



# What is Meaningful Engagement in Research for Survivors of Human Trafficking?

A preliminary summary of survivor focus group discussions and interviews

Polaris's National Survivor Study: Updated Dec. 2021

## What Experts Said:

Include survivor leadership **in every stage of the research process** (not just during outreach) and clearly communicate this process to participants.

*"It [survivor-led research] means that it's not only survivor involvement, but that **they have power to decide which path we want to take** with the project, who is going to be involved, how much is going to be compensated, and all these things."*

*"When you're talking about this [the research process], it's bringing up so many times in the last few years, and I didn't even realize how unempowering it is to not go any further with it [the research process]. **Because I have a voice and my voice is actually pretty powerful. I would love to stay in the process.**"*

**Provide credit for participant expertise and participation**, particularly as it pertains to their careers and professional development. Some ideas of how to do this were including their names in the acknowledgements of research reports, publications, and presentations or providing certificates of participation that can be included on resumes.



**Compensate survivors** for their participation and any other preparation or support they provide to the research process (e.g., interview preparation, outreach, advising, analysis, dissemination, etc.).

*"It's very important to compensate the community for their voice, especially the ones with lived experience because it also validates and assures that **we hear your truth, we know and understand your truth.**"*

Ensure **representation and diversity** among research team members and among survivor research advisors.

*"For me, survivor-led means that there is someone in the project that is not white, that probably wasn't born here, that their native language is other than English. **That's really survivor-led for me because it represents parts of me or it's part of the others who are discriminated** because I think that a lot of the spaces, especially on research, what I have seen is white people. That's a little bit discouraging."*

Provide participants with information or **training on the research process and how to interpret research findings.**

*"I think that we need to **close the gap between being just a participant and becoming a researcher.** It really opens up for a lot of survivors to engage more holistically, to understand what it's like. Because what I have seen is that, even if there's a description of the research, because we don't understand how our research gets done, the answers we give are not accurate. ... With each research study, I think that there is opportunity to educate and equip survivors with the skills."*



**Include participants in the analysis and dissemination** of research findings such as policy change and advocacy so they don't feel "used" or exploited for sharing their experiences and expertise with researchers.

*"What would make me excited [about participating in research] is, if out of the group of people that are participating in the study, **we're given an opportunity to have some type of connection to it if we want to**, or we can remain anonymous. ... Whenever it's presented somewhere, if it's going to be published in a peer-reviewed journal or whatever, we can take it to a conference or something. I think that **there should be a cycle of people that are involved with this study that would be able to be present** and get some type of -- I don't want to use the word ownership, but for lack of a better term, that's what I mean."*

*"People can hear something I say, it could be the awesome thing. If your organization and you've been in the game longer than the survivor has, then you because you have the money, the power, the resources, you'll take off with the idea and then leave the survivor behind, instead of just saying this was survivor-informed by such and such, **give the survivors credit** so that we can see our name on something and it could possibly turn to something bigger. You just never know and things like that. **Don't just take the information and then leave the survivor who gave the idea behind it in the process.**"*



# What is the 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 to provide insight into Polaris's strategies, policies, and evaluation frameworks. In full partnership with survivors, the NSS also aims to inform the anti-trafficking movement more broadly by filling key evidence gaps that exist in the field.

## Current Activities

- Holding focus group discussions with people traditionally excluded from research on human trafficking
  - e.g., survivors living in rural areas, Native American / Native Alaskan survivors, Black / African American survivors, Latinx / Hispanic survivors, LGBTQ+ survivors, immigrant survivors, male survivors, gender-diverse survivors, and Asian American & Pacific Islander survivors
- Conducting interviews with other professionals and lived-experience experts from the anti-trafficking field

## Next Steps

- Summarize key findings from focus groups and interviews
- Apply survivor feedback into survey questions
- Conduct an online survey with survivors across the United States

## Contributing Experts

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