

Domestic Preparedness Journal

Drug & Human Trafficking

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It Takes a Community to Stop Drug and Human Trafficking

By Catherine L. Feinman

Some of the greatest threats within a community are hiding in plain sight. For example, traffickers can use encrypted messaging applications and social media platforms to make drug sales. Cash apps and cryptocurrency make it easier for them to receive payments but more difficult for law enforcement to catch. In addition, despite public safety campaigns that promote awareness about human trafficking, many people still overlook victims they encounter throughout their daily routines. With so much information and many warnings being posted on social media, in shopping centers, at hospitals, and even on the back of bathroom stalls, critical information about these criminal activities does not reach everyone who needs to know.

Unfortunately, even among those who are more likely to encounter victims in the course of their daily duties – public safety professionals, first responders, medical and hospital personnel, volunteers, and others who protect and serve their communities – signs of illicit drug activity and human trafficking can be overlooked and unreported. Tips from community members can help law enforcement locate clandestine drug labs and synthetic drug manufacturing facilities, but some unusual activity still goes unreported. Victims of human trafficking encountering first responders may be too scared or unable to directly ask for help, and the responders may not ask the right questions or notice small details. In some cases, identifying one crime can also shed light on others. For example, the crimes of drug and human trafficking are becoming more intertwined as traffickers leverage opportunities to diversify their businesses and boost profits.

The authors in this June edition of the *Domestic Preparedness Journal* urge those who already dedicate their time to promoting safe communities to go one step further in combating drug and human trafficking. It is each person's responsibility – regardless of official roles and duties – to learn about the threats and hazards related to the drug and human trafficking industries and how they can impact any community. Take a few extra minutes this week to learn some new facts and be more alert to and report potentially nefarious activities before they have dire consequences.

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Invisible Chains: Human Trafficking, Drug Abuse, and Support

By Sandra Dennis-Essig

Human trafficking remains a profound problem in the 21st century that is not always accurately portrayed in the media. According to [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#), one of the most prevalent inaccuracies about human trafficking is that it always or frequently involves kidnapping or some other forms of physical coercion. This is not the case in reality, as the majority of human traffickers employ psychological tactics like manipulation, deception, coercion, and threats to ensure victims do exploitative work and commercial sex. According to [Polaris Project Statistics](#), thousands of people are trafficked in the United States on a yearly basis. A significant portion of traffic victims in the United States year by year are women and children, who are often considered as the most vulnerable population.

A study at the [University of Missouri–St. Louis](#) found that one of the most prevalent techniques used by traffickers to ensure total control of their victims is making them dependent on substances. The addiction to the drugs traffickers provide creates a strong grip on the victims, making escape extremely difficult. This technique of control ensures compliance and obedience, leveraging the destructive power of addiction to

enslave the victim. As a result, the victim is no longer just physically dependent on the trafficker; they are now chemically dependent as well. The [National Survivor Study](#) conducted by one of the nation's leading anti-trafficking organizations, Polaris Project, found that many survivors of human trafficking have a history of substance abuse, often exacerbated by their traffickers. This manipulation worsens the victim's fate, entangling them further in a web of exploitation from which it may seem impossible to escape.

Another form of human trafficking is familial trafficking, which exploits the trust that exists within the family unit. A report by the [International Organization for Migration](#) stated that 41% of child trafficking cases are conducted by relatives or caregivers. This type of human trafficking significantly impacts the victims psychologically as their trust is betrayed. According to a study by the [Hong Kong Dignity Institute](#), victims trafficked through the familial channel experience emotional manipulation, fear, and trauma attachment, making their escape difficult. The betrayal of their trust in a setting that should be a safe haven leaves lasting effects on them, which include anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [2022 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons](#) stated that 42% of people trafficked globally are women and 18% are young girls making women the most targeted population. The combined adverse effects of drug addiction and trafficking create a compounded trauma for victims, making it difficult for them to get out. Many survivors of trafficking report that their initial recruitment involved promises of a better life, only to be ensnared in a world of addiction and exploitation. According to [the 2022 study at the University of Missouri–St. Louis](#), 20% of people engaged in trafficking have substance abuse issues, often initiated and maintained by their trafficker to control them. Public awareness campaigns, like [the Blue Campaign](#) and [Stop This Traffic Manasseh Project](#) and [Kent County Human Trafficking Task Force](#), point out that human trafficking is not a remote problem but may occur in any community. As such, it is essential to be aware and educated on how to notice signs of trafficking and how to provide continued support to survivors. According to [Nevada Attorney General Aaron Ford](#), these signs include physical abuse, avoidance of eye contact, appearing fearful and anxious, inability to speak freely, lack of identification documents, restricted movements, appearing malnourished, etc. Law enforcement, social services, and community organizations need relentless efforts to effectively curb this rampant problem and help those caught within it.

