

Human Trafficking During the COVID and Post-COVID Era

An analysis of data on human trafficking situations reported to the US National Human Trafficking Hotline from 2020-2022

We have long known human trafficking to be a pervasive and versatile crime, as traffickers and exploiters adjust to changing environments. The COVID-19 pandemic showed us the profound adaptability of human trafficking. A global pandemic did not stop or impede trafficking from happening and, with few exceptions, did not seem to change how it happens or to whom it happens.

In this report, we examine data from the National Human Trafficking Hotline from January 2020 through August 2022 and explore a snapshot of the top findings of human trafficking during the calamitous pandemic years. We provide top trends and answers to questions we typically report on as a part of our data analysis, and introduce how select trends that began early in the pandemic changed or continued as the crisis evolved.

ABOUT THIS DATA

This data presents information collected on situations of trafficking reported during the majority of the pandemic years, January 2020-August 2022. This report presents trends observed in data collected by the Hotline during this time frame, but does not determine cause or specifically attribute these changes and trends to the pandemic. The information provided is limited to empirical information provided directly by Hotline data.



Limitations: The National Human Trafficking Hotline's primary purpose is to assist victims and survivors. Data collection via the Hotline is limited to information relevant to the signaler's safety and privacy. Data that is not relevant to the signaler's needs, such as details of their trafficking experience, is not collected. Individuals are never asked questions specifically for data collection purposes and are asked to share only the information that they are comfortable providing for the purposes of helping them get help and stay safe. **Due to this, data presented here does not represent prevalence data, nor should it be considered a representative sample of all trafficking situations or trafficking victims in the United States.**



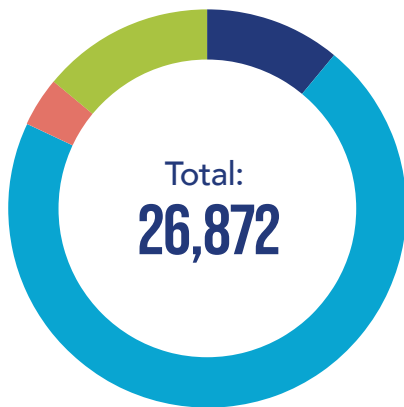
Findings Summary

- Much of what we know about how human trafficking happens and who is vulnerable remained the same during the pandemic. No substantial changes in these trends were observed during the January 2020-August 2022 timeframe.
- Trends that did change were specific to the identity of Hotline signalers and the rates of reporting of online sexual exploitation.

TOP NUMBERS

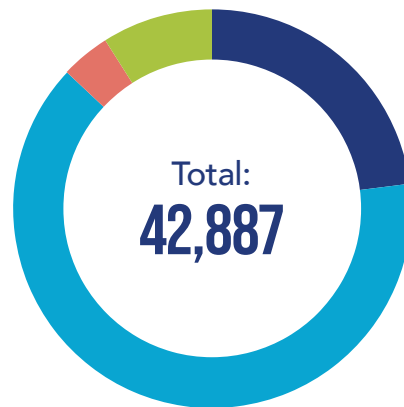
(1/1/2020-8/31/2022)

Total Trafficking Situations, by Form



Form of Trafficking	# of Situations
Labor	2,873
Sex	19,283
Sex and Labor ¹	1,005
Other/Not Specified ²	3,711
Grand total	26,872

Total Likely Trafficking Victims, by Form



Form of Trafficking	# of Likely Victims
Labor	9,735
Sex	27,370
Sex and Labor	1,862
Other/Not Specified	4,004
Grand Total	42,887³

1 Situations where the form of trafficking is 'Sex and Labor' involve both indicators of commercial sex and labor by force, fraud, or coercion, or if there are indicators of commercial sex being performed by a minor alongside indicators of labor or services happening through force, fraud, or coercion.

2 Situations where the form of trafficking is 'Other/Not Specified' typically occur when a law enforcement agent or service provider contacts the Trafficking Hotline for resources and referrals but does not disclose details about the trafficking situation due to confidentiality. This category also includes situations in which the person reporting the information references human trafficking but does not provide further detail regarding the presence of labor or commercial sex. These cases are often submitted to the Trafficking Hotline through anonymous online tip reports.

