



The State of Human Trafficking

🔍 2026 COMMUNITY REPORT ✕



collaborative to
End Human Trafficking

*Providing leadership and expertise to empower a systemic,
community-wide response to human trafficking.*

WHAT WE KNOW. WHAT REMAINS UNSEEN. WHAT OUR COMMUNITY NEEDS NEXT.



collaborative to End Human Trafficking

Mission

Lead, empower, and connect our community to eradicate human trafficking.

Vision

A world without human trafficking, one community at a time.

The Way

We provide leadership and expertise to empower a systemic, community-wide response to human trafficking.

The Work

We equip organizations and individuals with the knowledge, tools, and resources to address human trafficking by increasing public awareness, delivering tailored trainings, and facilitating multi-disciplinary collaboration.

How To Read This Report

The numbers in this report help us understand how one of our most difficult-to-solve public health issues is showing up in our community, but they do not capture the full scope of exploitation.

Why? Human trafficking is often hidden in plain sight and many people experiencing it are never identified.

Fear, dependence, stigma, immigration concerns, and limited opportunities to safely disclose can all affect whether someone is identified. The data also measure different parts of the response. Hotline contacts, people served, investigations, arrests, prosecutions, and convictions are not the same and should not be combined into one total. The same person or situation may also appear in more than one system.

The trafficking reflected in available data is only the trafficking that people and systems are equipped to recognize and record. Training, staffing, funding, screening practices, service availability, and opportunities for safe disclosure all shape what enters the record.



The most useful question is not only “How many cases were there?” but also “What is the data helping us see?”

Every number represents a person, but no number tells the whole story.

The Collaborative to End Human Trafficking gathered this data to identify **patterns**, recognize **gaps**, strengthen **prevention**, and improve our **community’s response**.

A note on language:



We use *survivor* as a practical term for someone with lived experience of human trafficking. Not everyone who has been trafficked identifies as a survivor or refers to themselves as such.



WHAT WE KNOW.

Human trafficking is **not** hypothetical.

IN 2025...



700+

individuals
identified/served

Reporting organizations in Cuyahoga County identified or served more than 700 adults and youth affected by human trafficking.

The count may include people served by more than one organization and is not a prevalence estimate. **Even so, it establishes that trafficking is neither rare nor isolated in our community.**^[1-7]

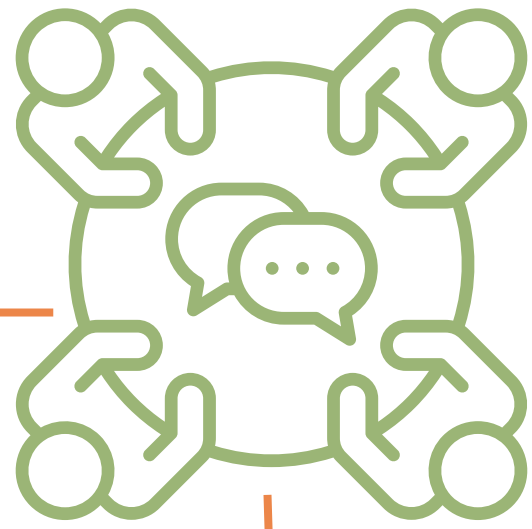
Twenty years ago, seven women religious brought Northeast Ohio together around a question many doubted: *Does human trafficking happen here?*

In 2016, the Collaborative formally began coordinating a multidisciplinary community response and launched the *Happens Here Too* campaign, helping establish that human trafficking was not a distant issue.

Today, the Collaborative convenes and facilitates Cuyahoga County's Anti-Human Trafficking coalition, connecting more than 75 organizations committed to preventing human trafficking and strengthening our community's response.

75

connected,
committed
organizations



156

survivors engaged with
the Collaborative



Source: CDC

The social determinants of health, pictured above, describe the social, economic, and environmental circumstances that shape how people are born, grow, live, work, and age. Applied to trafficking prevention, this framework shifts attention from asking what is "wrong" with a person to asking what resources, relationships, and community conditions could better reduce vulnerability and make exploitation more difficult.^[8]

Vulnerability indicators are not a checklist or a profile of who will be trafficked. They are signs that a person may have fewer safe options or may depend on someone who can misuse that relationship. **Protective conditions** work in the opposite direction by increasing safety, stability, connection, and access to help. A 2023 assessment prepared for the Collaborative identified four especially important protective conditions for young people: **healthy home lives, trusted relationships with adults, safe and stable housing, and access to integrated, trauma-informed services.** This is why anti-trafficking work belongs within the broader work of schools, healthcare systems, housing providers, employers, public agencies, and community organizations.^[9]



ooo



6 THINGS to remember

The available evidence does not provide one complete picture.