Trauma-Informed Care in Emergency Response

According to a [2018 study at Florida State University](#), most emergency medical services (EMS) and first responders are not trained in recognizing the trauma of human trafficking victims and providing effective support for them. They need specialized training on trauma-informed and victim-centric approaches that address all the issues associated with human trafficking. This specialized training equips them with

the necessary skills to identify survivors' experiences and comprehend the adverse effects their experiences have had on them. This, in turn, aids EMS and first responders in providing adequate support and treatment that places priority on survivors' well-being, safety, and empowerment. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's [Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach](#), trauma-informed care involves creating a safe environment, building trust, and empowering survivors. This method is crucial in providing effective assistance and reducing the risk of re-trafficking and further harm.

Trauma-informed care is not a one-size-fits-all solution but rather a framework that emphasizes understanding, recognizing, and responding to all types of trauma. According to the [Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach](#), the key principles include safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural, historical, and gender considerations. By applying these principles, emergency responders can better assist victims of trafficking, address their unique needs, and promote recovery and reintegration into society.

Emergency Managers' Role in Identifying Victims of Human Trafficking

According to a [2006 study funded by the Department of Health and Human Services](#), emergency managers play a crucial role in recognizing and responding to the trauma of human trafficking victims by:

- Coordinating with law enforcement and social services to identify potential victims;
- Providing training on human trafficking awareness and response;
- Developing protocols for victim support and referral;



Panelists at the 2023 Annual Legislative Breakfast: Addressing Human Trafficking in New Jersey, Law Policy and Practice (Source: Sandra Dennis-Essig, 2023).

- Facilitating access to medical, mental health, and social services;
- Ensuring victim-centered and trauma-informed care;
- Collaborating with organizations specializing in human trafficking support;
- Conducting needs assessments and resource mobilization;
- Supporting victim advocacy and empowerment;
- Facilitating information sharing and data collection; and
- Continuously improving response efforts through lessons learned and best practices.

Recognizing the trauma of human trafficking victims is essential to provide appropriate support and services. Emergency managers can help ensure a comprehensive and compassionate response. This, in turn, aids emergency managers and first responders in providing adequate support.

Comprehensive Support for Human Trafficking Survivors

Human trafficking survivors have needs ranging from short-term necessities like food, shelter, and medical care to long-term ones that include mental health services, vocational training, and education. In addition, they need legal assistance to adequately navigate legal struggles, get justice for the injustice done to them, and safeguard their rights. However, many survivors of human trafficking find it difficult to access these services due to the crimes they may have engaged in or perpetrated while in the net of human traffickers. In order to ensure survivors of human trafficking do not face additional struggles, the Trafficking Survivors Relief Act was proposed in 2022.

This bill will ensure that survivors of human trafficking are not punished for the crime they committed under duress, and it will grant them access to the assistance they need to properly rehabilitate and reenter society.

An effective system of support is essential for the successful rehabilitation of human

trafficking survivors. Community organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Polaris Project, La Strada International, or Anti-Slavery International, and support groups for other survivors constitute this network. These communities offer encouragement, a feeling of community, and vital assistance systems. Furthermore, NGOs and government initiatives that provide safe and long-term housing options provide survivors with a solid base on which to rebuild their lives with dignity and optimism. Furthermore, comprehensive support addresses mental health concerns through trauma-informed therapeutic approaches. Programs such as cognitive behavioral therapy, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, and group therapy can be effective in helping survivors manage trauma and build resilience.

The development of intervention strategies in addressing human trafficking and supporting victims requires a multidisciplinary approach and teams. Multi-disciplinary teams should include law enforcement, prosecutors, medical staff, mental health staff, forensic interviewers, victim services specialists, advocates, housing personnel, treatment facilities and personnel, NGOs, and travel and transportation personnel, all with an understanding of the victim-centered approach. Since it is an issue of transnational interest that requires cooperation at all levels, and many sectors must combine their unique perspectives and resources. Law enforcement agencies play a crucial role in the identification and prosecution of traffickers, in dismantling networks of trafficking, and in protecting potential victims. They bring traffickers to justice while ensuring that victims are treated respectfully and humanely. Social services support the survivors: safe housing, psychological counseling, treatment, and medical and legal support. These services are needed for survivors to heal from and rebuild

their lives after traumatic experiences. They enable a better understanding of trafficking dynamics and the development of new strategies to counter them. They publicize the situation of victims and lobby for better laws and policies on trafficking, ensuring that the voices of these victims are considered in policy processes. They critically work in prevention and advocacy for systemic change to address the root problems of trafficking.

