



# First National Survivor Study (NSS)

An Overview of the Background, Design, and Plan

## Background

Polaris works to reshape the systems that make sex and labor trafficking possible and profitable in North America. For more than a decade, Polaris has assisted thousands of victims and survivors through the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline (Trafficking Hotline)<sup>1</sup>. While Polaris' data set, built by operating the Trafficking Hotline, has great utility in shedding light on the types of human trafficking occurring most commonly in the United States, it has substantial limitations. First, the Hotline staff ask only questions that are important for responding to victim's needs. Most importantly, the data represents only the information survivors decide to share in order to get the services they are seeking. Furthermore, not all survivors choose to or are even able to contact the Hotline while in their trafficking situations. The passive nature of survivors' role in the data collection, moreover, lends itself to skewed power dynamics in which survivors are not in control over what story the data tells and how and if it is used.

Additional evidence is urgently needed to fill the gaps described above in order to provide more effective and targeted interventions to support Polaris' strategy to empower vulnerable populations and change the systems that enable their exploitation. The National Survivor Study (NSS) aims to fill these gaps by creating scientifically grounded evidence using participatory research methods that involve and empower survivors and other key stakeholders throughout the entire research process.

## NSS Design Process

We initiated the study design process by conducting a needs assessment with internal and external stakeholders to determine an initial scope of appropriate and useful topics. The results of the needs assessment were coupled with a literature review on the existing knowledge of labor and sex trafficking in the United States and a gap analysis which helped pinpoint how the NSS might be best used to fill gaps in existing data. After reviewing community engagement research models, we developed a meaningful survivor-engaged model for the NSS.

Next, in line with this engagement model, we deployed a 2-round Delphi study, and we engaged with a diverse group of anti-trafficking professionals in a conversation about the most critical and relevant areas that should be investigated in the NSS. More than 130 anti-trafficking professionals - 66 during the first round and 134 during the 2nd - participated; of these, more than 50 percent were survivors.

Finally, we have also formed a Community Advisory Group (CAG) to engage individuals who have expertise and lived experience relevant to the National Survivor Study. The CAG reflects our adherence to the principles of community engagement throughout the research process, as well as our commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion. This project has been developed and will be implemented by a research team that includes survivor leaders. The CAG membership complements demographic and lived experience gaps within the primary NSS research team. Community Advisory Group members will be engaged in meaningful, collaborative activities to support the NSS. Group members will also inform the development of research questions and instruments, offer population specific strategies for outreach and recruitment of study participants, provide input and feedback on analysis of the data collected through this study, and offer recommendations for dissemination.

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<sup>1</sup> Polaris received \$3.5 million through competitive funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant # 90ZV0138-01-00. The project will be financed with 77.7% of federal funds and 22.3% (\$1.002 million) by non-governmental sources.

## Study Purpose

The purpose of the National Survivor Study (NSS) is to put the lived experiences of survivors at the forefront of the anti-trafficking movement. The NSS will provide formative insight into Polaris' strategies, policies, and framework for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of those strategies over time. The NSS also aims to inform the anti-trafficking movement more broadly by filling key evidence gaps that exist in the field in full partnership with survivors.

The NSS is envisioned as both a model of survivor empowerment and a tool for evidenced-based strategies and approaches to anti-trafficking work. Drawing on community based participatory research models and survivor-centered principles, the NSS will shift power back to survivors by ensuring that survivors are equal partners in the development and implementation of this initiative and by offering meaningful, paid opportunities to participate in all phases of the project life cycle.

## Research Objectives

In 2021, the NSS will examine survivors' experiences and perceptions of the **institutions, structures and organizations** that impact their **livelihoods** (see model below). The objectives of the study are to:

- Understand **survivors' experiences with systems and institutions that intersect with livelihoods** (e.g., related to employment, financial services, health services, criminal justice, housing) including the ways in which different norms, policies, rules, and practices impact their ability to make a living.
- Describe **informal sources of innovation, community assets and sources of resiliency** survivors leverage to establish economic stability.
- Explore **survivors' perspectives** on specific issues related to **current advocacy and policy priorities** that can impact their livelihoods (e.g. recruitment reforms, temporary visa reform, and criminal relief).