3 This count is non-cumulative, as individuals may be victimized in multiple situations.



Trafficking Victims During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Hotline data during the pandemic showed that victim demographics largely followed existing trends.



In situations of sex trafficking, 37% of potential victims were minors; in situations of labor trafficking, 9% of potential victims were minors.



In situations of sex trafficking, 80% of victims were female, and in situations of sex and labor trafficking, 66% of victims were female. In situations of labor trafficking where gender was identified, most victims were male.



In situations where the victims' race or ethnicity was known,⁴ Latino/a-identifying people comprised 82% of labor trafficking situations. In sex trafficking situations where the victims' race or ethnicity was known, victims were African American (21%), Asian (25%), Latino/a (20%), and White/Caucasian (32%).

Hotline data also showed that vulnerabilities to trafficking during the pandemic were similar to those reported prior the the pandemic. In situations where vulnerabilities were known,⁵ the top five risk factors included:

TOP 5 RISK FACTORS/VULNERABILITIES

(1/1/2020-8/31/2022)

Labor Trafficking

Recent Migration/Relocation

Unaccompanied Foreign Minor⁶

Unstable Housing

Self-Reported Economic Hardship

Substance Use Concern

Sex Trafficking

Substance Use Concern

Unstable Housing

Runaway/Homeless Youth

Recent Migration/Relocation

Mental Health Concern

These risk factors are consistent with pre-pandemic data and highlight the need to address systemic issues that create vulnerability to trafficking, including but not limited to those mentioned here.

⁴ Race/ethnicity information was only provided for 26% of victims (n = 11,242).

⁵ Risk factors/vulnerabilities were known for 30% of victims (n = 12,852).

⁶ "Unaccompanied Foreign Minor" is selected as a risk factor or vulnerability when, prior to the start of exploitation relevant to the described trafficking situation, the victim or survivor could have ever been described as a youth under the age of 18 who entered the United States, without a parent, relative, or other responsible adult to care for them. Non-citizen children who enter the U.S. with relatives who are unable to care for them are still considered to be unaccompanied.



Means and Methods of Trafficking During the Pandemic

The Trafficking Hotline segments human trafficking into at least 25 types within the categories of sex trafficking and labor trafficking. Analysis of data reported during this period demonstrates that victims were largely trafficked in the same venues and in the same ways as they were pre-pandemic. Hotline data also showed that trends in exploiter relationship; recruitment tactics; and method of force, fraud, or coercion also remained largely unchanged during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Victims were trafficked by someone they knew. For both sex trafficking and labor trafficking, in situations where the relationship was disclosed, traffickers were almost always someone the victim knew.⁷ Across all forms of trafficking, the top relationship types were employer, familial relationship, or romantic partner.

TOP 5 EXPLOITER TYPES

(1/1/2020-8/31/2022)

Labor Trafficking

Exploiter's Relationship to Victim	% of Victims
Employer	85%
Familial Relationship to Victim(s)	7%
Recruiter (Non-Employer)	5%
Smuggler	4%
Intimate Partner of Victim(s)	3%

Sex Trafficking

Exploiter's Relationship to Victim	% of Victims
Familial Relationship to Victim(s)	44%
Intimate Partner of Victim(s)	39%
Employer	6%
Dealer/Illicit Substance Provider	5%
Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: No Controller	3%

Recruitment tactics used by traffickers also remained largely unchanged. For situations of labor trafficking, job offer or advertisement remained the dominant recruitment tactic. For situations of sex trafficking, familial trafficking and trafficking by intimate partners were the top reported recruitment tactics.