The Annual Legislative Breakfast is a yearly Montclair State University event at which lawmakers are called to address life-saving issues – human trafficking and housing insecurity – along with legislative solutions supporting survivors. The Global Center on Human Trafficking hosts the event, bringing together policymakers, survivors, advocates, educators, and community leaders for a vital conversation and building meaningful pathways.

The 2023 Annual Legislative Breakfast centered on the theme “Addressing Human Trafficking in New Jersey: Policy and Practice,” with assessments on the current effectiveness of policies against trafficking, potential gaps that had to be identified, and evaluations on the impact the gaps cause survivors. The ability to discuss updates from legislators, experts, and survivors enhanced the key speakers’ emphases that practical support measures lay a robust support system for developing comprehensive policies to tackle the criminal aspects of trafficking.

Call to Action: How to Support Trafficking Survivors

Human trafficking and its profound connection with drug addiction provide a huge issue that necessitates a diversified strategy. Communities must meet the needs of these survivors by implementing trauma-informed treatment, campaigning for strong legislative support, and offering comprehensive assistance. The following are the detailed ways

in which efforts can be invested to support human trafficking survivors:

- *Engage communities to provide necessary support to survivors* – Contribute time or resources to local organizations that support trafficking survivors. Active community participation can provide much-needed support and amplify these organizations' efforts to assist survivors.
- *Raise awareness about signs of human trafficking to reduce its prevalence* – Social media platforms can educate networks about the signs of human trafficking and how to report suspicious activities.
- *Support human trafficking survivors with financial contributions* – Donate to public awareness campaigns and organizations that fight for trafficking survivors' rights. Financial support is essential for sustaining these efforts and expanding their reach and impact.
- *Educate the community about human trafficking* – Correct common misconceptions about human trafficking and foster a deeper understanding of survivor experiences. Education can lead to a more informed public that is better equipped to support anti-trafficking initiatives.
- *Combat exploitation* – Stand against the demand that drives human

trafficking by advocating for ethical practices and supporting legislation that targets exploiters. Creating a supportive environment for survivors involves addressing the root causes of exploitation and helping survivors escape it permanently.

Human trafficking is a major issue that requires the effort and attention of individuals and government agencies. It is as important to ensure survivors get adequate help as it is to create measures that cut down on its prevalence. People should be educated on the risk factors and elements that make them vulnerable to human trafficking. In addition to this, awareness should be created generally to ensure victims are recognized, thus making the crime more difficult to commit. Most importantly, adequate support should be provided to human trafficking survivors through collaborations of different disciplines and effective strategies that ensure their rehabilitation and reintegration. Together, through sincere actions like those outlined in the call to action section, individuals and agencies can make a difference by helping survivors reclaim their lives and stopping human trafficking and drug abuse.

The author wishes to thank the NJ Coalition Against Human Trafficking for its contributions to the research provided in this article.



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She collaborated with the New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking as an advocate, speaker, and survivor. Sandra currently serves as a Selective Service Board Member for the State of California and has previously served as a volunteer Selective Services Board Member for the State of New Jersey.



The Mexican-American border (Source: [Greg Bulla/Unsplash](#), 2021).

The Nexus Between Drug and Human Trafficking

By Richard Schoeberl,
Jeff Bollettieri, and Bill Loucks

The profitability of human trafficking and drug trafficking makes them a desirable pairing for transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) seeking to increase profits and market control. The [International Labour Organization](#) estimated that human trafficking was a \$236 billion-a-year business in 2021. Actual illegal drug trade profits are largely unknown due to the trade's illicit nature. However, a 2014 [report](#) from Global Financial Integrity, a Washington, DC-based think tank focusing on illicit financial flows, corruption, illicit trade, and money laundering, has estimated the global illegal drug market between \$426 and \$652 billion.

Human trafficking and smuggling are complex crimes that affect people differently. While sometimes related, these are separate crimes. Emerging [research](#) suggests that disasters, like the border crisis, increase the risk of human trafficking. Numerous factors drive migration, including natural disasters, regional conflicts, poverty, political instability, human rights violations, and fluctuating immigration policies.

