

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/severe-punishments-for-traffickers-reflect-horrors-of-human-trafficking>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The fact that something as brutalizing and cruel as human trafficking occurs right under our noses in local businesses and residential communities is deeply unsettling, yet countless trafficking victims remain hidden, denied freedom, dignity, and justice. Identifying trafficked persons in the U.S. is the fundamental first step in stopping human trafficking, prosecuting traffickers, and changing the larger dynamics that hurt and entrap tens of thousands of people every year.

This is why the [Trafficking Victim Identification Tool](#) that Vera developed as part of a National Institute of Justice study is so important. For the first time, we have a reliable tool to identify sex and labor trafficking victims in the U.S. that, with some training and trust-building on the part of law enforcement and victim service providers, can enhance our understanding of the crime and increase identification of victims so they can be freed and provided with the services and support needed to rebuild their lives.

[Recent news coverage](#) of the life sentences handed down by U.S. District Judge Katherine B. Forrest to two men for the forced sex trafficking of Mexican women in New York is rightly taken as a sign that trafficking is being recognized as a horrific crime. The hundreds of women who had been trafficked most of whom, unfortunately, could not be found were reportedly forced to have sex with up to 25 men a day. They were terrorized, traumatized, beaten, isolated, and starved if they refused to submit to the traffickers who profited from their exploitation. But most victims could not be identified, and when located, were afraid to cooperate with law enforcement out of deeply ingrained fear of abuse and retaliation.

While doing our [research to validate](#) the screening tool, we heard similar stories many times from survivors and dedicated service providers who had worked with trafficking victims for years. We also heard encouraging comments from knowledgeable law enforcement officials and service providers who are grappling with new approaches to solving trafficking crimes by providing support for victims. Each case was unique, but force, fraud, and coercion which are central to the definition of sex and labor trafficking in the U.S. were common. In our study, trafficked persons came from 40 countries, including the U.S. They were men and women of all ages who were forced to work in sex or other commercial activities, in private homes and workplaces like restaurants and farms under dangerous and exploitative conditions, and often under threats against their lives or those of family members. None of these people had in their wildest dreams expected to be entrapped and abused when they started out, actually seeking a better job, further education, or a loving relationship. They quite literally had been enslaved through deception and force, and simply had no way out.

Trafficking victims may have few opportunities for discovery, but more often than we may think, law enforcement, health care professionals, child welfare workers, merchants, teachers, and others encounter victims without realizing it. With Vera's new screening tool, however, we hope and expect they will be better equipped in the future to see trafficking victims, to ask the right questions in the right way, and to help.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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