The above topics will be explored **to highlight the differences and similarities** in the **experiences and perspectives** of survivors by race, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status, age, family status (single parent, extended family), education level, socio-economic status, culture (religion, region) and political context (immigration status), as well as the type of trafficking situation.

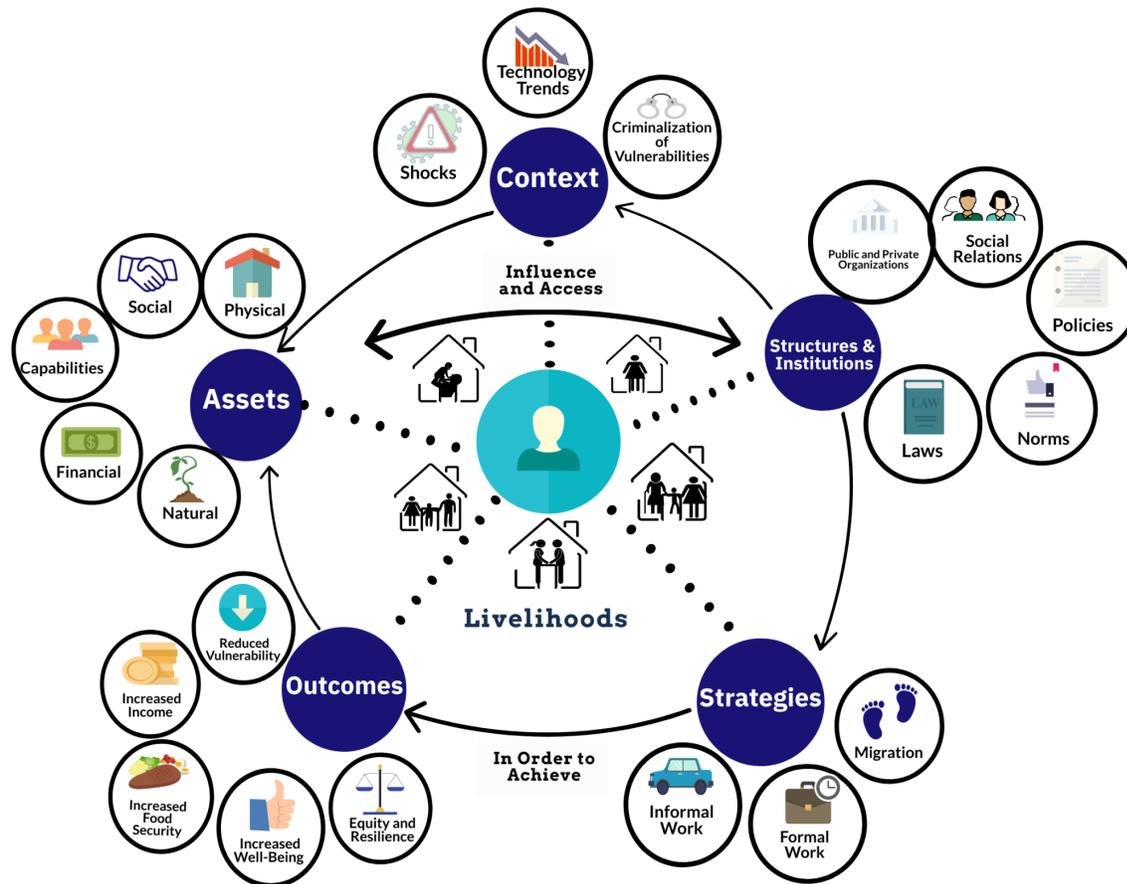
**Note:** This study **will not** attempt to determine trafficking prevalence including proportions of individuals trafficked or their demographic profiles. Instead, it will explore experiences and perspectives of survivors from different demographic groups regardless of their actual level of representation in trafficking. Therefore the study will make a concerted effort to reach out to traditionally underrepresented or hard to reach trafficking survivors. Other studies are currently attempting to use innovative approaches to measure prevalence<sup>2,3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> African Programming and Research Initiative to End Slavery (2020, May). Prevalence reduction innovation forum [Webinar]. US Department of State Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. Retrieved from <https://dev-apries.pantheonsite.io/prevalenceforum/>.