Although the responsibility for immigration policy and enforcement lies with the federal

government, state and local governments shoulder the burden for the stabilization of migrants remaining in the U.S. as they await immigration proceedings. State and local government efforts will be chiefly coordinated by emergency management personnel utilizing tactics similar to those for natural and human-caused disasters. They will assist social services agencies and their non-profit partners to quickly mobilize emergency migrant-serving facilities, programs, and services. Aside from the humanitarian lens, the policing lens has agencies shifting their “safeguarding” focus of respective communities to combat spillover violence associated with the border crisis:

- According to Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) [Director Wray](#) at a March 2024 congressional hearing, “I would say this from an FBI perspective: we are seeing a wide array of very dangerous threats that emanate from the border, and that includes drug trafficking. The FBI alone seized enough fentanyl in the last two years to kill 270 million people.”

- In March 2024, U.S. Border Patrol chief Jason Owens stated that the extraordinary flow of people into the U.S. is mainly driven by cartels, and they were setting “the rules of engagement” at the southern border.

Transnational Drug Trafficking

Aside from illicit drug trafficking, Mexican TCOs are aggressively increasing their involvement in corresponding crimes like extortion, human smuggling, human trafficking, arms trafficking, and oil theft, according to the Congressional Research Service. Additionally, the level of violence associated with territorial control, trafficking routes, and criminal influence is increasing. According to the Global Risk Map, Mexico remains at “high risk,” crediting the enduring narco-war that threatens the balance of power and fuels upticks in violence. Over the past few decades, Mexican TCOs have fragmented the seven original Mexican cartels into twelve. In addition to large TCOs, approximately 200-400 smaller criminal organizations operate in Mexico.

The fragmentation and evolution of criminal enterprises did not happen instantaneously. In 2018, instead of directly combating TCOs, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador adopted a policy addressing social conditions within the country, allowing these organizations to flourish. Unlike Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s, where dismantling the Medellín and Cali cartels led to less violence overall, dismantling the Mexican TCOs has fragmented criminal groups and encouraged widespread violence, largely due to Mexico’s governmental corruption and lack of enforcement.

TCOs continue to be the greatest ongoing drug threat to the U.S., according to the DEA. Mexican TCOs control a majority of the U.S. illicit drug market, have well-established transportation routes, possess

advanced technological and communication capabilities, and have strong affiliations with criminal groups inside the U.S. Their routine participation and involvement with affiliated crimes such as human smuggling, human trafficking, arms trafficking, public corruption, and violence pose a serious threat to homeland security and further jeopardize public safety. The TCOs’ production and trafficking of fentanyl to the U.S. has fueled a continuing opioid crisis. The DEA reported that fentanyl was responsible for the deaths of 74,225 Americans in 2022 and almost 38,000 Americans in the first six months of 2023, making it the deadliest U.S. drug threat.

TCOs currently control transportation routes inside Mexico, smuggling corridors, and distribution hubs in every U.S. state, as well as synthetic drug manufacturing facilities. Encrypted messaging applications and social media platforms facilitate these drug sales, making detection more challenging for law enforcement. TCOs can advertise drugs and cross-border human-smuggling services over social media platforms, communicate with co-conspirators and drug purchasers over encrypted applications, and receive payment via cash apps and cryptocurrency platforms on a single electronic mobile device.

Transnational Human Trafficking

The overwhelming number of undocumented, illegal migrants entering the U.S. is alarming. In 2023, Customs Border Patrol reported over 2.4 million encounters at the Southwest border and 3.2 million encounters nationwide. TCO violence and corruption, coupled with inadequate U.S. immigration policies and enforcement, have increased the number of asylum seekers entering the country. According to a 2022 report by the United Nations’ International Organization for Migration, the Mexico to U.S. corridor is the largest in the world, with nearly 11 million people fleeing

violence, extortion, armed clashes, or organized crime groups. Conflicts and competition for control between TCOs in violent states and battlegrounds – expanding into formerly peaceful areas – fuel a large exodus of people. Smugglers are capitalizing on opportunities for diversification and exploitation.

Recruiting and Transport

Common human trafficking recruitment methods include familial relationships, smuggling, and migration, specifically targeting migrants who originate in or pass through Mexico en route to the U.S. Migrants often have preexisting vulnerabilities and are unlikely to report trafficking crimes to law enforcement for reasons including the lack of self-identification, TCO retribution, deportation, and arrest. TCOs control the 2,000-mile U.S. Mexico-U.S. border which has escalated violent competition between groups over illicit markets and trafficking routes. The smugglers, often known as “foot guides,” “coyotes,” or “polleros,” recruit victims with promises of safe passage. Sometimes, victims are kidnapped en route to their destination and controlled with debt bondage, physical violence, and threats to family members.

