

In Their Shoes: Understanding Victims' Mindsets and Common Barriers to Victim Identification

The following document outlines a wide variety of both physical and psychological reasons why trafficked persons cannot or will not leave a trafficking situation. The list is inclusive of all forms of trafficking and all potential victims. Items on this list are not meant to be interpreted as present in all trafficking cases, neither is this list intended to be exhaustive.

Captivity/Confinement

Past examples have included victims being locked indoors, held in guarded compounds, or locked in trunks of cars.

Frequent accompaniment/guarded

In many trafficking networks, victims' public interactions are mediated, monitored, or entirely controlled. In certain severe cases, victims have been controlled by armed guards.

Use and threat of violence

Severe physical retaliation (e.g., beatings, rape, sexual assault, torture) are combined with threats to hold victims in a constant state of fear and obedience.

Use of reprisals and threats of reprisals against loved ones or third parties

Traffickers target reprisals at children, parents, siblings, and friends, or other trafficking victims.

Fear

Fear manifests in many ways in a trafficking situation, including fear of physical retaliation, of death, of arrest, or of harm to one's loved ones.

Shame

Victims from all cultures and in both sex and labor cases may be profoundly ashamed about the activities they have been forced to perform. Self-blame links closely to low self-esteem.

Self-blame

In the face of an extremely psychologically manipulative situation, trafficked persons may engage in self-blaming attitudes and blame themselves for being duped into a situation beyond their control. Self-blaming attitudes are often reinforced by the traffickers and can serve to impede the victim from testifying against or faulting the trafficker.



Debt bondage

Traffickers create inflated debts that victims cannot realistically pay off. These debts are often combined with accruing interest or small fees to ensure that the victim stays in the debt situation.

Traumatic bonding to the trafficker

In many trafficking cases, victims have exhibited commonly-known behaviors of traumatic bonding due to the violence and psychological abuse (a.k.a., Stockholm syndrome).

Language and social barriers

Feelings of unfamiliarity or fear of the unknown provide obstacles to leaving a trafficking situation. These feelings are exacerbated by language and social barriers.

Distrust of law enforcement or service providers

In many cases, traffickers are known to brainwash victims into a false distrust of law enforcement, government officials, and service providers. Victims also may have had negative past experiences with institutional systems, which also impact trust levels.

Isolation

Traffickers purposefully isolate victims from a positive support structure and foster controlled environments where the victim is kept in a state of complete dependency. High levels of dependency and learned helplessness often lead victims to stay in their situation rather than face the uncertain path of leaving.

False promises

Traffickers use sophisticated methods of manipulating the human desire to hope through false promises and lies about a future better life. Victims who are children are especially vulnerable to these false promises.

Hopelessness and resignation

In the face of extreme control, violence, and captivity, notions of hope may fade over time towards states of hopelessness and resignation.

Facilitated drug addiction

In certain trafficking networks, traffickers provide addictive substances to their victims to foster longer-term drug addiction and monetary dependency.

Lack of awareness of available resources

Victims may not leave a situation due to a lack of awareness of any resources or services designed to help them. Traffickers purposefully control the information that victims receive.



Psychological trauma

Many trafficking victims experience significant levels of psychological trauma due to the levels of abuse they have endured. In certain cases, this trauma leads to disassociation, depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which in turn affects daily functioning and levels of agency.

Low levels of self-identifying as trafficking victims

The majority of trafficking victims do not self-identify as victims of human trafficking. They may be unaware of the elements of the crime or the Federal criminal paradigm designed to protect them.

Normalization of exploitation

Over a long period of enduring severe levels of trauma, physical abuse, and psychological manipulation, victims demonstrate resilience strategies and defense mechanisms that normalize the abuse in their minds. In a relative mental assessment, what once may have been viewed as abuse may now be experienced as a normal part of everyday life. This changing “lens” on viewing the world impacts the ability to self-identify as a victim.



A belief that no one cares to help

Trafficking victims may believe that no one cares to help them, a belief that is reinforced both by traffickers' lies but also when community members do not take a strong stance against trafficking. When the community is silent on the issue, traffickers' power is increased and feelings of hopelessness are sustained.

Frequent movement

The frequent movement of victims fosters a low likelihood of multiple encounters with law enforcement or service providers. Victims may not be in one place long enough for a meaningful intervention.