

# Milestones on a Learning Journey

Process Updates and Outcomes from Polaris’s National Survivor Study



*The National Survivor Study (NSS)* is a scientifically rigorous project that puts the lived experiences of survivors at the forefront of the anti-trafficking movement. Flipping the traditional dynamics of social science research on its head, the NSS strives to engage survivors not just as subjects but as true partners at every step in the process. From research design and recruitment, to data collection and analysis with continual input from our Community Advisory Group, survivors are collaborating with allies to decide what aspects of trafficking to study, how to ask the right questions, and how to understand the results.

From the start of the NSS in 2020, Polaris’s goal has always been to **center the lived experiences and community wisdom of survivors** beyond performative moments. Meaningful community engagement is not only the right way to do research, but it also makes the results better by increasing representation, minimizing inherent biases, and producing relevant data. But committing to this standard is only the first step; carrying it out through the process of research requires unwavering dedication while remaining open to learning and recalibration throughout. It demands that we are responsive to feedback; accountable to survivors; and flexible to adjusting plans, timelines, and resources. Most importantly, it recognizes trust as the keystone of these efforts and prioritizes the time and emotional energy required to cultivate meaningful relationships across communities.

As we head into 2022, Polaris is deep into NSS data collection, and we look forward to publishing initial findings later this year. But we aren’t waiting for the end results before sharing some of our outcomes. Thanks to the insights of survivors and the approach of our team, **Polaris has already learned significant lessons and seen positive impact during the process of designing, launching, and adapting the study.** We hope these interim reflections will continue to inform the NSS project as well as future research endeavors across the field.

## Process Learnings

The following sections outline four distinct stages of Polaris’s NSS work to date: planning, outreach, informed consent, and formative data collection (specifically focus groups). Each section describes some key learnings from each stage, as well as examples of how we responded to these discoveries.



## STAGE 1: PLANNING

In preparation of the NSS, Polaris knew how critical it would be to balance the two pillars of scientific rigor and community engagement. Maintaining this principle required negotiating the logistical tensions that arose, whether aligning program goals with community input, laying additional but necessary groundwork during pre-implementation, or attempting to quickly pivot and respond to needed changes. Both timelines and budgets had to adjust, and the team grew in its own resiliency to manage the burden of changing expectations. Our lesson: **Committing to principles and listening to the community requires flexibility.** In the future, we will build in more time for planning, communications, and adjustments.



### *Formative Flexibility: Establishing the Community Advisory Group*

Initially, Polaris had secured consultants as well as two individuals on the core research team with lived experience. However, we realized we didn't have a diversity of experiences represented. So we created a Community Advisory Group that targeted outreach to survivors who would bring new perspectives from their lived experience or demographic background.

But as intentional as this endeavor was, our original process of advisory group meetings was not inclusive enough. Because the meetings were conducted in English, one survivor who spoke only Mandarin could not participate. We knew it was critical to hear her input, however, as there are many Chinese trafficking survivors but few who reach out to resources like the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline or participate in projects like the NSS.

To address this challenge, Polaris set up one-on-one meetings for this survivor with a Mandarin-speaking team member and compensated her at the same rate as advisory members in the group setting. By maintaining flexibility and not forcing people into preconceived institutional structures, the NSS has benefited from this survivor's unique perspective and valuable insights.

Perhaps even more substantially, the Polaris team remained open to having our own expectations and good intentions corrected. We have been laser-focused on conducting the NSS differently from traditional research projects that can exploit survivors' participation while ignoring their meaningful input on the process. We considered safety and well-being throughout, including ensuring privacy, accounting for possible triggers, and building in peer support and access to the Sanar Institute's counseling services — all important components. But in practice, survivors are not monolithic, and many did not feel our protective measures were good for the research or empowering for them. Our lesson: **Don't assume what survivors want or need — give them the respect and autonomy to make their own choices about how they want to participate.**



### *Parameters for Participation: From Privacy Protection to Named Recognition*

Knowing the safety risks that survivors face, Polaris went to great lengths to ensure participant privacy. This included securing a federally issued Certificate of Confidentiality, which protects identifiable research information from forced or compelled disclosure — to law enforcement, for example.

Armed with this formal backing, Polaris hoped that our precautions would build trust for participants. Although this was the case for some, we also heard that many survivors *want* to be acknowledged by name for participating in this study and sharing their experiences. Thus, we are revisiting our protocols to allow for public recognition for those who want it, while still protecting privacy and allowing anonymity.