<sup>3</sup> The National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine. (2019, September). Estimating the prevalence of human trafficking in the United State: Considerations and complexities: Proceedings of a workshop-in brief. [Workshop]. Retrieved on May 11, 2021 from <https://www.nap.edu/read/25550/chapter/1>.

## Sustainable Livelihoods Model for Trafficking Survivors



*Adapted from Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2006). Building on gender, agrobiodiversity, and local knowledge: A training manual. Retrieved April 26, 2020 from <http://www.fao.org/3/y5956e/y5956e04.htm#ch2.1>. Reproduced and Adapted with Permission.*

### Significance of Proposed Research

The significance of the proposed research is twofold in that it 1) endeavors to systematically empower survivors through compensated, meaningful, and collaborative opportunities and 2) aims to address a critical knowledge gap in the evidence base available to the anti-human trafficking field throughout the life cycle of the study.

Commitment to both of these goals is demonstrated in the process and the results of the stakeholder engagement activity (Delphi study) described above. The use of a livelihood framework readily aligns with the research priorities of the anti-trafficking professionals who gave input into the discussion on research topics for the NSS. First, in line with the fact that survivor’s perspectives was the highest ranked area of inquiry, the framework places survivors at the center of this study and allows us to examine the livelihoods system from the survivor perspective. More specifically, this line of inquiry is intentionally focused on learning more from survivors about their current needs, access points to resources, as well as uplifting the internal

strengths and coping strategies they develop; this is aligned with the research topics survivors selected as most critical for the 2021 NSS:

- Exploring the ways in which they would like to be engaged in anti-trafficking conversations they have felt excluded from;
- Reviewing the external conditions, access points, and resources they most needed and or used to exit trafficking and achieve long-term stability;
- Understanding the internal strengths, skills, and coping strategies they develop and employ before, during, and after their trafficking situations to support survival and long term resilience;
- Examining the intersection between their access to community resources such as viable employment, education, social networks (friends, family, community), and financial services and their risk of trafficking.

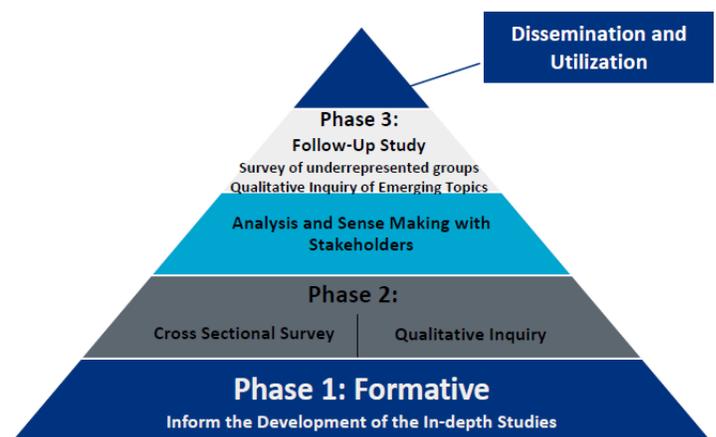
Grounded in the study’s guiding values, the NSS will offer diverse, meaningful, compensated opportunities to survivors to collaborate and partner on the project. This powerful approach represents a significant and exciting path forward in person centered, survivor driven, economically empowering research in the anti-trafficking field.

## Study Design and Methods

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, using qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. This type of approach is best suited for trying to understand not only the “if” and “what” of a situation but also the “how”, and “why”. A variety of methods—including in-depth and key-informant interviews, structured surveys, and facilitated group discussions—will be employed during the different phases of this research.