Victims were trafficked in escort services, pornography, illicit massage businesses, domestic work, and agriculture. In situations of sex trafficking, escort services and pornography were the most reported types of sex trafficking. In situations of labor trafficking, victims most often reported being trafficked in either domestic work or agriculture and animal husbandry. While these data remain largely consistent with pre-COVID data, it is worth noting that since 2018, the number of situations of sex trafficking in pornography has steadily increased. While escort services remain the top reported type of sex trafficking, trafficking in the pornography industry is being reported more and more. For situations of labor trafficking, the only notable difference is the deep decline in traveling sales crews⁸ and begging/peddling as a type of labor trafficking.⁹

7 Exploiter types were known for 32% of victims (n = 13,871).

8 Begging/peddling was the third most reported type of labor trafficking in 2017 (<https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2017NHTHStats-1.pdf>).

9 Traveling sales crews were the third most reported type of labor trafficking in 2016, 2018, and 2019 (<https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/2016-Statistics.pdf>, https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Polaris_National_Hotline_2018_Statistics_Fact_Sheet.pdf, <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Polaris-2019-US-National-Human-Trafficking-Hotline-Data-Report.pdf>).



TOP TYPES OF TRAFFICKING

(1/1/2020-8/31/2022)

Labor Trafficking Situations

Type	# of Situations
Domestic Work	542
Agriculture & Animal Husbandry	277
Restaurants & Food Service	192
Construction	178
Illicit Activities	157

Sex Trafficking Situations

Type	# of Situations
Escort Services	2,781
Pornography	2,212
Illicit Massage, Health, & Beauty	1,448
Residential-Based Commercial Sex	1,355
Personal Sexual Servitude	637

Traffickers used economic abuse, threats, and emotional abuse and manipulation to traffic victims.¹⁰ During the pandemic years, victims of labor trafficking reported financial abuse, such as wage withholding; threats, such as immigration threats; and excessive working hours as the primary methods of trafficking. Victims of sex trafficking reported emotional and physical abuse and inducing or exploiting substance abuse issues as primary methods traffickers used to recruit and trap victims.¹¹ These reflect the same tactics traffickers used pre-pandemic, with one exception: The use of isolation as a means of force in situations of sex trafficking, which was the top reported method in 2017 and 2018, has dropped out of the top five reported methods.

Other notable observations include the top reported method of control. During the COVID-19 timeframe, inducing or exploiting substance abuse issues was the top reported method of coercion in situations of sex trafficking. While the top reported method of coercion in sex trafficking has varied from year to year in the past, inducing or exploiting substance abuse regularly appears in the top three, suggesting this finding is not unusual. In situations of labor trafficking, taking/withholding earnings, excessive working hours, and threats to immigration were the top reported methods of coercion.