## STAGE 2: OUTREACH

The NSS has taken a broad approach, seeking input from survivors of sex and labor trafficking from all backgrounds rather than focusing only on specific populations. Unique in scope, it will produce the field's most comprehensive study of trafficking survivors to date. However, our lesson is: **Broad and inclusive outreach requires significantly more effort, including more targeted activities and more staff to carry out different approaches, as well as more time for building trust.** Most research studies, including our initial plans, do not give this component the time or resources needed for success.



### *Expanding Outreach Efforts: Tailoring Tactics for Target Populations*

Polaris planned many outreach strategies for the NSS, including dissemination of marketing materials through other service organizations, survivor collectives, and community partners. However, during recruitment, we identified several groups that are currently underrepresented in the study and in anti-trafficking efforts more broadly, including labor trafficking survivors, immigrants, male survivors, transgender or other gender minorities, and Mandarin and Spanish speakers.

To expand outreach, Polaris has incorporated a variety of other approaches, from adding new incentives and identifying population-specific organizations, such as those reaching farmworkers, to consulting with survivors and members of the identified communities to determine more effective grassroots strategies. For example, we heard that print ads in Mandarin and radio in Spanish may be better than online communications, while other communities may respond better through relationships built by attending in-person meetings over time.

Given the long-term nature of building such relationships, the team is also thinking beyond this initial NSS process to consider how Polaris can continue to engage survivors and communities and strengthen relationships outside of any one specific project. This is certainly an area of focus for Polaris as a whole.

Building upon survivors' integral participation in the planning stage, Polaris has continued to see the absolute necessity of keeping them involved throughout the process. In outreach, that has meant not only shaping and improving strategies and messaging but also *delivering* them — because the messenger matters. Our lesson: **Engaging survivors in the process goes beyond asking for review and approval to including them in strategy, creation, and production.**



### *Centering Survivors: Rewriting the Outreach Script*

Inspired by a Community Advisory Group idea, Polaris conceptualized an outreach video inviting NSS participation and created a script for the group to review. Traditionally, this has been an acceptable standard for community input. But when the Community Advisory Group saw the script, they had other ideas.

They rewrote the script from survivors' point of view, realizing that it would speak to survivors more authentically and better reflect the survivor focus of the NSS. This new approach improved the outreach video, and it continues to evolve by including male and female voices in the Spanish and Mandarin versions. Although this iterative process took longer than expected, it resulted in stronger outreach and a better reflection of our commitment to centering survivors.



### STAGE 3: INFORMED CONSENT

One of the most unique but perhaps less emphasized components of the NSS is its informed consent process. Typically, studies like this distribute forms to participants that ask for their sign-off. Polaris went the extra mile, engaging a consultant and research team members to call survivors and have conversations about the project and what informed consent means. Again, though it took more time and effort than traditional standards, Polaris found that the commitment was more than worth it. Our lesson: **Investing in a personalized process builds trust and enables survivors to own their participation.**



#### *Leveraging Consent: Adding a Personal Touch to a Perfunctory Process*

Polaris developed a new procedure to contact each participant for their consent, incorporating new technology to expand contact options and enable survivors to respond through email, text, or phone. Once a time was scheduled, our consultant held a 20-minute conversation about the project to connect with each survivor, address questions or concerns, and ensure we provided enough information and context for survivors to give their informed consent.

Several survivors have highlighted the personal connections and sense of safety they have developed through these conversations. One shared that the personal connection and ability to choose contact methods helped her to trust the study and believe her voice would be heard. Talking to our consultant felt like a real conversation rather than a transactional prompt. Furthermore, she could follow up by leaving messages, and team members called her back to clarify questions about next steps and compensation timing. She said she felt empowered to control her own participation in the NSS.

### STAGE 4: FORMATIVE DATA COLLECTION - FOCUS GROUPS

Survivor centrality remained vital as Polaris began conducting initial focus groups to gather input and inform the quantitative NSS survey and qualitative follow-up. Again, as we experienced in planning and outreach, survivor feedback revealed the opportunity to engage survivors at a much deeper level than simply as advisors or reviewers. Our lesson: **Inviting survivors to serve as research leaders not only enhanced trust and comfort in focus group settings but also led to better data collection.**



#### *Facilitating Focus Groups: Letting Survivors Lead the Way*

Polaris's first focus group was led by a research team member who is a committed ally. We also provided for survivor peers to support participants, whether in the discussion itself or in separate conversations as needed. Despite the team's best efforts, that first group felt tense, and participants shared that they needed to see survivors not only involved in the NSS but in leadership to really feel that the study was survivor centered and led.

In response, Polaris immediately redesigned the focus groups for survivor-facilitated or co-facilitated discussion, depending on the survivor leader's comfort level. This shift led to a noticeable difference in trust and empathy during focus groups, and the very fact that we changed the structure in response to their feedback helped gain some survivors' trust and participation.



