



LABOR HUMAN TRAFFICKING

IPHPRP Global Public Health Case Competition | Spring 2026



All characters, organizations, and plots described within the case are fictional and bear no direct reflection to existing organizations or individuals. The case topic, however, is a true representation of circumstances in the United States of America. The case scenario is complex and does not necessarily have a correct or perfect solution and thus encourages a judicious balance of creative yet perceptive approaches.

The authors have provided informative facts and figures within the case to help teams. The data provided are derived from independent sources, may have been adapted for use in this case, and are clearly cited such that teams can verify or contest the findings within their recommendations, if it is pertinent to do so. Teams are responsible for justifying the accuracy and validity of all data and calculations that are used in their presentations, as well as defending their assertions in front of a panel of knowledgeable judges representing different stakeholders.

The information and data given in the following text is meant as a suggestive guide but is not considered all-inclusive. Teams may choose any area(s) of approach that they deem impactful and feasible.

NARRATIVE

Luis, aged 35, his wife, Rosa aged 32, and their two kids were born in Guatemala. In Guatemala, Luis spent his days working at an IT company and Rosa worked at their children's school as a teacher. They often gathered with family and friends sharing food and laughter. Five years ago, violence began to increase in their hometown, and the economy began to falter. After a few years, many in the community had to make the choice to either flee or meet the demands of those inflicting violence which often included handing over your belongings and/or land, forced labor, or committing illegal acts.

Three years ago, with continued violence in their community Luis and Rosa left Guatemala for the US in hopes of gaining asylum. They settled in Illinois, finding a community with a Guatemalan population, that slowly began to feel like a home away from home. Their kids loved school, Rosa found a teaching job in the U.S., and Luis began working in a factory. They made a modest living from both jobs allowing them to meet their needs.

One year ago, their asylum was denied. The denial of the asylum application caused the couple to lose their Employment Authorization Document (EAD), which meant that they were not eligible to be employed as they had been previously and were no longer legally residing in the U.S. Returning to Guatemala brought too much fear for their safety, so they chose to stay in the United States without legal documentation. A month after the denial, Luis was recruited to work for an agricultural operation with the promise that they would help him and his family get legal documentation by taking a cut of his paycheck. At first the work was okay, but soon it shifted to being forced to work in hazardous conditions, threats to call authorities if he didn't work longer hours, not getting paid for overtime work, and being forced to work while injured.

For the last year, Luis has been forced to work in exploitative conditions while Rosa and their kids find any work that pays in cash to scrape by. Luis knows that his work conditions are in violation of labor laws. He also knows there is support out there, but as an immigrant without legal status, it is impossible to know who he can trust.

One day, Luis's coworker mentioned Alejandro, a support worker of a nonprofit focused on helping undocumented immigrants who are victims of human trafficking.

With Luis's story being one of several he has heard about and knowing there are even more with the same story that exist but are scared to come forward, Alejandro decides more needs to be done. He begins to coordinate with other stakeholder organizations to form a new regional taskforce focused on reducing labor trafficking prevalence, especially among undocumented immigrants.

SUMMARY OF THE ISSUE

There are two primary forms of human trafficking. Below are the definitions used in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (1,2):

- **Sex Trafficking:** “The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age. (22 U.S.C. § 7102(11)(A)).”
- **Forced Labor:** “The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery. (22 U.S.C. § 7102(11)(B)).”

Modern criminal statutes are the main way in which human trafficking is investigated and prosecuted (1). These statutes were established in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 and include the following (1):

- 18 U.S.C. § 1589, Forced Labor
- 18 U.S.C. § 1591, Sex Trafficking of Children OR by Force, Fraud or Coercion
- 18 U.S.C. § 1592, Unlawful Conduct with Respect to Documents in Furtherance of Trafficking, Peonage, Slavery, Involuntary Servitude, or Forced Labor (aka Document Servitude)
- 18 U.S.C. § 1594, Attempt/Conspiracy/Forfeiture
- 18 U.S.C. § 1597, Unlawful Conduct Regarding Immigration Documents
- 18 U.S.C. § 1351, Fraud in Foreign Labor Contracting

Traffickers. Human traffickers are motivated by profit “at the expense of others” and do not have one profile (1). Traffickers are men and women, and they can be strangers, relatives, behind employment ads, close family friends, and new online gaming or social media friends (1, 3). These traffickers use three primary methods of control: coercion, fraud, and force. Often defined as follows (1, 3, 4):

- **“Coercion** can be subtle or overt. Some common tactics include taking identity documents and threatening arrest and/or deportation, inhumane treatment, blackmail, shaming, isolation, addiction, and economic coercion, which can be taking advantage of existing debt or creating a debt.”
- **“Fraud** is often false promises – of education, a relationship, a specific job, good pay and days off, paying off a debt, sending money home to support the family, or generally of a new more secure life – but the reality is something different and inescapable.”
- **“Force** can include the threat of and actual physical assaults and sexual violence to the victim and others around them which makes the threat even more credible, or family members.”