The study will be implemented in distinct stages including three main data collection phases that are followed by an analysis and sense making phase and a final dissemination phase. The three data collection phases are:

- Phase I - Formative Study
- Phase II - In-Depth Studies
  - Phase IIa: Qualitative Inquiry
  - Phase IIb: Cross-Sectional Survey
- Phase III - Follow-up Study



### 1. Phase I - Formative

The formative phase (Phase I) is designed to inform and shape Phase IIa (Qualitative Inquiry) and IIb (Cross-sectional Survey). Results from the formative phase will be analyzed and incorporated into the development of this phase in a few important ways. Results from Phase I will help to drill down our focus for year one, honing in on the most critical economic institutions to address at this time. The formative research phase has three main study aims, which are outlined below:

- **Aim 1** - To inform the NSS’ protocol and procedures, including instruments, materials, and the design of Phase II cross-sectional survey and qualitative inquiry.

- **Aim 2** - To explore appropriate and feasible ways to engage with and recruit study participants, as well as to disseminate study findings and create tailored research products for different stakeholder audiences.
- **Aim 3** - To conduct an exploratory mapping of institutions, systems, and resources that survivors navigate related to livelihoods, in order to inform the survey tool.

As described, the formative phase will be critical for ensuring engagement and access for all survivors with different backgrounds and individual characteristics and experiences. During this phase of the study, we will employ both online group discussions and individual key informant interviews. In addition, we will conduct a pilot study to explore the best recruitment strategies for the in-depth portions of the study.

## **2. Phase II - In-depth Studies**

Phase II comprises both an in-depth qualitative study and a cross-sectional survey. Both studies' specific aims, research questions and methods will be shaped by findings from the formative research stage and input from stakeholders. The two studies will be carried out in tandem with one another.

### **A. Qualitative Inquiry**

The primary objective of the in-depth qualitative inquiry is to understand how different groups of survivors experience institutions and informal resources that impact their livelihoods. This will include understanding the pathways, decision-points, facilitators, and barriers survivors experience while navigating different organizations and accessing services at them. This will also include digging deeper into survivor perspectives on particular norms, policies and practices that were raised during the formative phase, including perspectives on issues related to advocacy and policy priorities. In so doing, the qualitative inquiry will yield data on particular characteristics of institutions, as well as barriers and facilitators that shape survivor experiences accessing services. This phase will also include a mapping of community assets, and sources of innovation and resiliency, including informal coping mechanisms and alternative sources of support that are drawn on while making a living. The in-depth qualitative study will explore survivors' personal experiences, as well as the impacts of different social identities and experiences with trafficking. This will include following up on experiences and dynamics raised during the formative research. The methods for the in-depth qualitative study will be determined based on findings from the formative phase. Methods will likely include in-depth interviews, group discussions, or a case study approach.

### **B. Cross-sectional survey**

The objective of the cross-sectional survey is to understand survivors' experiences with the full range of institutions and organizations that intersect with livelihood systems. Specifically, we would like to understand the assets and resources survivors access as well as how they interacted with various institutions during their trafficking journey to discover the extent to which those experiences either helped or harmed them. In addition, the survey will assess survivors' experiences with current advocacy and policy priorities related to economic system reforms (e.g., temporary visa reform, decriminalization of prostitution and criminal relief, etc.), and what their opinions are on proposed reforms. Analysis of the results will take into consideration whether these experiences and perceptions vary for different subgroups of survivors -- this includes any significant differences based on race, gender, sexuality, type of trafficking, nationality, etc., that will be detected through sophisticated regression analyses and other statistical inferential procedures. All surveys will be conducted online to increase reliability and

reduce error. We will field the survey using a multi-modal approach. Some participants will self-administer the online survey. We will also deploy enumerators who can administer the web-based survey via the telephone.