Furthermore, focus groups reinforced another lesson that we also saw with privacy concerns. Initially, Polaris devised indirect ways of asking questions about participants' experiences with the goal of creating a safe space, protecting survivors' well-being, and avoiding traumatic triggers. However, survivors' feedback highlighted that this approach was perceived not as protective but as patronizing. Again, we learned the lesson: **Don't assume what survivors want or need — give them the respect and autonomy to make their own choices about how they want to participate.**



#### *Truth and Trauma: Listening to Survivors on What Questions to Ask*

Polaris designed focus group questions with the best intentions, wanting to honor survivors' input while not retraumatizing people. We first incorporated a "persona" exercise where participants imagined a hypothetical person in a situation to describe feelings and circumstances without needing to share their own experiences.

After participating in this exercise, survivors from the discussions, members of the Community Advisory Group, and survivor consultants shared overwhelmingly unified feedback: Predetermined choices about what questions participants can handle were artificial and inauthentic, and many found it offensive. Instead, they advised us to provide the needed information and let survivors choose whether to participate and what to share.

This is an especially important point, not merely for the sake of better research, but for survivors themselves. Many survivors expressed that it's important to share their truth. If we dilute that opportunity in an effort to protect, we curtail their healing and empowerment. For them, it is more important to share what happened to them, even if it means asking and answering hard questions.

## **Unexpected Outcomes**

Polaris not only learned these important process lessons, but we also realized that the process itself has already generated initial impact for survivors, our team, and our partners.

### **✦ Polaris has built trust with multiple communities.**

At best, survivor-engaged research has been an impersonal process; at worst, it has harmed survivors. The NSS changes that paradigm, and we have already heard from many survivors about how different this study feels and how excited they are to participate in it.

Moreover, Polaris has built trust among the academic and research community. In the past, we have been criticized for our use of Trafficking Hotline data, which is always qualified with notes about quality and scope. Undertaking the NSS as our first scientifically rigorous, IRB-approved study proves our capability to run such a project and reconfirms the necessity of community engagement in high-quality research.

### **✦ The NSS process has supported survivors in connecting, healing, and developing professional skills.**

The survivor experience can be isolating. In light of that fact, participants have valued the personal connections they're building through the NSS, whether meeting other survivors in a focus group, receiving peer support, or even talking to our team during a consent call. In



particular, although the focus groups are not designed as therapy, some participants have experienced healing within the safe space that survivors created.

Furthermore, the NSS is giving many survivors paid opportunities to gain research and consulting experience with a well-known organization that can help in their professional development. Even just participating can have a similar effect: One survivor said it's the first time she has felt empowered by research.

### ✦ **The process has identified learnings for improving other Polaris and anti-trafficking efforts.**

The outreach and other challenges Polaris has faced with the NSS reflect similar struggles to raise awareness, usage, and trust of the Trafficking Hotline amongst certain groups, including survivors who identify as Asian and/or speak Mandarin as identified here. Strategies, tools, and partnerships that are under development for the NSS can also support broader Polaris outreach moving forward.

As an organization, Polaris strives to be survivor centered and empowering, including in our advocacy, communications, and fundraising. Hearing from survivors participating in the NSS is already informing these other areas, particularly in making sure we let survivors choose how much of their identities and stories they want to share.

## **A Future Foundation**

Launching the NSS has been an incredible journey thus far. This project has taken more time and resources than we initially envisioned, along with many changes to our approaches, strategies, and tactics. But we hope this brief illuminates our openness to listen, our intentional responses, and the important lessons we've learned in engaging survivors. And we hope it gives you an exciting glimpse at where we are headed.

These interim learnings and unexpected outcomes strengthen the foundation for Polaris's continued work on the NSS, the final results expected later in 2022, and future endeavors in community-based research and survivor engagement. Like so many of our fellow partners in the fight against human trafficking, we are eager to see the first-ever NSS completed. In the meantime, we are learning valuable lessons about how we conduct the work, and we hope these lessons will contribute to improved research and community engagement efforts across our field as a whole.

Thank you for your partnership in the NSS and our mission to end human trafficking. We look forward to sharing more updates soon!

*“To really do community-based, participatory research well, it takes a lot of time, and you don't always know exactly where you're going or what it's going to look like. To be responsive, you have to listen seriously to the people you are prioritizing as experts, which requires you to make changes you didn't envision. It's both the right thing and the smartest thing to do for our work.”*

LARA POWERS

Senior Advisor, Survivor Engagement, Polaris