



Recognizing and Responding to Human Trafficking: The Pharmacist's Role Beyond the Counter

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Learning Objectives

1. Identify clinical, behavioral, and environmental indicators that may demonstrate a patient is experiencing human trafficking in pharmacy and healthcare settings.
2. Demonstrate appropriate steps for responding to suspected human trafficking such as documentation, reporting, and maintaining patient safety.
3. Recall common risk factors and social vulnerabilities that increase an individual's risk for being human trafficked.

Definition



Human trafficking (HT): The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of people through the **use of force, fraud, or coercion** with the aim of exploiting them for profit.¹

There **must be an exchange** of money, materials (i.e. drugs, clothing), food, or shelter.

When a person younger than 18 is used to perform a commercial sex act, it is a crime *regardless* of whether there is any force, fraud, or coercion involved.

The Different Types of HT

Sex

Force, fraud, or coercion to compel another person to engage in a commercial sex act.² Traffickers are often known by their victims. There is **no** such thing as a child prostitute.

Labor

Force, fraud, or coercion to exploit the labor or services of another person. Often involves exploitation through threats, debt bondage, withheld wages, or restrictions on freedom of movement.²

Organ

Illegal removal, sale, or transplantation of human organs in violation of laws and ethical standards, often through coercion, deception, or exploitation of vulnerable individuals.²



Human Trafficking vs. Prostitution

Those experiencing human trafficking do not get to keep the **goods or services**. The exchange of money, materials (i.e. drugs, clothing), food, or shelter will go to the trafficker.

There must be the **use of force, fraud, or coercion**.¹⁻²



Human Trafficking Globally

49.6 million souls are being trafficked³

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Prevalence in the US

National Human Trafficking Hotline

- The Human Trafficking Hotline has received **463,109 signals** since its inception in 2007.⁴
 - Identified 112,822 cases and 218,568 victims.
- In 2024, **received 32,309 signals** and 8,024 of them were victims or survivors of human trafficking.
 - Of 11,999 cases in 2024, **21,865 victims** were involved.

National Human Trafficking Hotline

Rank ⁴⁻⁵	Population Rank	State	Total Human Trafficking Victims (2019–2023)	Victims per 100,000 People
1	1	California	11,254	28.88
2	2	Texas	7,369	24.16
3	3	Florida	6,904	30.53
4	8	Georgia	5,140	46.60
5	4	New York	3,576	18.27
6	7	Ohio	2,675	22.70
7	10	Michigan	2,653	26.43
8	9	North Carolina	2,392	22.08
9	5	Pennsylvania	2,043	15.76
10	18	Missouri	2,016	32.54

The Polaris Project - 2021

Trafficking situations reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline^{4,6}

Recruitment Type	Percentage (n = 10,359)
Family member or caregiver	33%
Intimate partner	28%
Employer	22%
Friend/Acquaintance/Coworker	8%
Smuggler	5%
Other	4%

Relationship to Trafficker by Age

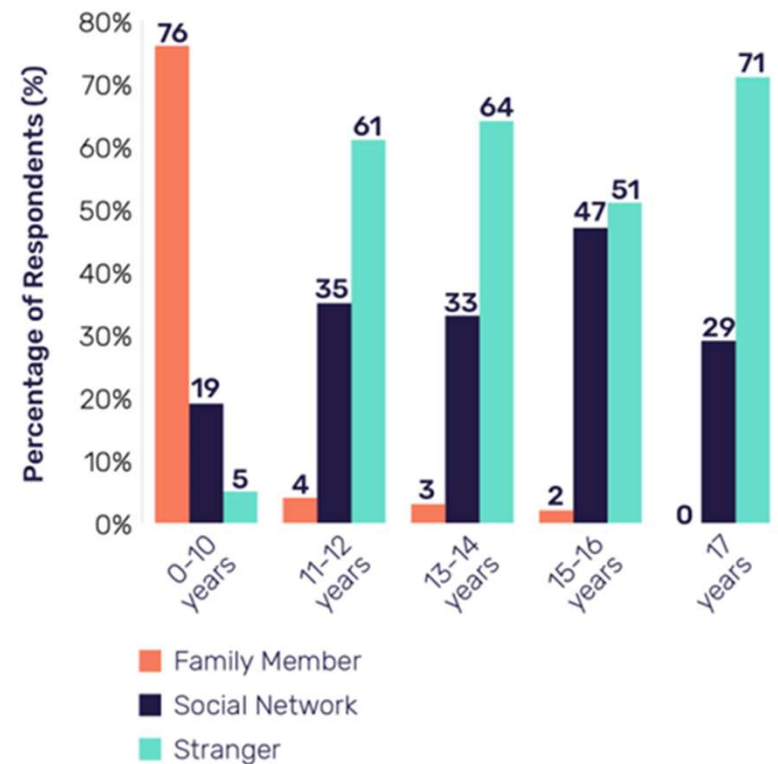
A survey conducted by Thorn in collaboration with Texas Christian University included **260 survivors** from 14 states.⁷

The average age is 12 to 15 years old.