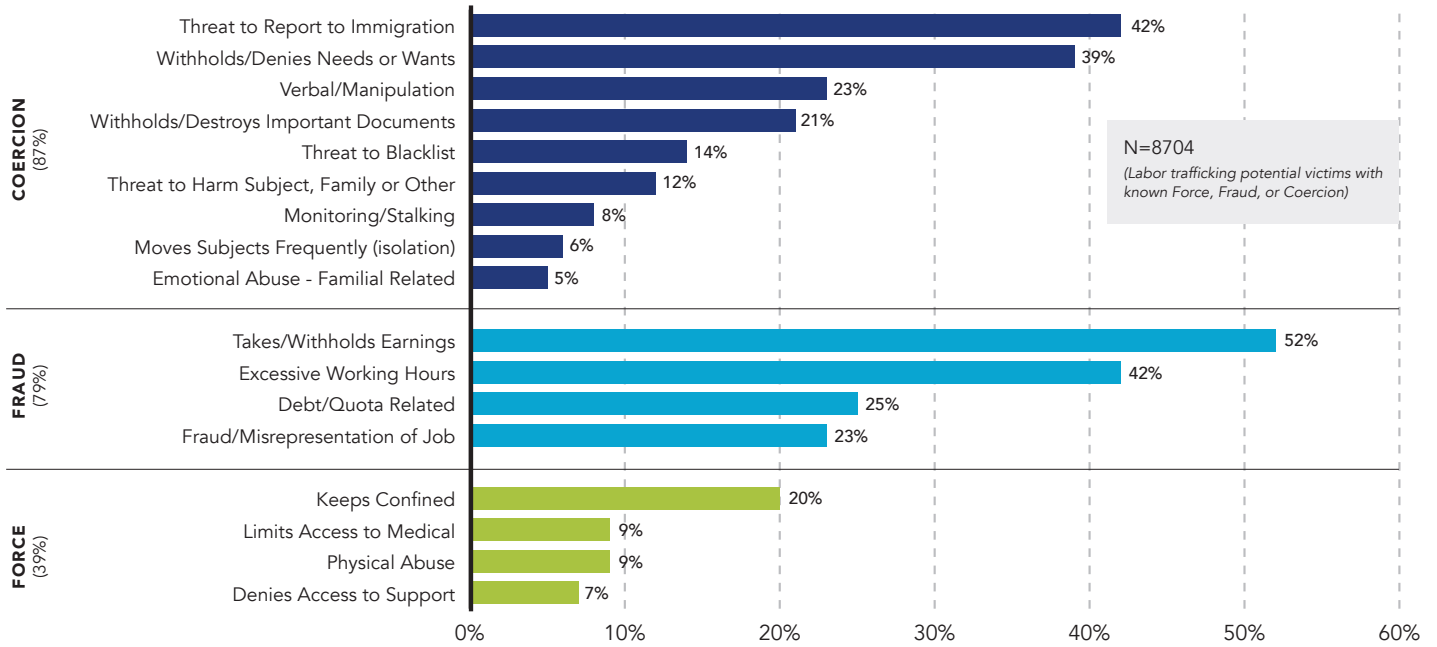
¹⁰ Force, fraud, and coercion was specified for 72% of victims (n = 30,752).

¹¹ A minor in commercial sex is not included but is sufficient to classify a situation as human trafficking based on federal law.



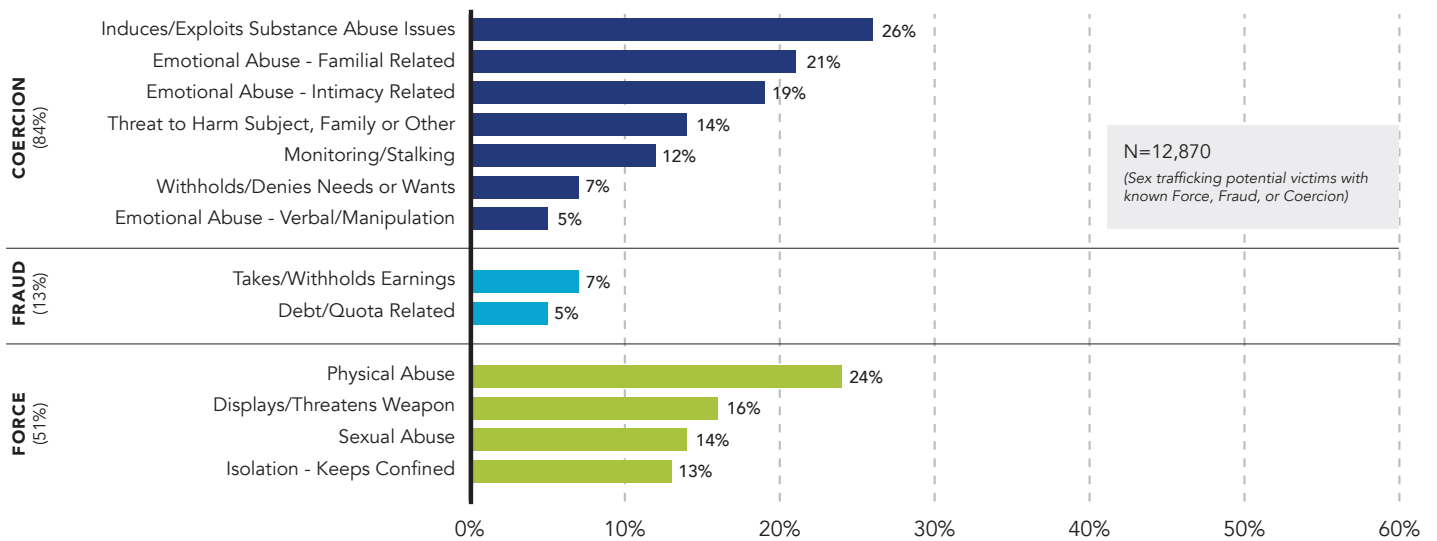
EXPLOITATION OF VICTIMS OF LABOR TRAFFICKING