It does, however, reveal several patterns that can guide how our community understands and responds to human trafficking.

1

The Count Is a **Starting Point**, Not the Answer

2

Traffickers Exploit **Unmet Needs to Build Trust**

3

Trafficking Affects Children and Adults, but Our Systems See Them **Unevenly**

4

Trafficking Happens in Everyday Places, Including **Online**

5

Exploitation Persists **Because It Is Profitable**

6

Safety Requires **More Than One Service**





WHAT WE KNOW.

1

The Count Is a **Starting Point, Not the Answer**

More than 700 people were identified or served locally in one year, but we still do not know how many people experienced forced labor and/or commercial sexual exploitation and were never identified. No national, state, or local database can currently answer that question with confidence. [10]

That uncertainty should not weaken the response. **It should change what we measure and how.**

A rising count may reflect better screening, stronger services, or increased trust, not necessarily more trafficking.

A falling count may reflect reduced capacity or fewer safe opportunities to disclose, not necessarily less trafficking. **Progress must include both better identification and stronger prevention.**



2

Traffickers Exploit **Unmet Needs to Build Trust**

The familiar image of a stranger abducting someone does not reflect most identified trafficking. National Human Trafficking Hotline data more often identify family members or caregivers, intimate partners, and employers as recruiters or exploiters.

In labor trafficking, an employer may be the person exercising control. In sex trafficking, exploitation may be embedded within a family or intimate relationship. [11]

Traffickers may initially offer affection, belonging, housing, employment, transportation, substances, or financial stability. What appears to be help can then become leverage. Control may involve violence, isolation, debt, threats, withheld documents, or dependence on housing or income. [12,13]





3

Trafficking Affects Children and Adults, but Our Systems See Them **Unevenly**

Grooming and exploitation can begin in childhood or adulthood, and the age when someone is identified may be years after exploitation began. Hotline records show that sex trafficking frequently begins during adolescence, while national referral data also show that most people seeking specialized assistance are adults.[12,14]

Women and girls accounted for 165 of the 168 potential victims reported by the Ohio Attorney General and 315 of the 361 survivors included in the 2025 Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force Summary.[13,15] Among 50 youth and young adults identified in our community, 45 were reported as female, four as male, and one as transgender.

These figures show who has been identified, not everyone who is being trafficked. People of all genders experience trafficking, and labor trafficking data reveal a different gender pattern. Differences by race and ethnicity may also reflect unequal exposure to poverty, violence, housing instability, and system involvement, as well as differences in who is screened, believed, and offered help.[10,15–18]

Disability, immigration status, language, sexual orientation, and gender identity are recorded inconsistently. People whose experiences do not match familiar trafficking narratives may therefore be both vulnerable to exploitation and less visible to the systems designed to identify it.



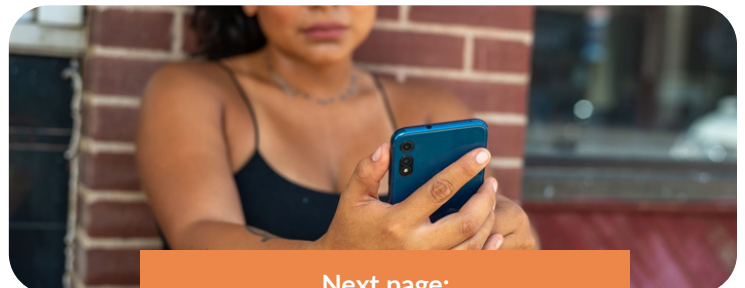
4

Trafficking Happens in Everyday Places, Including **Online**

Trafficking may begin or be facilitated online while the exploitation itself occurs in a home, hotel, workplace, or another everyday location.

This is a crime that exists wherever there are people, across all sectors and systems. National referral data frequently identify hotels and private residences in sex trafficking situations, while reported labor trafficking includes domestic work, agriculture, retail, restaurants, construction, and other industries.[15,17]

Technology may be used to make initial contact, develop trust, advertise children and adults to other abusers, monitor communications, move money, or threaten someone; this is often now referred to as “Technology-facilitated Abuse.”[12,13]



Next page:

Learn through two federal case examples of Technology-Facilitated Abuse in Ohio, with offenders sentenced in 2026.