1 in 6 were trafficked under the age of 12. The youngest age was less than one years old.

Most child cases were perpetrated exclusively by family members.

FIGURE 7: RELATIONSHIP TO TRAFFICKER BY AGE ENTERED THE LIFE



Social Media

Popular websites used were Google, Facebook, Craigslist, and Instagram.⁷

- 1 in 7 who were advertised on the street had more than 10 buyers a day
- 1 in 4 who were advertised online had more than 10 buyers a day



Terminology



Pimp– A man who controls prostitutes and arranges clients for them, taking part of their earnings in return

Bottom– A female appointed by the trafficker/pimp to supervise the others and report rule violations, may help instruct victims, collect money, book hotel rooms, post ads, or inflict punishments on other victims

“John”– An individual who pays for or trades something of value for sexual acts

Terminology



Branding– A tattoo or carving on a victim that indicates ownership by a trafficker/pimp/gang

Date– The exchange when prostitution takes place, or the activity of prostitution

Quota– A set amount of money that a trafficking victim must make each night before she can come “home”

The Game/The Life– The subculture of prostitution, complete with rules, a hierarchy of authority, and language

How is Someone Trafficked?



Traffickers prey on vulnerabilities such as:

- Unstable living conditions or homelessness⁸
- History of substance use
- Current substance use
- Unstable working conditions or unemployment
- Undocumented immigration status
- Runaway youth
- Unstable family life (child abuse, family member incarceration, divorce, etc)
- Social marginalization
- Disabilities
- Young age (child)

Their goal is to meet the need of that individual.

The Grooming Process



- ✦ Target
- ✦ Gain Trust
- ✦ Meet Needs
- ✦ Isolate
- ✦ Exploit
- ✦ Control

Why It Is Hard to Leave

Mental and Emotional	Limitations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Stockholm Syndrome● Groomed and manipulated● Emotional bond● Trauma bonded● Guilt and shame	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● No money, shelter, or security● No family and friends (isolated)● No documentation, identity, or citizenship

Signs of HT



Behavior

- Dissociated or “checked out”
- Quiet and closed off
- Hyper-vigilance or paranoia, fear, anxiety, depression, or nervousness
 - a. Inability to make decisions, panicked
- Providing conflicting stories
- Not making eye contact
- Not being the one to speak or answer questions
 - a. The person with them answers all questions
- Unable to provide a home address
- Not in control of their identification/documents

From the National Human Trafficking Hotline⁹

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Signs of HT



Physical Appearance

- Tattoos could be a such of branding. Symbols include:
 - a. Five-point crown
 - b. Medusa
 - c. Initials of their trafficker
- Malnutrition
- Shaved hair or wig
- Injuries from exposures (i.e. dangerous substances or unsafe water)
- Inappropriate dress for weather or situation
- Signs of drug or alcohol abuse
- Signs of physical abuse

From the National Human Trafficking Hotline⁹

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Signs of HT



Health Concerns

- Needed treatment for multiple or recurrent sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- Purchased Plan B multiple times in a short period of time
- Seeking treatment for abortion (especially multiple abortions)
- Delayed care:
 - a. Did not seek medical attention
 - b. Untreated illnesses/infections

From the National Human Trafficking Hotline⁹

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How to Identify Victims in Different Pharmacy Setting

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Retail and Community

- Picking up prescriptions for:
 - STIs
 - Abortion
 - Birth control
 - Multiple antipsychotic medications for depression and anxiety¹⁰
- Purchasing different over-the-counter (OTC) products:
 - Multiple Plan B pills
 - Birth control (Opill®)
 - Frequent antifungal medications
- Inability to give address
- Not answering questions for themselves
 - Someone is doing this for them (“boyfriend”)
- Uninsured
- Behavioral and physical appearance signs

Retail and Community

Pharmacy-specific questions:

- Where do you store and keep your medications?
- Who is in charge of handling your medications?
- What are you taking this medication for?
- Did anything get in the way of seeking treatment before now?

