

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/connecting-with-victims-of-human-trafficking-on-their-own-terms>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

This blog post is the second in a two-part series about Veras recently-released [Trafficking Victim Identification Tool](#), a questionnaire designed to make it easier for victim service providers and law enforcement to identify victims of human trafficking.

Words matter. This is especially true when trying to provide services to possible victims of crime and others seeking assistance. During Veras two-year [Improving Trafficking Victim Identification Study](#), researchers were not only able to validate a [screening tool](#) that will greatly assist in the identification of trafficking victims but also learned the importance of establishing trust and rapport between those asking the questions and those answering them. Researchers found that the tool worked best when both sides were able to effectively communicate in an environment where potential victims felt safe and supported.

Word choice was especially important when asking victims personal questions about their lives and experiences. While the tool is meant to be used with all types of trafficking victims, the word work may mean different things to different people, for example, to those forced into domestic servitude and to those forced into commercial sex. It may even have different cultural connotations. Sex trafficking victims and service providers serving these victims reacted strongly to this word and the framing of forced sex as work. As one study participant stated: For me [prostitution] is something that you couldn't call work, something that you're not doing with the intention to want to do it. They are forcing you to do it. The question How have you supported yourself financially while in the U.S.? was purposefully phrased to allow for a variety of responses about trafficking experiences and to avoid the word work.

Asking about sensitive topics and picking the appropriate language for those questions could also be tricky. Many study participants described the sense of shame around forced sex or labor experiences. Therefore, questions were worded in ways both direct and indirect (such as the one above) so that the right balance could be struck depending on the interviewees comfort level. Some participants felt such shame that indirect questions were overwhelming to answer. Others, however, felt similarly when faced with a more direct question. When asked Did you ever have sex for things of value, for example money, housing, food, gifts, or favors? one participant felt light-headed all of a sudden. Paying attention to the comfort of the potential victim who is being interviewed is key to getting questions answered.

Official words in other languages, such as trata de personas (trafficking) and remuneracion (payment), were sometimes met with confusion by study participants. Simply rephrasing certain words made study participants feel more at ease and more willing to answer questions, showing the importance of creating a trusting environment. Not understanding the subtleties of certain words and their meanings can create a barrier between the person administering the tool and the possible victim, creating a missed opportunity to identify and assist victims of trafficking.

For these reasons, researchers developed a Spanish translation of the tool (both a [shortened version](#) to be used during initial screenings and the [full-length version](#) during in-depth screenings) that incorporated the suggestions of study participants so that it may be better received by future trafficking victims. These new versions make the screening tool more accessible and will hopefully give voice to the many unidentified victims of trafficking seeking help.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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