(1/1/2020-8/31/2022)



EXPLOITATION OF VICTIMS OF SEX TRAFFICKING

(1/1/2020-8/31/2022)





Getting Help

For both sex and labor trafficking during the COVID pandemic, **interaction with friends and family was the most common point of access to help for likely victims.**¹² Friends and family were also reported as the top access point for victims dating back to 2017, suggesting that top access points were largely unaffected by the pandemic.



The top referral request in labor trafficking situations was for legal services.



The top referral request in sex trafficking situations was for shelter or housing.

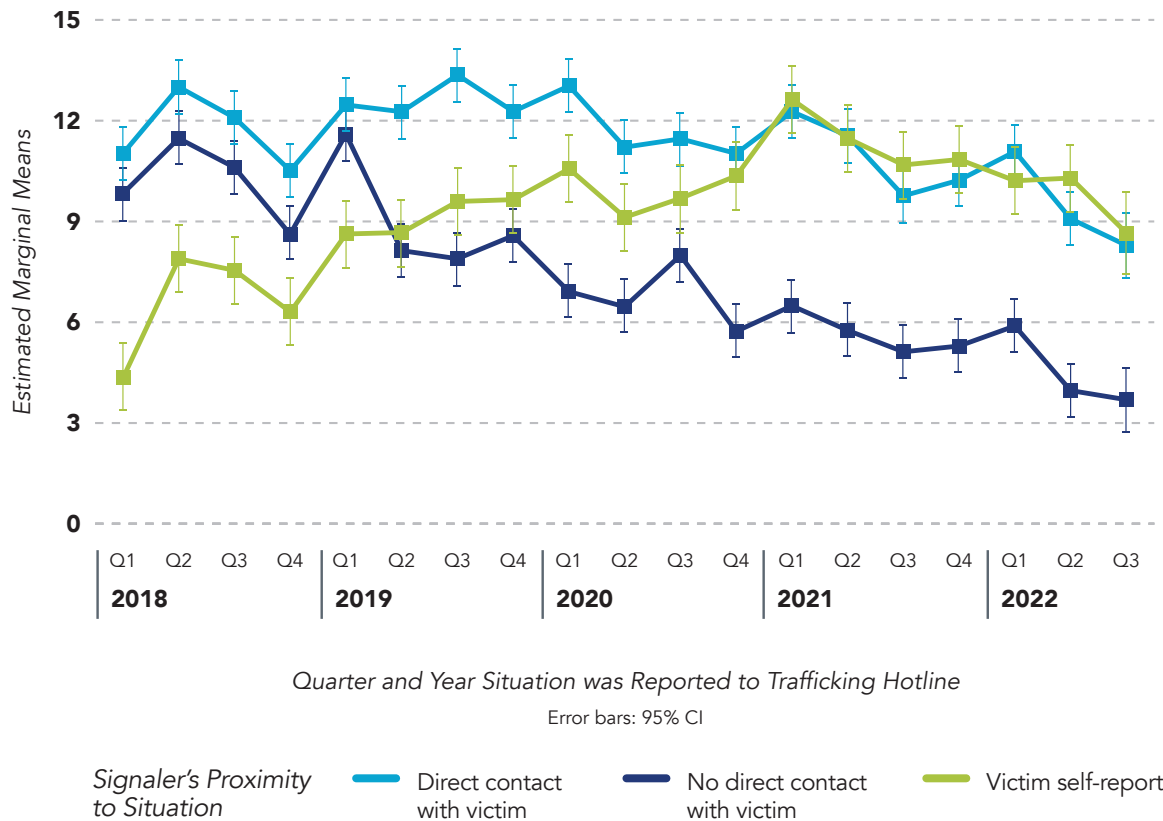
Five Years of Trafficking Trends (2018-2022)

Victims of trafficking increasingly self-reported their trafficking situations to the Hotline.