WHAT WE KNOW.

FROM THE COURTS

Not every form of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation meets the legal definition of human trafficking. Yet production of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), online grooming, sextortion, and commercial sexual exploitation can overlap, and the same child may experience several of them. Recent federal cases illustrate both the severity of technology-facilitated abuse and the importance of distinguishing related offenses from confirmed trafficking.

“Lakewood Sex Offender Sentenced to 26 Years in Prison for Child Exploitation and Sexual Abuse Charges”

Offender: Male, age 34

Published: April 17, 2026

A Lakewood man used technology in multiple ways to facilitate child sexual exploitation: hosting an invite-only platform for sharing CSAM and enticing a 15-year-old to create and send sexual content. The case demonstrates how technology can support both offender-to-offender networks and direct offender-to-child exploitation.

“Brook Park Man Sentenced to 14 Years in Prison for Trafficking Nearly 2,000 Child Sexual Abuse Images”

Offender: Male, age 53

Published: April 1, 2026

Over nearly three years, a Brook Park man used peer-to-peer applications to repeatedly distribute child sexual abuse material (CSAM), with investigators ultimately identifying nearly 2,000 files involving children from toddlers through teenagers. The case demonstrates how technology can enable the repeated circulation of documented abuse, extending harm well beyond the original act.



5

Exploitation Persists Because It Is Profitable

Trafficking is not sustained by vulnerability alone; it persists because others profit from it. In **sex trafficking**, buyer's money creates the market. In **labor trafficking**, employers, recruiters, contractors, businesses, and consumers may benefit from compelled work. Exploitation is not limited to street-level transactions. Wealth, power, technology, properties, financial systems, transportation networks, and professional relationships can help facilitate or conceal it. Those same systems can also become critical points for detection and interruption.

Ohio recorded more than 1,800 arrests of alleged sex buyers from 2019 through 2025, including 103 in a recent Northeast Ohio operation, reflecting visible demand and enforcement activity rather than the full size of the market.[19,20]

National research shows that sex buyers may recognize vulnerability, coercion, and control yet proceed with the transaction.[21] Locally, we need clearer information about buyers, repeat purchasing, transaction locations, trafficker patterns, effective accountability strategies, and demand for goods and services produced through forced labor.

Prevention must reduce the vulnerabilities traffickers exploit while also confronting the demand and financial benefit that sustain exploitation.



6

Safety Requires More Than One Service

There is no single path to safety and no standard package of services.

Survivors often carry the effects of complex trauma resulting from prolonged or repeated exploitation, violence, betrayal, and instability. Safety may begin with meeting immediate needs, but healing often requires long-term, specialized trauma treatment and consistent support.

A person may also need housing, medical care, substance use treatment, legal assistance, childcare, income, transportation, documentation, and trusted relationships. Those needs may change over time and require different levels of support.

Housing is foundational, but “more beds” is not a complete answer. National referral data show that adults, transition-age youth, and minors often require different levels of structure and support. Minors, in particular, were much more likely to need inpatient or high-acuity settings. [12]

Substance use may reflect a health need, serve as a coping response, or be introduced or controlled by a trafficker. Legal needs may involve forced criminality, criminal records, custody, immigration, unpaid wages, debt, identification documents, or protection orders.

Services work best when they are voluntary, coordinated, developmentally appropriate, and sustained long enough to support lasting stability.[12,13]

Level of Support	Adults	Ages 18–24	Minors
Inpatient or specialized medical setting	8.40%	10.20%	32.40%
High -acuity structured support	14.90%	16.80%	34.30%
Moderate support	34.20%	38.00%	21.90%
Lower -support independent setting	42.50%	35.00%	11.40%



WHAT REMAINS UNSEEN.

Question	What remains missing locally
How many?	A defensible prevalence estimate and unduplicated count
Who?	Comparable demographic data and a clearer picture of people being missed
How and where?	Recruitment, control, relationships, industries, venues, and technology
Who benefits?	Local patterns involving traffickers, employers, facilitators, and buyers
What helps?	Unmet needs, completed referrals, service access, outcomes, and survivor-defined success

Our community's challenge is not that information does not exist. It is that what we know remains fragmented across healthcare, schools, courts, shelters, law enforcement, government, and community organizations. Each system sees one part of a person's experience; no system sees the whole picture.

