

STAYING SAFE: TIPS FOR LGBTQ YOUTH

for How to Protect Yourself and
Your Community from Human Trafficking



ABOUT POLARIS

Polaris is a leader in the global fight to eradicate modern slavery. Named after the North Star that guided slaves to freedom in the U.S., Polaris systemically disrupts the human trafficking networks that rob human beings of their lives and their freedom. Our comprehensive model puts victims at the center of what we do – helping survivors restore their freedom, preventing more victims, and leveraging data and technology to pursue traffickers wherever they operate.



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TO GET HELP, REPORT A TIP, OR REQUEST INFORMATION OR TRAINING, CALL THE NATIONAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING HOTLINE AT 1-888-373-7888 OR SEND A TEXT TO BEFREE (233733).

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INTRODUCTION

What are friends for, really? We build friendships for the fun, company, and sense of community. LGBTQ people often have or look for connections with other LGBTQ people – people who get you, love you, respect you, and care for your health. A close community can help you stay safe and give you strength in the face of pain, fear, and violence. A close community can look out for each other, listen, and give support.

We all experience times when we lose or become separated from support networks – friends, family, teachers, mentors – who help to keep us happy and safe. Remember that there are always community members who support you. They are at youth groups, LGBTQ centers, health centers, and activist groups. If you feel lonely or distant, know that you have people you can turn to for support, companionship, and help in times of need.

Whether or not you have such a community, we want to talk about ways to stay safe, especially from human trafficking. We wish the best for you, but wishes take us only so far – here are the things we want you to be aware of and tips to help you protect yourself and your friends.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

“I had no idea that I was part of an epidemic of homeless queer kids. Three days after I was kicked out I went to the public library and looked at every book that was shelved under ‘homosexuality.’ I was searching for hope, for home. I didn’t know which friend’s family would take pity and let me sleep on their couch that night, or what I would eat for dinner. I’d never met another teenage lesbian. There was nothing on those library shelves that resembled my life. Sitting on the floor of that old library I promised myself that if I survived, I would write a book so that no other queer kid would feel as alone as I felt that day.

A few weeks later, I rode busses for two hours to get to the city of Portland. I held my breath and walked into the queer youth center for the first time. It was all concrete, spray paint, bike parts, glitter, and BO, but for the first time I knew that I wasn’t alone. I learned the beginnings of trust from other kids who had lost everything. We swore allegiances to one another, built families in the back rooms of that youth center, in parks, under bridges, in punk houses. We kept the promises we made. We grew each other up, saving one another in ways no adults, no social workers or agencies ever could.”

- Sassafras Lowrey¹



WHAT IS HUMAN TRAFFICKING?

Human trafficking is the use of force, fraud, or coercion to compel someone to engage in commercial sex or forced labor or services. There is one exception to this rule, however: minors who are made to engage in commercial sex are automatically considered victims of human trafficking, even if the use of force, fraud, or coercion is not present. A commercial sex act can be a sex act traded for anything of value: money, food, shelter, drugs, among others. In labor trafficking cases, force, fraud, and coercion still need to be used by the trafficker if the victim is under the age of 18.

Human trafficking occurs in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and U.S. Territories. Victims of human trafficking can be adults or minors, foreign nationals or U.S. citizens, and people of any gender identity. Traffickers can control their victims in many different ways. Sometimes they are physical and use violence or threats, and other times they use psychological tactics, such as lying, manipulation, keeping their victims indebted to them, and more.

“I had a fight with my mother over my gender identity and sexual orientation, and she put me out, and she instructed all family and friends not to help me out financially, so I hitch-hiked to San Francisco.”

– Transgender youth, 24²

While human trafficking could happen to anyone, there are some particular circumstances or risk factors that human traffickers may try to exploit for their own profit. For example, people who may not be financially stable because of homelessness or a lack of job opportunities may be susceptible to manipulation by traffickers who promise safety, stability, a job, or a better life. Runaway and homeless youth, as well as victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, past violence or abuse, or social discrimination are also frequently targeted by traffickers.

Too many LGBTQ youth face significant challenges during adolescence and early adulthood, fighting discrimination, misconceptions, and abuse by peers, family members, and others in their community. Because of these hardships, you may be at a higher risk of trafficking and exploitation.

“ I don’t remember it that vividly, all I know is just that I was starving...My friend was like, ‘Come to the stroll trust me, you’ll get somebody.’ I was hungry, I was cold, so I did it.”

– Respondent 199, 21 years old, black, gay, male³

As a young LGBTQ person, you are doing your best to stay safe. But even though you are trying your hardest, there are people in the world who want to take advantage of those whose families don’t support them, who live away from their families, or who feel alone.