Smuggling endeavors are highly sophisticated. In 2021, TCOs earned an estimated \$13 billion from human smuggling. Migrants agree to pay TCOs to travel from Southern or Central America to the U.S. Before the journey occurs, TCOs do the equivalent of a background check to learn about the migrants’ family members and friends and where they live. The family members or friends become “collateral” for the migrants. When the journey begins, TCOs require migrants to wear color-coded and serial-numbered wristbands that reflect how much money is outstanding and who they may have to work for once inside the U.S.

During the trip, TCOs often increase the price or “piso” (tax), making it difficult for migrants

to back out of deals or negotiate lower fees. Most migrants have some money, but not always enough to pay for the entire journey, with smuggling rates ranging from \$3,000 to \$60,000. At the border, TCOs remove the migrants’ wristbands and collect any remaining piso and smuggling fees. Migrants refusing to pay risk having someone kill their family members or friends. Any migrant who owes money must go to a work location in the U.S., where the migrant stays enslaved in debt bondage to the trafficker until the full amount is paid.

Forced Labor in the U.S.

Once in the U.S., large percentages of undocumented illegal migrants smuggled into the U.S. from TCOs fall prey to labor trafficking, which expands beyond laboring on a farm, cleaning hotels, doing construction, or working in factories for little or no wages. According to research conducted by one of the nation’s leading anti-trafficking organizations, Polaris, the National Human Trafficking Hotline identified that, between 2015-2018, 50% of persons trafficked for labor were from Latin America. Agriculture has the distinction of being the U.S. industry with the greatest number of reported immigrant victims of human trafficking.

Latin American migrants are not the only victims of the gateway from smuggling to trafficking. Labor trafficking also occurs at legal and illegal marijuana farms, which may be operated by TCOs or Asian Criminal Organizations with ties to the Chinese Communist Party, who also function as money launderers. According to the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, encounters with Chinese nationals have significantly increased over the past four years: 450 in FY2021, 2,176 in FY2022, 24,314 in FY2023, and 27,700 in the first 7 months of FY2024.

Expanding Beyond Drug Trafficking

Capitalizing on their existing drug routes, TCOs have expanded and diversified into human

smuggling and, subsequently, human trafficking. Targeting migrants desperate to enter the U.S. and escape violence and economic poverty in their own countries, TCOs offer struggling migrants paid unauthorized transportation. Many migrants cannot pay the transportation cost and become the TCOs' indentured servants. Repayment for this service takes many forms, primarily sex trafficking, labor trafficking, drug smuggling, and other associated criminal activity. Refusal to comply with TCO demands for trade-based repayment often means violence to migrants or their family members who remained in the country.

Same Routes, More Commodities

Unlike the Colombian cartels of the 1980s and 1990s, disrupting and dismantling Mexican TCOs have proved difficult because of corruption in the Mexican government and because arresting TCO leaders results in further fragmentation, cartel expansion, and extensive violence in geographic turf battles. TCOs control the areas along the Southwest border and exploit that control and long-established transportation routes. Capitalizing on their already prosperous business model for drug cargo, TCOs diversified into human smuggling using the same routes and procedures to transport human commodities. As an added benefit, desperate migrants rarely have the total funds required for their transportation, so TCOs accommodate them by forcing them into sex work, forced labor, drug trafficking, drug production, and associated criminal activities.

Exploiting migrants provides an endless supply of TCO personnel and income not dependent on the manufacture and transportation of illicit narcotics. The diversification into human smuggling and trafficking is a simple business decision for TCOs who have no regard for human life and make no distinction between drugs and human commodities. Profits

effectively triple with minimal effort while providing an endless supply of personnel and diversified illicit business opportunities should the narcotics trade become disrupted. With money as a prime motivation for these illegal activities, transnational crime is likely to increase until authorities challenge the high-profit, low-risk paradigm. Enacted or amended legislation is needed to address the immigration crisis, as well as training for law enforcement to recognize human trafficking when encountering migrants.