A 2023 community assessment prepared for the Collaborative identified limited county-specific data, fragmented communication, barriers to accessing and continuing services, and insufficient coordination. Those findings remain relevant today.[9]

Skilled professionals collaborate on individual cases. Multidisciplinary teams bring different forms of expertise together, and specialized programs provide healthcare, legal assistance, advocacy, housing connections, and other support.

The next task is to connect these strengths so that identification and assistance do not depend on where someone enters the system or whether two professionals happen to know each other.

The Collaborative and Cleveland State University are expanding use of a validated trafficking screening tool across participating service, court, and law enforcement settings. At one early site, standardized screening identified likely trafficking or elevated risk that may otherwise have remained unseen. The findings demonstrate the value of asking consistent questions and connecting disclosure to a safe response.[2]

This is the work of building community capacity: providing training, developing a common language and shared practices, strengthening referral pathways, measuring responsibly, learning continuously, centering survivor leadership, and holding one another accountable for best practices.

Community capacity building does not replace direct services. It strengthens the network around those services so people are recognized earlier, connected to appropriate support, and met with a safer, more coordinated, and more effective response.[22,23]

WHAT OUR COMMUNITY NEEDS NEXT.



1



Include survivor expertise in decision-making.

Compensated survivor leaders bring essential expertise to policies, programs, funding priorities, community responses, and measures of success.

2



Create responsible shared measurement.

State agencies and policymakers can provide more resources and stronger incentives that help partners share information, identify trafficking patterns, and measure outcomes, without creating a centralized record of survivor identities.

3



Make identification and referral more consistent.

Recognition and safe access to support should not depend on where someone encounters the system. Common language, validated screening tools, training, and clear referral pathways create a more consistent response across settings.

4



Invest in conditions that prevent exploitation.

Prioritize stable housing, family and community support, economic security, healthcare, education, transportation, labor protections, and social connection, not only intervention after trafficking has occurred.

5



Reduce vulnerability and disrupt profit.

An effective response addresses buyer demand, labor exploitation, employer practices, financial benefit, and the systems that facilitate exploitation, not only the vulnerabilities traffickers exploit.

6



Fund the infrastructure and services a proactive response requires.

A proactive trafficking response requires sustained investment in system coordination, direct survivor services, shared standards, data, accountability, and long-term care.



WHAT OUR COMMUNITY NEEDS NEXT.

How Every Sector Can Strengthen Our Response



WHAT OUR COMMUNITY NEEDS NEXT.



& How We Will Measure Progress

We will measure progress by more than whether the number of identified survivors rises or falls. Meaningful progress includes more consistent screening and referrals, stronger privacy protections, safer access to services, fewer unmet needs, greater survivor leadership, and prevention strategies that address both vulnerability and profit.

A better count matters. A **stronger community response** matters more.

WHAT WE HOPE YOU REMEMBER

Human trafficking often develops through relationships, unmet needs, and dependence, not stranger abduction.

Human trafficking affects hundreds of people in our community, and many more may remain unseen.

It occurs in ordinary homes, workplaces, hotels, businesses, streets, and digital spaces.

Survivors need a no-wrong-door response in which trained providers develop individualized service paths and coordinate across organizations to support safety, healing, and long-term recovery.

Cuyahoga County has strong programs and case-level collaboration. The next step is stronger system coordination: aligning practices, referral pathways, data, and accountability across the community response.

Prevention requires both strengthening the conditions that protect people and disrupting the demand, facilitation, and profit that sustain exploitation.

Twenty years ago, Northeast Ohio was working to establish that human trafficking happens here. Today, the work is to build the shared knowledge, capacity, and infrastructure to recognize it earlier, respond consistently, and prevent exploitation before it begins.



Methodology and Sources

The State of Human Trafficking in Cuyahoga County

This report synthesizes public datasets, published research, program records, and information provided by coalition members that was available to the Collaborative as of September 2026.

Figures are presented as reported and are not combined when they measure different populations, periods, places, or stages of response. The 700-plus county figure represents people identified or served by reporting organizations in 2025. Because possible overlap could not be resolved, it is neither an unduplicated count nor a prevalence estimate. Findings from individual programs or screening sites describe the people those programs encountered and should not be generalized to the county population.

Organization-specific information is documented below so readers can verify the evidence without interrupting the report's central narrative.

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18. [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Trafficking in Persons. Trafficking Victim Assistance Program.](#)
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