of trafficking.
  - Train professionals (teachers, doctors, social workers) to identify and report suspected cases.
- **Providing Comprehensive Support Services**
  - Ensure access to mental health services, trauma counseling, and substance abuse treatment.
  - Offer legal assistance for victims and their families.
  - Provide safe housing options, including emergency shelters and long-term placements.
- **Strengthening Child Protection Systems**
  - Enhance screening and reporting protocols for suspected trafficking.
  - Increase staffing and resources for child protective services.
  - Improve collaboration between law enforcement, social services, and the judicial system.
- **Empowering Children**
  - Teach children about their rights and resources for help.
  - Encourage open communication about unsafe situations or exploitation.
  - Support leadership and advocacy opportunities for survivor youth.
- **Strengthening Families**
  - Offer parenting classes and support for at-risk families.
  - Provide resources for addressing underlying issues (poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence).
  - Strengthen extended family and community support networks.
- **Collaboration and Coordination**
  - Establish multidisciplinary teams for case management and service coordination.
  - Improve information sharing between agencies (with appropriate confidentiality).
  - Develop formal protocols for referral and collaboration.
- **Early Identification and Intervention**
  - Train professionals to recognize signs of trafficking and exploitation.
  - Conduct regular assessments and interviews with at-risk youth.
  - Implement immediate response and safety planning when suspicions arise.
- **Strong Legal Framework**
  - Enact and enforce strict laws against familial trafficking.
  - Hold perpetrators accountable through criminal prosecution.
  - Provide legal protections and support for victims and witnesses.

- **Building Resilience**

- Implement evidence-based programs promoting resilience and coping skills.
- Support positive relationships with mentors and supportive adults.
- Encourage engagement in positive activities (education, hobbies, peer groups).

- **Financial Support**

- Provide direct financial assistance for victims and their families.
- Help access public benefits and services.
- Support education and employment opportunities for long-term stability.

- **Monitoring and Evaluation**

- Track data on prevalence, risk factors, and outcomes.
- Regularly assess and improve prevention and intervention programs.
- Conduct research to inform evidence-based practices.

## Barriers & Strategies for Supporting Victims and Survivors

- **Lack of Financial Resources**

- Provide direct financial assistance, such as emergency funding and long-term support.
- Help access public benefits, scholarships, and financial aid.
- Offer education and job training programs to promote self-sufficiency.
- Assist with budgeting, saving, and financial planning.

- **Emotional/Psychological Trauma**

- Ensure access to trauma-informed mental health services, including counseling and therapy.
- Provide support groups for survivors to share experiences and connect with peers.
- Teach coping skills and stress management techniques.
- Encourage engagement in positive activities for emotional well-being.

- **Fear of Retaliation from Traffickers**

- Develop safety plans with survivors, including emergency protocols.
- Provide access to legal services, such as obtaining restraining orders.
- Offer secure housing options, such as safe houses or relocation assistance.
- Ensure confidentiality and privacy in service provision.

- **Lack of Awareness of Support Services**

- Conduct outreach and education in communities about available services.
- Partner with other organizations to reach survivors.
- Provide clear information about services, eligibility, and access.
- Ensure services are culturally appropriate and accessible.

- **Distrust of Law Enforcement**

- Build relationships with survivor leaders and advocacy groups.
- Provide training for law enforcement on trauma-informed practices.
- Offer legal advocacy and accompaniment to legal proceedings.
- Ensure survivors' rights and protections are upheld in legal processes.

## Additional Resources

- [Youth Development Insight](#) (University of Minnesota Extension)
- [Child Legal Rights LDICP Draft Legislation](#) (Legislative Drafting Institute for Child Protection)
- [Human Trafficking Toolkits](#) (Thomas Reuters)
- [Human Trafficking Prevention Month 2024 Toolkit](#) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
- [2024 UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons](#) (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime)
- [Counter Trafficking Data Brief](#) (The Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative)



### A Note from the Author

As a survivor of familial trafficking, I have finally found the strength to break free from the chains that once bound me. I have overcome the fear and manipulation that kept me silent for so long, and now I stand tall and proud as a **resilient survivor**. I have reclaimed **my voice and my agency**, and I refuse to let anyone control me ever again.

I am no longer defined by the trauma and abuse that I endured at the hands of my own family. I am a survivor, a warrior, and a beacon of hope for others who may be trapped in similar situations. I have found the courage to **speak out against the injustice** and exploitation that so often goes unnoticed within our own homes.

To my fellow survivors, I say: never give up hope, never stop fighting for your freedom, and never let anyone else dictate your worth. You are strong, you are powerful, and you deserve to live a **life free from fear and oppression**. Remember, you are not alone, and together, we can break the cycle of trafficking and create a safer, more compassionate world for all.

**-Dasha**

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