U.S. Efforts to Combat Trafficking

The decades-long war on drugs has had minimal progress in eradicating TCOs' illicit businesses. The illegal drug market has transitioned from cocaine and heroin to even more deadly inorganic intoxicants such as methamphetamine, fentanyl, and xylazine. The major geographical drug threats are no longer South America for its cocaine production and the Middle East for its heroin but are geographically now Mexico and China. Drug-trafficking routes have evolved from private and commercial air carriers, drug mules and body carriers, and maritime routes via the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic and Pacific oceans to land routes along the Southwest border. Mexico's entry into drug production and its partnership with China to obtain precursor chemicals has further fueled the U.S.'s deadly opioid epidemic.

Despite its tremendous amount of demand for reduction programs, the U.S. remains the leading consumer of illicit narcotics globally. Traditional enforcement efforts used in the past to disrupt and dismantle TCOs have proven unsuccessful in Mexico and have only led to fragmentation, violence, and furtherance of territorial control. Implementing programs such as the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force, High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas, and High-Intensity Financial

Crimes Areas have had some level of success. However, TCO expansion and diversification into other criminal activities such as human smuggling, human trafficking, arms trafficking, and fuel theft have boosted their profits. Open-border policies facilitate TCOs to conduct criminal activities within the U.S. and exploit migrants who embark on the cross-border smuggling journey.

A Renewed and Expanded Call to Action

Immigration reform, legislation with harsher penalties for the manufacture, possession, and distribution of synthetic drugs, and training drug enforcement organizations on human trafficking and smuggling investigative approaches can help combat TCOs. Collaborative and multifaceted steps are needed to address this nexus between drug and human trafficking, which include:

- *Prevention of migrant smuggling* – Aside from proactive investigations and disruptions of TCOs, other measures are key in addressing migrant smuggling, such as accurate information about smuggling risks for migrants to make educated decisions about their journeys. Some technology-based initiatives could disseminate information by sharing migrants' experiences and the dangers of their migration journeys.
- *Immigration reform* – Current immigration policies provide opportunities for TCOs to victimize migrants. Migrants who involuntarily congregate along the Southwest border awaiting their eligibility to seek asylum may contemplate alternate avenues to U.S. entry, thus increasing their vulnerability to extortion and kidnapping.
- *Prosecution of traffickers* – The criminal justice approach or “all-crimes approach” to counter trafficking is critical for dismantling TCO trafficking networks, preventing trafficking, and protecting its victims.
- *Utilization of an Enhanced Collaborative Model* – Multidisciplinary teams should include law enforcement, prosecutors, medical staff, mental health staff, forensic interviewers, victim services specialists, advocates, housing personnel, treatment facilities, and personnel, nongovernmental organizations, and travel and transportation personnel, all with an understanding of the victim-centered approach.
- The *Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force* enhances funding and training budgets to target high-level transnational, national, and regional criminal organizations. This task force provides investigative funding and intelligence-driven strategies, ensures U.S.-Mexico cooperation along the Southwest border, and offers an assortment of assets globally. Programs should not be reduced, but some of this funding should be reallocated from enforcement to education.
- The High-Intensity *Drug Trafficking Areas* program is part of the National Drug Control Strategy to assist and coordinate law enforcement agencies by addressing drug threats, trafficking, and production in the U.S. This program recognizes the expansion of Mexican cartel activities. Providing training to regional High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas offices can help identify human trafficking victims during narcotics investigations.
- The *Financial Crimes Enforcement Network* is administered by the U.S. Department of Treasury to safeguard the U.S. financial system by combating money laundering and terrorist financing. This network supports law enforcement with expertise in narcotics money laundering

and should utilize its current monitoring system for monetary commodities to flag financial transactions associated with the movement and sale of human commodities.

- The High-Intensity Financial Crimes Areas program complements the High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas program by focusing on the financial aspect of transnational crimes in Northern and Southern California, New York, New Jersey, Chicago, Puerto Rico, South Florida, and along the Southwest border. Better integration across the enhanced multidisciplinary team approach would help combat the illicit human-drug trafficking enterprise across the U.S.
- The President's Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons is comprised of 20 federal agencies tasked with coordinating governmentwide efforts to combat human trafficking. Its primary focus is enforcing criminal and labor laws, victim-centered and trauma-informed assistance, data collection, education, public awareness, foreign aid, and diplomatic engagement. The Human Trafficking Institute's 2022 Federal Human Trafficking Report states U.S. federal prosecutors concentrated 97% of trafficking prosecutions on sex trafficking and only 3% on forced labor cases. Conversely, experts estimate that 70% of persons trafficked are forced labor. Better agency-wide coordination would provide data-driven intelligence by improving the collection and sharing of statistical data pertaining to the types of prosecutions.
- *Human trafficking task forces* – The FBI and Homeland Security Investigations have limited resources applied to human

trafficking task forces within their domestic field offices. Much like the Joint Terrorism Task Force, the establishment of human trafficking task forces at the 56 FBI field offices could better combat the drug trafficking nexus.