Trafficking Locations. In the United States, sex trafficking has been uncovered in hotels, bars, illicit massage parlors, apartment complexes, escort services, street prostitution, and truck stops (1, 5). Additionally, the use of social media/online platforms to exploit, advertise to, and recruit victims is increasing (1). In the United States, forced labor has been uncovered in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, restaurants, domestic work, hospitality, landscaping, elder care, agriculture, salon services, grocery retailers, and janitorial services (1, 5).

Human Trafficking can be transnational or local and show up in industries such as construction, agriculture, landscaping, and commercial sex (1, 2). Larger scale and smaller scale examples are listed below (1, 3):

- **Larger Scale**
 - Factory owner
 - Captain of commercial fishing vessel
 - Farm owner/agricultural operation

- **Smaller Scale**
 - Child sex offender traveling internationally
 - Pimp
 - Local businesses (i.e. restaurants, massage business, contracted janitors)
 - Family with live-in domestic worker or nanny

Victims of Human Trafficking. While there is no specific profile for victims of human trafficking, the following are example of groups at higher risk (1, 3, 4):

- Individuals displaced by war, disaster, or political instability
- Unaccompanied alien children
- Recent relocation or migration
- Individuals working in settings with less legal protections
- Individuals living in poverty
- People experiencing homelessness
- Survivors of violence
- Youth in foster care and/or juvenile justice systems
- Individuals who have experienced abuse or neglect in childhood

Often, at risk populations, those who have been exposed to or experienced violence and/or those without stable support networks, are targeted at a higher rate (7). Vulnerability is then exacerbated by societal factors such as xenophobia, structural racism, and gender inequality (7).

Victims of human trafficking often experience short- and long-term consequences to their physical and mental health including cardiovascular, dermatological, dental, reproductive, gastrointestinal, sexual,

and neurologic health problems (2, 8). For example, infections, injuries, and lack of medical attention may create negative outcomes. Anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and memory/sleeping issues are also common mental health effects (1).

The United Nations' International Labor Organization estimates that human traffickers victimize 27.6 million people worldwide (1). Victims of forced labor make up 77% of this estimate while victims of sex trafficking make up 23% and 57% are men/boys while 43% are women/girls (1). However, within sex trafficking, 78% are women/girls with 22% being men/boys and 92% are adults while 8% are children (1). Within forced labor, 33% are women/girls with 67% being men/boys and 73% are adults while 27% are children (1). Unfortunately, according to the Department of Homeland Security, the United States does not have a reliable estimate of human trafficking (1). All 50 states, U.S. territories, and Tribal land have reports of human trafficking (1). However, the Berkeley Human Rights Center claims that a U.S. victim of human trafficking estimate is in the hundreds of thousands and that human trafficking is "worth multiple billions of dollars in the United States alone" while being the fastest growing criminal activity in the world (9).

According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, there has been a 26% increase (1,519 to 1,912) between 2012 and 2022 in persons referred to for human trafficking offenses to U.S. attorneys (10). Prosecutions of human traffickers doubled from 2012 to 2022 starting at 805 persons and increasing to 1,656 persons (10). In 2022, 1,070 defendants in the U.S. district court charged with any human trafficking offenses had the following demographics: "91% were male, 58% were white, 20% were black, 18% were Hispanic, 95% were U.S. citizens, and 71% had no prior convictions (10)."

Many experts also believe forced labor prevalence is underrepresented (7, 11). Of the foreign nationals certified by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in fiscal year 2020, 81% of adults and 74% of children had experienced labor trafficking (12). The 2021 Trafficking in Persons report released by the U.S. Department of State expressed a "continued lack of progress and sustained effort to address labor trafficking... including in effort to identify [labor trafficking] victims" mirroring historic inequalities of immigrants and people of color (12).

Evaluation and surveillance of human trafficking is extremely difficult due to the complexity of the issue since it often occurs "under the radar" and victims are not likely to come forward as they blame themselves or fear legal consequences (3, 13). This is especially true for undocumented foreign-born immigrants that experienced human trafficking in their home country, experienced trafficking on their way to the U.S., and/or are experiencing trafficking in the U.S. Our population of interest in this case is undocumented U.S. immigrants from the Northern Triangle that have experienced human trafficking.

