



MISPERCEPTIONS LEAD TO MISSED OPPORTUNITIES TO IDENTIFY VICTIMS

Dispelling misperceptions about human trafficking is imperative to proactively identify victims and to counter the isolation on which traffickers rely to keep people in servitude.

“Trafficking doesn’t happen here.” Approaching human trafficking as a crime that occurs only in far off places ignores situations of forced labor or sex trafficking that may be happening closer to home. Human trafficking is not a problem that involves only foreigners or migrants, but one faced in nearly every corner of the world involving citizens who may be exploited without ever leaving their hometown.

“She’s a criminal.” Many victims of trafficking first come to the attention of authorities due to an arrest for immigration violations, prostitution, or petty theft. Screening vulnerable populations—even if first encountered as potential defendants—for signs of force, fraud, or coercion used against them is imperative to identify human trafficking properly, to ensure that victims are not punished for acts committed as a result of being subjected to trafficking, and to effectively prevent victims from being returned to an exploitive situation.

“It’s cultural.” Holding a person in servitude is not a cultural practice; it is a crime. Some victims are subjected to trafficking by members of their own family or ethnic group. Misperceptions that this is a shared value among an ethnic group ignore the methods of force and coercion used by individual traffickers, and can create a zone of impunity in an ethnic community, with the result that victims in that group will never see their abusers brought to justice. These prejudices fail to reduce victims’ vulnerability to exploitation and often obscure the true demographics of who is subjected to certain types of trafficking.

“He agreed to do this.” Whether or not a person agreed to a certain type of employment, to migrate for a better job, or to work off a debt is irrelevant once that person’s free will has been compromised. A person who faces threats or harm should

they choose to change their employment is in a situation of servitude. Often, traffickers use the initial consent of victims to stigmatize them for their choice, telling victims they will be deported, arrested, or ostracized if they seek help.

“She’s free to come and go.” Popular images of human trafficking include dramatic kidnappings and people held under lock and key. More common, but less visible, methods of control include psychological coercion, debt bondage, withholding of documents and wages, and threats of harm. As in domestic abuse cases, observing a person out in public or taking public transportation does not mean that she is free from the effective control of her trafficker.

“He didn’t complain.” The duty to identify human trafficking must not be left solely to those in servitude. A victim has valid reasons for not accusing his exploiters of trafficking. He may fear physical or financial harm, shame, or repercussions for his family. He may assess that the assistance he could access from coming forward does not offer the needed protection to merit taking this risk. He may be unaware of his rights, or lack trust in authorities to enforce those rights.

“Trafficking doesn’t happen where prostitution is legal.” The occurrence of trafficking does not depend on the legality of prostitution; it exists whether prostitution is legal, illegal, or decriminalized. It is the obligation of every government, regardless of the legal status of prostitution, to look closely for victims of trafficking and to ensure their protection.

“There’s nothing I can do about it.” Everyone can learn the signs of human trafficking and take action to alert authorities of possible crimes as appropriate. Citizens can learn about organizations that assist victims of trafficking in their hometowns and how to safely refer potential victims for help. They can spread awareness of, and dispel common misperceptions about, human trafficking.