- *Easily accessible, low-cost training and education in human trafficking recognition for the public, law enforcement, and the judicial system* – Screening for human trafficking indicators is necessary any time law enforcement officials identify migrants during operations associated with migrant smuggling. Educating first responders in recognizing trafficking, using a trauma-informed approach, and employing investigative procedures is critical as they are likely to be the first to encounter victims and perpetrators. Additionally, educating judges, prosecutors, and jurors to better understand human trafficking crimes could result in more effective prosecutions.

The illicit drug market, smuggling, and human trafficking at the Southwest border are profitable for TCOs. They reap enormous profits from drug trafficking, human smuggling, and human trafficking. The diversification into human commodities has expanded profits by exploiting migrants. TCOs will continue to utilize their long-established drug routes between the U.S. and Mexico to smuggle and force many into indentured servitude, which can result in debt bondage, sexual exploitation, labor trafficking, and forced criminality. Migrant smuggling and human trafficking are different but often overlap, which makes it imperative that policymakers, immigration officers, law enforcement, and organizations are conscious of the differences between them and the fluidity of moving from one to another. According to the Texas Border Czar Mike Banks, “Every state has really become a border

state. Never in my career have I seen such large numbers entering the country illegally. And so, I think we should be worried about it.”

Communities, resources, and emergency management agencies across every state, county, and city are strained. In 2021, the Federal Emergency Management Agency deployed to the Southwest border to assist with an incursion of migrants. In April 2024, the administration announced \$300 million in grants through the Shelter and Services

Program to support communities across the U.S. that are providing services to migrants. The U.S. must multilaterally prepare for the continued insurgency of migrants by utilizing disaster management best practices, continuing to aggressively target TCOs with anti-smuggling campaigns before migrants are recruited and reach the border, and combating smuggler misinformation so migrants are duly informed. Without additional action, the TCOs become stronger, more diversified, and harder to combat.



Richard Schoeberl, Ph.D., has over 30 years of law enforcement experience, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). He has served in a variety of positions throughout his career, ranging from a supervisory special agent at the FBI's headquarters in Washington, DC, to unit chief of the International Terrorism Operations Section at the NCTC's headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Before these organizations, he worked as a special agent investigating violent crime, human trafficking, international terrorism, and organized crime. He was also assigned numerous collateral duties during his FBI tour – including as a certified instructor and member of the agency's SWAT program. In addition to the FBI and NCTC, he is an author and has served as a media contributor for Fox News, CNN, PBS, NPR, Al-Jazeera Television, Al Arabiya Television, Al

Hurra, and Sky News in Europe. Additionally, he has authored numerous scholarly articles, serves as a peer mentor with the Police Executive Research Forum, is currently a professor of Criminology and Homeland Security at the University of Tennessee-Southern, and works with Hope for Justice – a global nonprofit combatting human trafficking.



Jeff Bolettieri is a 27-year veteran with the Suffolk County Sheriff's Office, New York, where he spent 12 years assigned to the Special Investigations Unit, and 11 years assigned as an investigator Sergeant with the Special Investigations Unit. Additionally, Jeff spent 16 years assigned to the Drug Enforcement Administration New York Drug Enforcement Task Force. Eleven of those years, he was assigned as the executive officer supervising task force personnel and overseeing cases. Jeff currently serves as an investigator/instructor for Hope for Justice, an international non-profit organization combating human trafficking. Jeff is responsible for specialized training to include Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces human trafficking training and working in Hope for Justice's Investigative model across the U.S.



William "Bill" Loucks Jr. has over 20 years of law enforcement experience, the majority working as a gang and narcotics detective with the Metro Nashville Police Department. Following Metro Nashville Police Department, Bill served as an instructor for the North Carolina Department of Justice-Justice Academy, where he instructed gang and narcotics-related courses. Bill is also a North Carolina General Instructor, North Carolina Specialized Explosives and Hazardous Materials Instructor, and Tennessee Specialized Police Instructor Certified for gangs. Bill is currently a senior investigator with Hope for Justice, where he conducts human trafficking investigations and serves as an instructor for law enforcement agencies. He is also a staff member of the International Narcotics Interdiction Association.