You may have to work hard and make sacrifices in order to stay safe, but that doesn’t give anyone permission to exploit you. Just because someone is providing you with food, shelter, money, or something else you may need, does not mean that they are allowed to take advantage of you. There are other options and support systems that are not exploitative, and we can help you find them.

Each individual’s human trafficking experience is unique, but there are ways to protect yourself and members of your community from traffickers. This toolkit is meant to help youth that identify as LGBTQ learn what human trafficking is, how to recognize if they or someone they know may be experiencing human trafficking, and how to get help if they do.



SIGNS YOU MAY BE EXPERIENCING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

We know you are trying your hardest to stay safe and live your life, and sometimes that involves making sacrifices. Sometimes it can be hard to know when sacrifices and work cross the line to exploitation and abuse. It's not necessarily easy to tell if an employer or someone you love or trust is actually taking advantage of you. Here are some signs to look out for. It's important to note that each trafficking situation is unique, and there are many more indicators than the ones listed here. Later in the toolkit we will tell you what to do if you think you may recognize some signs of human trafficking, but aren't sure.

- 1 Your employer doesn't pay you in cash or they keep your money; doesn't pay you at all
- 2 Someone doesn't let you go where you please
- 3 Someone makes you feel extreme emotions in order to control you: sometimes they tear you down, calling you names like "trash," while other times they build you up by calling you names like "queen"

- 4 Someone can access and control your phone, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, or email
- 5 Your employer promised you one type of job, but instead makes you do something different
- 6 A person that you trust or the person that you love makes you have sex with other people
- 7 You don't get to choose who you can be friends with

“My family was very religious, they really didn't approve of me. I didn't have anybody...I felt really in the dark and vulnerable. I was introduced to the streets and it gave me a feeling of being accepted and belonging. From there I was introduced to prostitution, and in this weird way I almost felt a sense of happiness because I was desired...I was introduced to someone who offered to help me out. I had to work for them, they took my money, they were taking advantage of me. There were nights I was so tired I didn't want to go out to the streets, but they would force me. It was really bad.”

– Torri Ramos, transgender woman⁴

“ I was supposed to be going to meet up with a guy from Backpage and he told me that he wanted to manage me and it was in the Bronx so I said, ‘Okay, fine,’ you know being naive. So I went and I met up with him, and...all I hear is materialistic things, he drove a BMW at the time, he was really popular, you know...he was also Hispanic like me and so I trusted him, I know it sounds a little off to trust somebody because of his ethnicity but it’s just reminding me of home...he told me that he was breaking me in and so I didn’t understand what that meant, still naive, okay I’m all like, “Money, yay,” and he’s like, “Oh now you’re my Bitch,” like basically I’m his property. And I don’t know what was wrong with me maybe because I was missing my mom and I didn’t have the support that I wanted or needed from my dad and at first I was sad, I was sad through the whole thing then it was just like I thought I was starting to fall in love with him. I was what they call a bottom, which makes a lot of money. A bottom is like the main girl, the girl who brings in the most money and I mean quotas and I was meeting my quota, it was \$4,000. It went from being \$150 every half hour to being \$1,000 every night to being \$4,000 every day.”

- (Respondent 470, 20 years old, multiracial, pansexual, female)⁵



SIGNS YOUR FRIEND OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW MAY BE EXPERIENCING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Sometimes people who are being trafficked don't believe that they are being victimized at all. They may be too close to the situation to realize that they are being taken advantage of, they may be in love with their trafficker, or they may not see any other options. As a friend or fellow community member, you are in a unique position to recognize when someone you know is in trouble. This is especially important for those people who are not living at home or who may not have enough support from their families.

We encourage you to keep an eye out for all LGBTQ youth that you know, not just your own family and friends. Here are some signs that indicate that your friend or someone you know may be experiencing human trafficking. Remember, these are some of the more common indicators we see, but there are many more than the ones listed here.

Interviewer: *Who would you go to when in trouble?* **Interviewee:** *That's a hard one. I usually don't... Yeah, I'm just like alone.*

– (Respondent 5281, 20 years old, black and Dutch, lesbian, female)⁶

- 1 Someone has isolated your friend from you and other loving and supportive people
- 2 Someone makes decisions for your friend about when your friend is free, where they can go, or who they can hang out with
- 3 Your friend left town suddenly or they disappear from time to time with little or no explanation
- 4 Your friend is highly secretive about a new relationship or their whereabouts
- 5 Your friend has received expensive new gifts
- 6 You never see your friend anymore or you can never get time alone with them
- 7 Your friend seems frightened or nervous
- 8 Your friend seems malnourished or ill and isn't allowed to get the treatment they need

“*I will go to a friend that is like very close to me, and like you know I can talk to her about all my problems because she won't judge me.***”**

– (Respondent 225, 18 years old, multiracial, bisexual, male)⁷

TIPS FOR STAYING SAFE – KEEPING YOURSELF SAFE AND WATCHING OUT FOR THE WELL-BEING OF YOUR FRIENDS



There are certain circumstances that make a person more vulnerable to exploitation – and traffickers know them and take advantage of them. You should know them too, so that you can be more aware of the different ways people might try to take advantage of you or the people you know.