### **3. Phase 3 - Follow-up Study**

The follow-up qualitative study will be a focused investigation into key questions or dynamics that emerged during the in-depth studies. For example, the follow-up study may be used to gather in-depth data to help explain a particular set of survey findings or to follow up on emerging themes from the in-depth qualitative inquiry. The objective of the follow-up study will be to provide further clarification and deeper understanding around significant Phase II findings that warrant further explanation. We will also use the follow-up qualitative study to gather information on how study findings can be used to develop recommendations, action steps, and dissemination products. Data collection and analysis methods are likely to include online workshops, facilitated group discussions and in-depth interviews.

## **Sample Size, Sampling and Recruitment Strategies**

Based on a calculated sample size adequate for building a regression model using the survey data, we are aiming to reach between 500 and 1000 participants that would participate in one or multiple phases of the study. We intend to use a snowball, respondent driven sampling (RDS) design to increase participation of underrepresented or hard to reach groups including labor trafficking and LGBTQ survivors as well as persons of color . Such a design relies on a peer-recruitment strategy to access members of the hidden study population through referrals to the survey to achieve far reaching representation of the population. The design will commence with the outreach to partner organizations that will be asked to send the study information to survivors in their network. Each respondent that participates in the NSS from this initial outreach will be asked to refer up to three individuals from their personal network of survivors. Sampling will continue until the desired sample size is reached.

## **Compensation**

At this point, we plan to provide each participant for the qualitative portions of the study, including group discussions and in-depth interviews that may take more than one hour, a \$75 stipend for their participation. We are currently anticipating providing participants to the cross-section portion of the study, anticipated to last approximately 30 minutes, a \$25 stipend for participation.

## **Confidentiality and Informed Consent**

Informed consent will be prioritized by ensuring that potential participants have access to full and transparent information about the study, including its purpose and our intentions for the use and dissemination of the data. The information on informed consent that is shared with potential study participants in the formative stage will be conveyed through both a written document and orally, with staff checking for clarity and understanding before securing consent. The written informed consent document will detail the steps taken to ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality. Participants will also be advised of exceptions to confidentiality, in which information that indicates a participant is a threat to themselves or others or information which indicates the endangerment of a minor will obligate facilitators to report such information to the proper authorities. We acknowledge that informed consent also requires trust in the research team; the process of trust building begins from the studies' conception all the way through its completion.

## **Benefits and Risks**

Study participants should always be the intended primary beneficiaries of the research they make possible, while avenues to benefit from the study should be intentional and well thought out from the start of the project. This study aims to benefit survivors professionally, personally, and economically. First, all research participants will be compensated for their time, providing a short term source of income for all survivors who engage. As an avenue for professional development, the study will provide diverse opportunities to learn about the research process. Participating in the study will also advance survivor voice and perspective, giving all those who participate the chance to be heard by a wide audience once the research is disseminated. The community-based participatory model of this study places survivors at the center. As such, the data and ultimately the reports that come out of this research will be guided by survivor priorities, perspectives, and experiences. This influence makes it likely that the final research products will be useful in advancing issues that survivors hold important.

As with any study involving vulnerable populations, participation poses risks which we will seek to minimize with great intention and care. Disclosure of traumatic experiences always carries the risk of emotional triggers which can be destabilizing if not properly managed. The research team will develop individual safety protocols for each research activity, tailoring these protocols to the activity itself and the degree of risk of trigger each presents. It is also important that all participants have access to a safety net of local resources to meet their individual needs should triggers occur. The Polaris-operated National Human Trafficking Hotline is able to provide connection to local resources to meet these needs. Participants also have access to the National Human Trafficking Service Provider directory should they wish to search for local resources on their own.

## **Study Dissemination and Utilization Plan**

We are planning on using the formative study and our engagement with a community advisory group of trafficking survivors as well as conversations with other stakeholders and partners to determine the best dissemination method, products, audience, and timeline. Dissemination may include products like presentations, reports, fact sheets, webinars, webpages, and white papers, targeted to audiences like policymakers, survivors, direct service providers, anti-trafficking professionals, private companies, and financial services professionals.