Conversely, people with no relationship to or interaction with the victim (e.g., bystanders) were involved in fewer reports trafficking situations as the pandemic went on.



DAILY NUMBER OF SITUATIONS



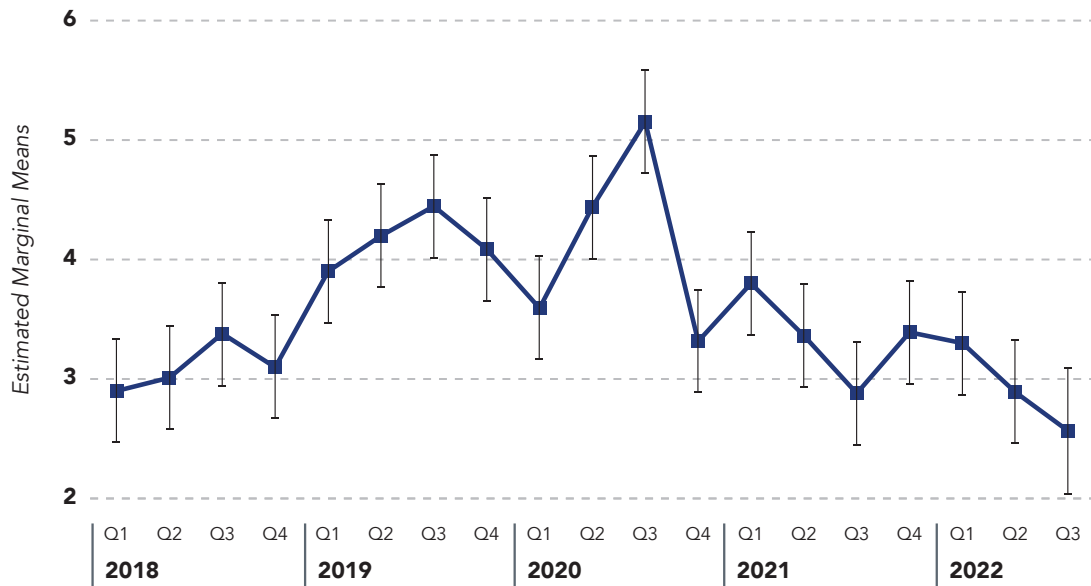
¹² Access points were known for 22% of victims (n = 9,549).



Although situations of online sexual exploitation went up in the early months of the pandemic, this trend did not continue as the crisis evolved. This change in data could reflect either an actual decrease in the amount of online sexual exploitation or a decrease in reporting of online sexual exploitation to the Hotline.



AVERAGE DAILY SITUATIONS INVOLVING ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION



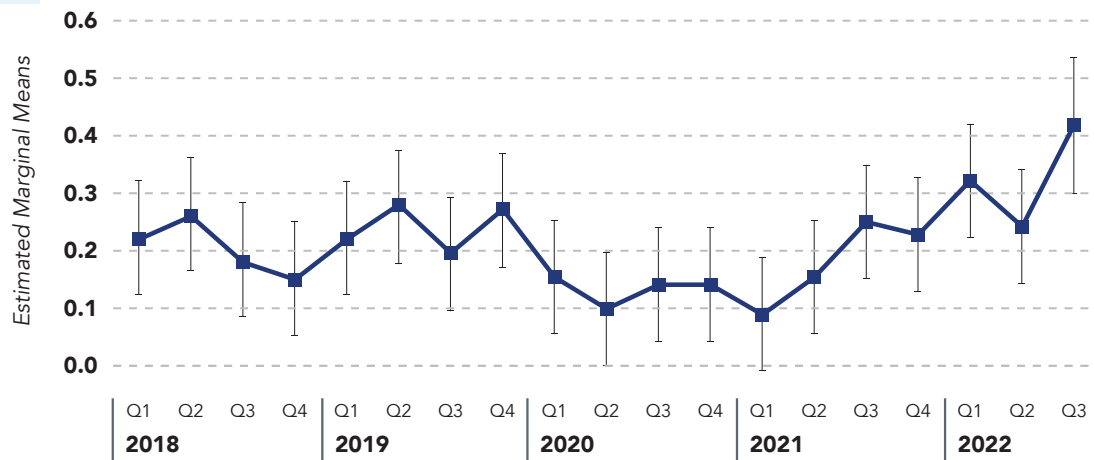
Quarter and Year Situation was Reported to Trafficking Hotline