General questions to ask:

- Where do you sleep and eat?
- Is anyone forcing you to do anything you do not want to do?
- What are your working and living conditions like?
- Do you feel safe at home?
- Have you been physically harmed or threatened?

Retail and Community



Important Reminders

- Have these conversations **in private** (i.e. consultation room)¹⁰
- **Separate** the person from whoever is accompanying them
 - There may be **reluctance** as the trafficker does not want to lose sight or control
- Do **NOT** force them to answer any questions, make eye contact, or get help
- Use open-ended questions
- Use trauma-informed care and language
 - **Never** “What’s wrong with you?” **Always** “What happened to you?”



**Pharmacists are on the front-
lines of healthcare**

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Hospital

- Behavioral and physical signs¹⁰
- **Reported traveling (state to state)**
 - For work or “just visiting”
- Lack of family support (no visitors)
 - Reported “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” they live with
- Positive blood cultures (IV drug use)
- **Positive toxicology screening**
- **Positive for STIs**
- Multiple emergency department visits
 - Abortion, STIs, abuse, intoxication, rape, etc
- Uninsured
- Admission for withdrawal or need to social services
- Admission for suicide attempt or ideation



Hospital



Actions to take:

- **Communicate to social services of your suspicion¹⁰**
 - Hospital systems often have staff designated and trained to handle these cases
 - Social workers have resources and connections when the patient is being discharged
 - Ask what resources they have accessible (local task force, hotlines, etc)
- **Communicate to the team of your concern**
 - Nurses and physicians can better control who visits the patient
 - The team can consult spiritual services if the patient is agreeable
- **Follow any mandatory reporting laws**

Be Mindful

Do:

- **Ask open-ended questions** regarding if they are safe at home or need help.¹⁰
- **Ask if they want to leave their situation.** If they do, know your local safe-homes and recovery centers and get them there. If nothing is local, know your company's protocol to get them to a safe location.
- **Body language is key.** Be attentive, empathetic, and non-judgmental.

Don't:

- **Do not pressure or force them to leave their situation.** They must be willing to leave. Most of the time, it takes multiple attempts to leave before finally committing.
- **Do not attempt to confront the trafficker yourself.** This could jeopardize the safety of the potential victim and yourself.

Resources for Pharmacists



National and Local Hotlines

- Call 1-888-373-7888 or submit a tip online

Local Human Trafficking Task Force

Local Christian-Based Non-Profit Organization or Ministry

Patient Advocacy through Social Services

Learning Assessment



Question 1. What could be considered a healthcare indicator that a patient is being trafficked?

- a. Missing many medication refills
- b. Multiple prescriptions for STIs
- c. Not getting treatment for hypertension
- d. Multiple prescriptions for a skin rash

Learning Assessment



Question 1. What could be considered a healthcare indicator that a patient is being trafficked?

- a. Missing many medication refills
- b. Multiple prescriptions for STIs**
- c. Not getting treatment for hypertension
- d. Multiple prescriptions for a skin rash

Learning Assessment



Question 2. What is an appropriate response when a patient identifies themselves as someone experiencing trafficking?

- a. Call the National HT Hotline and local HT Task Force
- b. Tell them to call 9-1-1 when they get home and are safe
- c. Wait for social work to get involved as it's their duty to report
- d. Tell the patient to leave their trafficker immediately

Learning Assessment



Question 2. What is an appropriate response when a patient identifies themselves as someone experiencing trafficking?

- a. **Call the National HT Hotline and local HT Task Force**
- b. Tell them to call 9-1-1 when they get home and are safe
- c. Wait for social work to get involved as it's their duty to report
- d. Tell the patient to leave their trafficker immediately

Learning Assessment



Question 3. Select a social or environmental determinant that increases an individual's risk of experiencing human trafficking.

- a. Traveling from Florida to Ohio after a family vacation
- b. Living in an urban or metropolitan area
- c. Someone who has moved multiple times for work
- d. Someone who is younger than 18 years old

Learning Assessment



Question 3. Select a social or environmental determinant that increases an individual's risk of experiencing human trafficking.

- a. Traveling from Florida to Ohio after a family vacation
- b. Living in an urban or metropolitan area
- c. Someone who has moved multiple times for work
- d. Someone who is younger than 18 years old**

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Special Thanks!



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Thank You!

Questions?

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