While we have no true metric to understand the size of this population, it is estimated by the United Nations Refugee Agency that 247,000 people from Honduras and 71,500 people from El Salvador "have been internally displaced by violence at of 2018" (3). Some research suggests that higher migration intentions are associated with being a victim to multiple crimes (3). Additionally, individuals from Central America often immigrate to the U.S. due to natural disaster, economic hardship, or violence in

their home country (33). Ineffective governance within home countries also contributes to migration to the U.S. (3). California, Texas, New York, Illinois, and Florida house about half of all immigrants that have arrived in the past five years (6).

Department of Homeland Security. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security, founded in 2002, has a “central role” is “administering the immigration system of the United States” and has several sectors dedicated to doing so including U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (15). USCIS manages lawful/legal immigration to the U.S. (14) while CBP controls and manages the U.S border by “combining customs, immigration, border security, and agricultural protection” in a comprehensive approach (15).

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) handles “immigration enforcement, human detention, preventing terrorism, and combating the illegal movement of people and goods” (16). The largest responsibility is immigration enforcement which includes the “humane detention and removal of persons subject to” unlawful actions (16). Two main directorates include Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) and Homeland Security Investigations (HSI).

ERO “upholds U.S. immigration law at, within, and beyond” the U.S. borders by focusing on public safety threats and dangers to national security (17). The immigration enforcement process is managed by ERO including the removal of undocumented immigrants “ordered removed from the U.S.” by federal immigration judges (17).

HSI investigates transnational crime that threatens or seeks “to exploit the customs and immigration law” of the U.S. including terrorism, narcotics, human trafficking, cybercrime, and money laundering (17).

To improve efficiency and reduce effort duplication, DHS coordinates with federal partners in ways such as the President’s Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (18), which “is a cabinet-level entity” consisting of 20 federal government agencies tasked with coordinating the U.S. government response to trafficking (1, 19, 20). There is also a national human trafficking hotline where people can get help, report a tip, and learn more about the topic (19).

Within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement houses a federal law enforcement agency that investigates “at home, abroad, and online” called Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) (21, 22). HSI criminally investigates human trafficking in coordination with other law enforcement entities Annually, more than 1,000 criminal investigations are opened by HSI (23). The U.S. Department of Homeland Security also has a Center for Countering Human Trafficking which works in the following areas: training, outreach, and engagement, victim protection and assistance, identification and screening, and enforcement and investigations (24). ICE also has a group called, Enforcement and Removal Operations, that plays a role in human trafficking detection because of their interactions with noncitizens (22). Within their detention centers, this group “identifies, screens, and responds” to possible traffickers and victims (22).

Mandated by the Victims' Rights and Restitution Act, 34 U.S.C. § 20141, and the Crime Victims' Rights Act, 18 U.S.C. § 3771, victims involved in an HSI investigation receive assistance aimed at stabilizing the individual including, medical/mental health care, legal services, food and shelter, legal services, and more. Eligible victims may also receive immigration benefits from U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services to help protect them, such as U and T visas (see below) (1, 25).

As noted previously, a victim's lack of legal immigration status is often used by traffickers as a means of exploitation and controlling them (25). Additionally, this lack of legal status often causes victims to be wary of working with law enforcement and service organizations (25). To protect victims of human trafficking and other crimes by providing immigration relief to eligible victims, the US Citizenship and Immigration services has mechanisms to provide immigration relief to eligible victims of human trafficking and other crimes. The agency administers 2 immigration processes that encourage victims to come forward and work with law enforcement and other certifying agencies:

- **T Nonimmigrant Status (T Visa):** The T visa "is for victims of a severe form of trafficking in persons. Victims can remain and work in the United States for up to 4 years once granted T nonimmigrant status. T nonimmigrant status may be extended beyond 4 years in limited circumstances; victims can also apply for a Green Card, also known as lawful permanent residency, if they meet certain requirements." (25)
- **U Nonimmigrant Status (U Visa):** The U Visa "is for victims of certain qualifying criminal activities, including domestic violence, sexual assault, hate crimes, human trafficking, involuntary servitude, and certain other serious offenses. Victims can remain and work in the United States for up to 4 years after they are granted U nonimmigrant status. We may extend U nonimmigrant status beyond 4 years in limited circumstances. Victims can also apply for a Green Card, also known as lawful permanent residence, if they meet certain requirements." (25)

While applying for visas, there is usually a cost burden from securing proper supporting documents, legal assistance, and potentially from the eventual green card process (26). Additionally, while working on the visa applications and prior to a "Bona Fide Determination", individuals can be deported (8).

Human Trafficking as a Public Health Issue. Given the structural and multi-level risk factors for human trafficking, a "public health approach to anti-human trafficking prevention and intervention activities" has been suggested. (27, 28). Problem size estimation, risk and protective factor identification for perpetration, victimization, survival, and resilience "across multiple levels of the social ecology", and development of evidence-based strategies to better victim health are key elements of a public health approach to human trafficking (2).