Here are some risk factors that traffickers may exploit. We are not listing these in judgment. We recognize the difficulties you may be facing and respect the strength it takes to get through them. But, we also want you to know the sorts of circumstances that traffickers look for so that you can better protect yourself from exploitation if they apply to you.

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| 1 Homelessness | 5 Gang involvement | 9 Criminal history or current involvement in criminal activities |
| 2 Drug, alcohol, and tobacco use | 6 Bad history with child welfare services | 10 Lack of access to hormone therapy drugs |
| 3 History of prior abuse or neglect | 7 History of victimization | |
| 4 Isolation | 8 Low self-esteem or a need for validation | |

“Who I am, is a person, my actions shape how I look at the world or how I still keep living in this world. It shapes how I live, but it doesn't define who I am. What defines who I am is basically how I see through things and how I do things and how I do whatever it takes to survive because I know if people were placed in the same situation, especially if they haven't eaten for like about week or so and they had no place to live and their clothes are smelling like piss. They will have no choice. To some it's like no choice, but to do it's either that or live in a life where your clothes are dirty every day, people are looking at you with a weird look, you're hungry, you are about to die it's like that's all you have.”

– (Respondent 5094, 21 years old, Latino, bisexual, male)⁸

TIPS FOR STAYING SAFE [CONT.]

“I get counseling. I guess I just get help when I need it. Like, if I’m ever in, like, a bad situation I know that I can come to anyone, anybody here and they’ll find me the right help that I need.”

– Focus group participant (Austin, TX)⁹

HERE ARE SOME WAYS TO STEER CLEAR OF PEOPLE WHO MIGHT TRY TO EXPLOIT YOU

- 1 Don't share your passwords (social media, bank PIN numbers, email, etc.) and avoid posting your location online
- 2 Keep an eye on your ID documents; if someone asks to hold them for you, say no
- 3 Identify friends, community members, and family that you trust
- 4 Remember that you deserve to be safe
- 5 Remind yourself that your worth is not determined by another person
- 6 Be careful on social media – traffickers often use social media as recruiting grounds
- 7 Come up with a safety plan – think about who you would call, where you would go, and how you would get there if you found yourself in a situation that felt unsafe
- 8 Memorize the National Human Trafficking Hotline number (call 1-888-373-7888 or text Polaris at 233733) and/or the number of a safe adult that you trust

“Basically like with a lot of programs out here you definitely need to look into it because they offer a wide range of services that can help you in your specific what you need like some places help out with like legal services. So many different things so I definitely encourage people to check those things out. And they could definitely if you are honest with them they could help you step by step what’s the right road to like choose so. And I don’t know like for anybody else but for some people there is definitely they need to look at it as a temporary situation because you can’t be like 80 years old still on the stroll so yeah. Just move on from that.”

– (Respondent 301, 21 years old, Latino, bisexual, male)¹⁰

WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK YOU OR YOUR FRIEND MAY BE EXPERIENCING HUMAN TRAFFICKING



If you think you or someone you know may be experiencing human trafficking, you can call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888 or send an email to help@humantraffickinghotline.org. You can also text “HELP” to BeFree (233733), which is Polaris’s Textline that is operated from 3:00 p.m. – 11:00 p.m. EST.

The National Human Trafficking Hotline has provided round-the-clock, confidential support to thousands of survivors of sex and labor trafficking who are looking for a safe, nonjudgmental space to seek services and ask for help. If you contact the Hotline, we can help you get the support that you want, and we won’t give you any resources unless you say you want them. Some people may not be ready to leave their situation or receive services, and that’s okay. We will not tell you what you want, what you need, or what you should do. If you do wish to receive help, we can connect you with services and resources in your town or city. If you need to leave – whether that means going home or getting out of a place where you are being exploited – we can help you find the support you need, no matter where you are in the country.

The Hotline is a confidential toll-free hotline that operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We take calls from anywhere in the country, and can answer calls in more than 200 languages. We are not a law enforcement entity, and we will not report anything to law enforcement unless the caller gives us their explicit consent, or if we are required to by law. We are required by law to report to law enforcement if the caller references suspected abuse or neglect of a minor, or if there is imminent danger present.

The Hotline is a national, confidential resource, so there is an increased level of anonymity that you might not get at a local level. If you request, we won’t record any names or contact information that you provide. If you are worried about backlash from your trafficker or fellow community members, please know that we won’t know who you are talking about, and will not judge you or blame you for your circumstances.

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