Error bars: 95% CI

During the pandemic, the number of labor trafficking situations involving restaurants and food service went down as businesses were temporarily or permanently shuttered, but now that trend is reversing. Starting in late 2021, the Hotline began to see a rise in situations of labor trafficking in the restaurant industry, a trend that continued through 2022.



AVERAGE DAILY SITUATIONS INVOLVING TYPOLOGY OF RESTAURANTS AND FOOD SERVICE

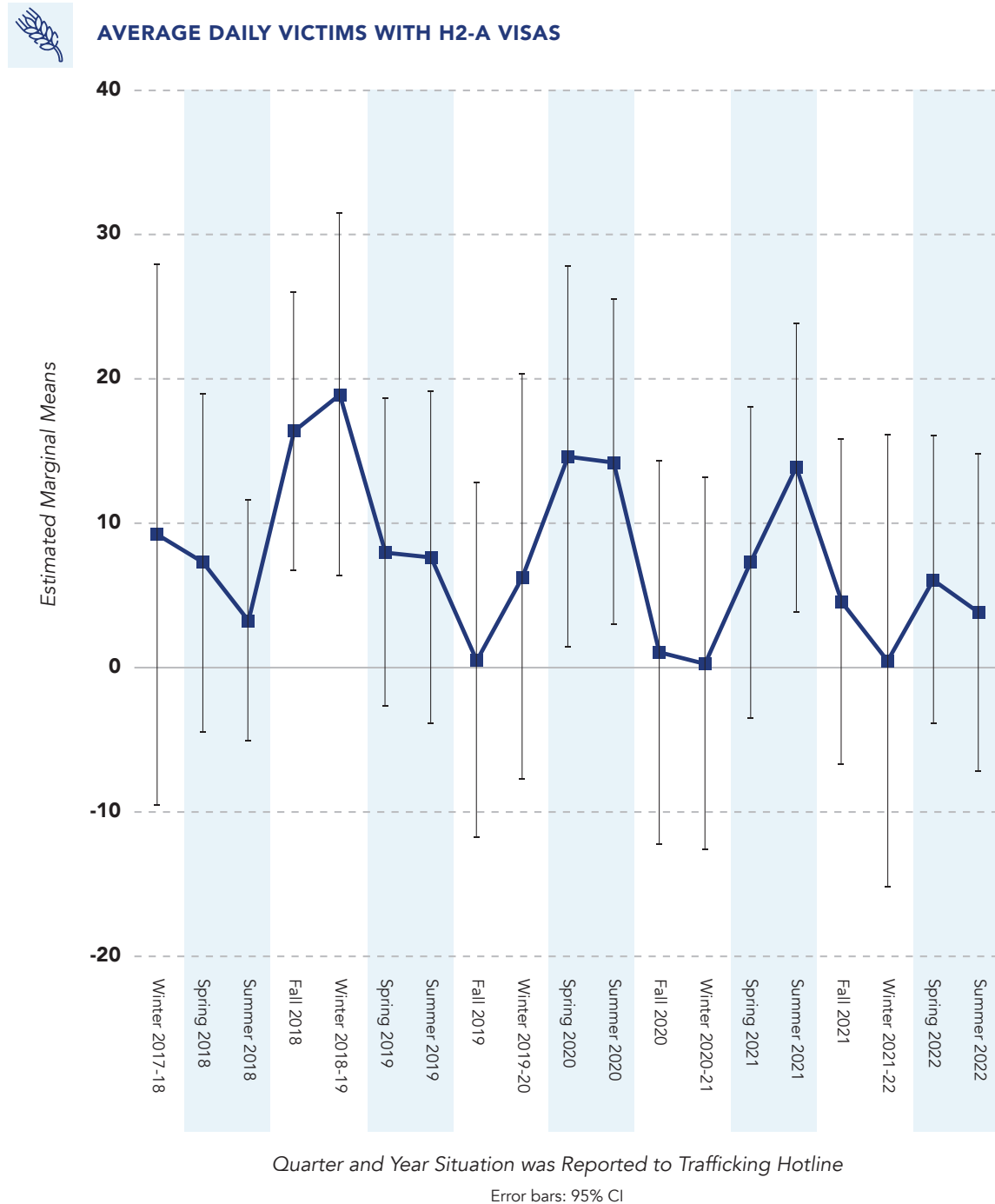


Quarter and Year Situation was Reported to Trafficking Hotline

Error bars: 95% CI



During the pandemic, average daily victims of labor trafficking among H-2A visa holders did not vary significantly compared to previous growing seasons. The H-2A program grants temporary work visas to foreign nationals, allowing them to work in the agricultural industry for up to a year. H-2A visa holders are especially vulnerable to labor trafficking due to factors such as the economic situation in their home countries, lack of knowledge about their rights, and their recent migration. Analysis of Hotline data stretching back to 2017 demonstrates reports of labor trafficking of H-2A visa holders remained fairly consistent in pattern and at levels similar to those observed pre-pandemic, indicating that labor trafficking of H-2A visa holders appears to have been unimpeded by the pandemic.





Conclusions: The Wrong Kind of Resilience

Demonstrated by the above data, trends in human trafficking type and recruitment tactics as reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline did not change significantly over the course of the COVID pandemic. Human trafficking in the US remained remarkably unimpeded by the pandemic and regrettably resilient.

This analysis suggests that the vulnerabilities that make people susceptible to trafficking in the first place— the broken systems that enable traffickers to target people who are unhoused, impacted by substance use, economically marginalized, or have recently migrated; and the unending demand for commercial sex and cheap labor— continue to drive human trafficking. Even in the midst of a global pandemic that suppressed commercial activity across industries, human trafficking continued to thrive.