The public health field has also continued to contribute to prevalence estimation and trends, research, designing and validating screening tools for human trafficking (7). While individual and interpersonal

risks have been studied, public health as a field also has researched societal level and cultural factors that impact human trafficking (7).

ADDITIONAL FACTORS

Non-governmental Organizations Addressing Human Trafficking. Many public health and community organizations are currently addressing human trafficking. For example, HEAL Trafficking, is an organization that equips healthcare professionals to “recognize, respond, and prevent human trafficking” through survivor centered, evidence-based approaches with a public health perspective (29). By incorporating the socio-ecological framework, prevention strategies, and other health perspectives, organizations similar to HEAL Trafficking can shift trafficking from only a criminal justice issue to a public health issue allowing adverse health outcomes to be more easily addressed and bringing in additional stakeholders to prevent, detect, and stop human trafficking (29).

Community organizations dedicated to serving specific racial/ethnic populations, similar to Ethnic Minorities of Burma Advocacy and Resource Center (EMBARC) and Latina Unidas Por Un Nuevo Amanecer (L.U.N.A.), also exist to provide survivors of human trafficking and other abuses with specific support needs that arise (30, 35).

Differing Opinions in the US about immigration. Opinions about Immigration issue in the US have been mixed through the years. According to the Gallup poll, since 1965, when they first asked Americans about their preferred immigration levels, on average over that time period, 42% of Americans have favored reduced immigration, 35% preferred keeping the status quo, and 18% wanted increased immigration (34). The complexity of the issue is reflected in both the ebb and flow in opinions as well as the nuances of opinions. For example, Gallup notes that in July 2024, 55% of those polled wanted to see immigration decreased. In that same poll, 70% of U.S. adults favored allowing immigrants who entered the country illegally a chance to become U.S. citizens if they meet certain requirements over a period of time. In contrast, in 2020 and 2021, nearly as many wanted to see increased immigration (34%) as to keep the status quo (36%), with fewer favoring decreases (30%).

Public opinion may influence the potential policy options available to assist those who have experienced labor trafficking, particularly if they are present in the country without legal status.

Changes in Federal Immigration Policy. Many legislative reforms, starting with the Immigration and Nationality Act codified in 1952, have led to the current U.S. immigration system we have today (31, 32). Since, reforms ending the national origins quota system, redefining the word refugee, creating a path to citizenship for those who entered the U.S. before 1982, making it illegal to hire undocumented individuals, providing Temporary Protected Status, and more have occurred (31, 32).

Within the last decade, immigration policy has continued to change. Such changes include the Central American Minors program, the Secure the Border Rule, and the discontinuation of various policies. The Central America Minors program, established in 2014, allows vulnerable youth to have their application processed while they wait in their home country if they have parents in the U.S. rather than requiring

them to get to the U.S. border which is often dangerous (33). Additionally, in 2016, Temporary Protected Status was renewed for over 200,000 individuals from El Salvador, allowing them to work and live legally in the U.S., due to gang violence (33). These programs were ended during the first Trump administration (33). Due to the Secure the Border Rule established during the Biden administration, asylum applications were suspended when border crossings reached a seven-day average of 2,500 starting in 2024 (34).

In the U.S., permanent and temporary immigrants are different issues and “the executive branch may exercise statutory or executive authority to allow certain noncitizens to enter or remain in the United States on a time-limited basis, including those who have not been admitted through permanent or temporary pathways under the INA and might otherwise be subject to removal” which allows them to in act policy change within this scope (31, 32).

Current immigration policy should be considered when solving this case and may have changed since the release of this case.

Language and Culture. The population of interest may also have difficulty seeking and receiving help while/after experiencing human trafficking due to cultural and language barriers such as resources only being offered in English (25).

CHARGE

A new Midwest regional human trafficking taskforce is asking for proposals to reduce labor trafficking prevalence and adverse outcomes of undocumented immigrants from the Northern Triangle in Central America. Your task is to identify what areas and specific populations of interest to address first within the overall case and create an equitable and sustainable proposal.

The proposed intervention should focus on short- and long-term solutions that empower and incorporate the community impacted while also considering the health of the community system. The regional taskforce requests a realistic and applicable **multifaceted approach** to address human trafficking of undocumented immigrants from the Northern Triangle. The following must be included in your proposal:

- With a realistic lens, identify what specific areas, scenarios, and settings should be addressed first when solving the broader case problem of human trafficking of undocumented immigrants from the Northern Triangle.
- The proposal should include but not be limited to a human trafficking surveillance plan for your identified specific population of interest.
- A rough budget for all short- and long-term proposed interventions with at least one funding source identified.

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WRITING AND EDITING TEAM | SPRING 2026

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Secret Writer	The secret writing team will be announced after the competition has concluded.