

# Florida's new reporting system is shining a light on human trafficking in the Sunshine State

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Human trafficking can be hard to track because it is a crime that hides in plain sight.

*Mireya Acierto/Photodisc via Getty Images*

Most Americans imagine human trafficking as a violent kidnapping or a “stranger danger” crime – someone abducted from a parking lot or trapped in a shipping container brought in from another country.

In fact, trafficking rarely takes this form.

In most cases, traffickers spend months or even years building trust and creating emotional and economic bonds with their victims. They use a variety of coercion and control techniques such as emotional abuse, forced criminality, financial abuse, and physical and sexual abuse to entrap their victims.

Meanwhile, the perpetrators are making money off their victims’ unpaid labor, including unwanted sex work. Human trafficking is estimated to be a US\$172 billion industry.

The story of Jeffrey Epstein is just one example of how traffickers use a combination of manipulation, economic dependency and coercion – rather than physical captivity – to entrap vulnerable people and slowly erode their autonomy. Many victims don't even realize they're being exploited due to the manipulations of their traffickers.

Epstein's crimes have attracted the national spotlight due to the fame and power of his clientele. His case demonstrates the harsh reality that human trafficking is far more common and complex than most people imagine.

We are criminologists who research human trafficking. In 2020, we founded the University of South Florida's Trafficking in Persons Risk to Resilience Lab, known as the TIP lab, to study human trafficking in the state of Florida.

We know that labor and sex trafficking hide in plain sight, embedded in ordinary settings such as hotels, restaurants, farms, massage businesses and private homes.

Most victims are trafficked by someone they know or trust – a family member, intimate partner or employer. Many continue to go to school or work while being exploited.

Misconceptions about what trafficking looks like have made it harder to see and harder to measure. The available data on this crime and its victims has long been fragmented, incomplete and inconsistent. Law enforcement, government organizations such as health departments, and nonprofits that provide advocacy and victim services collect information differently. The same case could be counted multiple times by different agencies, while other victims go entirely uncounted, making it nearly impossible to understand the true scope of trafficking and effectively fight it.

## **Florida steps up**

To address this problem, Florida in 2023 passed Senate Bill 7064, a law requiring all state and local government agencies and nongovernmental organizations that receive federal or state funding to send their human trafficking data to the USF TIP lab.

We developed TIPSTR, Florida's statewide repository for anonymous human trafficking data. This single, consistent database is the most comprehensive data resource on human trafficking in any state in the U.S.

Our team compiled anonymous data from more than 30 state agencies and nonprofit organizations, including the Florida Department of Children and Families, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay.

We also conducted a self-report survey in 2024 to learn more about trafficking victims living in Florida. The survey was administered by YouGov using a representative sample of 2,500 Florida residents. And we established BRIGHT – Bridging Resources and Information Gaps in Human Trafficking – which connects survivors directly with services such as housing, mental health counseling, transportation and more, helping them move from crisis to stability. Besides serving as a resource for trafficking victims, BRIGHT allows us to measure and track the availability of victim services relative to the need for them.

Since starting TIPSTR in 2023, we've been putting all of the data together to create a picture of the complexities, depth and breadth of trafficking, as well as the resources that address the problem, both statewide and in each of Florida's 67 counties.



Florida's agricultural industry attracts many migrant workers, who are vulnerable to being exploited.

*Wayne Eastep/The Image Bank via Getty Images*

## Why Florida faces higher risk

Florida's economy and geography create a mix of risk factors for trafficking that are distinct from most other states.

With its large tourism, agriculture, construction and entertainment industries, the state depends heavily on temporary and mobile workforces. Its international airports and seaports connect it to global markets. Large sporting events and other entertainment bring in visitors looking for "fun in the sun" from all over the U.S. and the world.

All of these features make Florida economically vibrant – but they also create vulnerabilities. Transient labor markets, seasonal employment and high migration make it easier for traffickers to exploit workers and harder for authorities to detect exploitation. Often, buyers travel into Florida as tourists with the idea that “what happens in Florida stays in Florida,” creating a market for sex trafficking.

## What we've found so far

2024 was the first full year for which we collected data, and we published our findings in July 2025 in the 2024 TIPSTR Report. The report demonstrates both the scale of the problem and the importance of reliable data.

The report also analyzes Florida counties with populations above 500,000, evaluating each county's risk, resilience and response capacity on a scale from low to high.

Our self-report survey found that an estimated 500,000 current Florida residents were exploited or trafficked at work, and an estimated 200,000 were trafficked for sex. Minors made up half of those trafficked for sex and a quarter of those exploited at work. Although many of these survivors were exploited outside of Florida, these people need services locally to help get their lives on track.

Of those reporting human trafficking, only 9% to 12% reported this crime to law enforcement, confirming our concerns that it remains largely hidden from view. This is why it's critical that TIPSTR doesn't solely rely on law enforcement data.

Our analysis of the available data revealed wide variation across Florida counties in both the level of risk and the robustness of response systems. Some regions show strong resilience due to coordinated task forces and survivor services, while others struggle with underreporting and limited resources.

## Translating data into action

At the same time, there are encouraging signs. The TIPSTR data shows prosecutions are increasing, and coordination among law enforcement, service providers and community organizations has strengthened.

Going forward, we hope our analysis of the data collected by TIPSTR will help the reporting agencies find new ways to respond. And tracking trends can allow policymakers to measure the effectiveness of programs run by different groups.

In fact, this is already happening. One sheriff's office shared with us that when it saw how many illicit massage businesses were in its county, it started investigating them. In another instance, a nonprofit told us it had used the report to show why it needs more funding to expand its programs.

Seeing where trafficking is most concentrated and where services are missing is already helping the Florida Legislative Working Group on Human Trafficking identify potential policy changes.

Law enforcement can now use TIPSTR's cross-agency data to connect cases. Service providers can coordinate care across counties, reducing duplication and ensuring continuity for survivors.

We hope that the report will also be used to develop broader awareness campaigns and better victim identification practices.

## The importance of a long-term database

The system we've created will allow us to track the data for years to come. From a research perspective, this is critical, because it means our team can assess whether new policies and prevention strategies are making a measurable impact over time.

As criminologists, we believe that what Florida has built through TIPSTR can serve as a model for other states. Data alone cannot end human trafficking, but without it, we are fighting a hidden problem we cannot fully see.

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