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To put an end to trafficking, we must work together to address the underlying situations that make people vulnerable, strengthen our systems to care for the most marginalized and disenfranchised, and hold abusers and exploiters accountable for their crimes.

And most importantly, we must listen to human trafficking victims and survivors. It is encouraging to see the longer-term growth in the proportion of victims self-reporting their situations to the Trafficking Hotline — indicating growing awareness and trust, as well as improving the assistance the Trafficking Hotline can provide. As victims and survivors share their experiences and expertise, it is our responsibility to listen, respond, and amplify their voices as we work to address root causes and broken systems together.

If you or anyone you know is being pressured to exchange sex for money or something of value; or is being threatened or otherwise forced to work against your will, help is available:



CALL 1-888-373-7888



TEXT BEFREE 233733

The data displayed in this report was generated based on information communicated to the National Human Trafficking Hotline via phone, email, online tip report, SMS, or webchat. The National Human Trafficking Hotline cannot verify the accuracy of the information reported. This is not a comprehensive report on the scale or scope of human trafficking within the United States. These statistics are accurate as of 11/3/2023, but are subject to change as new information emerges or as data cleanup occurs.

Since awareness of both human trafficking and the existence of a national victim service hotline is still limited, this data set should be interpreted as a limited sample of actual victim or trafficking incident data, rather than a representation of all existent victims or incidents of human trafficking. The information reported by the Trafficking Hotline is only able to represent who has access to and knowledge of the Trafficking Hotline, who has the means to reach out, and who is more likely to self-identify as a likely victim or someone in need of assistance. The data reported by Polaris should not be compared to the findings of more rigorous academic studies or prevalence estimates.

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