Chemist Kai-For Mo and Biomedical Scientist Ashley Bradley prepare fentanyl samples in a specialized hood to measure the substance's spectra using Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy at Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in Richland, Washington (Source: Andrea Starr/Pacific Northwest National Laboratory).

Fentanyl Hazards and Detection

By Ashley Bradley and Kristin Omberg

In 2023, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) seized over 79.5 million fentanyl-laced pills and 12,000 lbs. of fentanyl powder, amounting to the equivalent of over 376.7 million lethal doses – and seizures have more than doubled in recent years. Likewise, in 2023, the U.S. Customs and Borders Protection (CBP) seized 27,000 lbs. of fentanyl, increasing from 11,200 lbs. in 2021. Consequently, opioid overdoses reached an all-time high at over 110,000 in 2023 and continue to increase. The impact of the deadly opioid epidemic does not stop at overdoses – it poses life-threatening exposure to first responders who arrive on scene. Unfortunately, the drug's ever-changing chemical structure makes it more deadly and addictive as well as more challenging to detect. For the scientific community, addressing this threat is an all-disciplines-on-deck situation – from chemistry and biology to computing and predictive analytics. Through science and technology, scientists are forging paths toward better detection to improve protection for first responders in the field. Optimizing detection strategies and advancing understanding of the capabilities and limitations of commercial-off-the-shelf products is giving first responders a larger toolset to make decisions in unknown circumstances.

Increasing spectral reference libraries to include fentanyl, fentanyl analogs, and adulterated drugs allows for better detection and chemical identification, especially in more complex sample mixtures.

Understanding Emerging Challenges and Hazards

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that has hundreds of millions of possible chemical variants, which are known as analogs. Its intended use is as an analgesic or pain reliever. Unfortunately, it is at high risk for addiction and dependence and is highly abused by trafficking. The criminals behind such drugs are constantly modifying compounds to create substances that evade detection while packing an ever-addictive (and often deadly) punch. These substances are not always in pure form and are frequently mixed with cutting agents (e.g., sugars, lidocaine, xylazine, caffeine, acetaminophen, and other drugs) that can interfere with detection. Modified fentanyl analogs can be up to 100 times more potent than fentanyl itself and, therefore, more dangerous to first responders exposed to them in the field, either by direct encounter with illicit materials and drug paraphernalia on-scene or with individuals under the influence of these substances.

The creation of these illicit materials is literally out of control. Quality controls are unlikely in clandestine laboratories, the sites where drugs like fentanyl are illegally manufactured, often with improvised materials and uncontrolled operations. This means the contents and percentages of each component may vary from pill to pill, even in the same batch. Currently, xylazine, a non-opioid tranquilizer not approved for human use, is one of [the rising adulterants](#). Furthermore, one pill or powdered sample may not represent what the rest of the seized products contain. An estimated seven out of 10 DEA-seized pills in 2023 [contained a lethal dose of fentanyl](#), though this cannot be determined visually. While 2 mg of fentanyl is a potentially lethal dose, cutting agents can alter the potency of the fentanyl or fentanyl analog. It becomes more difficult to detect fentanyl or related analogs when they are present in smaller percentages and cutting agents or adulterant features mask the signal. First responders need to have an understanding of their equipment limitations and strengths and may need to use several systems or reachback analysis depending on the circumstance.

The unknowns create challenges with the antidote as well. For example, Naloxone (Narcan) is the established antidote for opioid overdoses. However, its effectiveness is person-dependent based on several physical and physiological factors such as height, weight, history of drug use, and opioid tolerance. Additionally, the specific analog and potential cutting agents may also play a role in antidote effectiveness, especially when the cutting agents in question are not opioids. Drug mixtures adulterated with various cutting agents cause a greater challenge for detection

and target identification when compared to the pure form. This in turn creates greater hazards for the first responders who may be exposed to illicit materials present at crime scenes or individuals under the influence of unknown drug mixtures.

Compounding the threat of exposure is the challenge that detection equipment manufacturers struggle to keep pace with the ever-changing makeup of these illicit substances. With new forms of the drug appearing constantly, scientists, first responders, and equipment manufacturers may feel as if they cannot possibly know exactly what they are looking for – but new research and scientific discovery are shedding light on potential solutions.

Expanding Detection Strategies and Technologies

Confronting fentanyl at this nexus of unknowns is a daunting and enduring task, but detection capabilities have improved over the years. Common commercial-off-the-shelf products for fentanyl detection include optical instrumentation such as Fourier transform infrared and Raman spectroscopy. These products require little to no sample handling and offer a quick response time. However, due to spectral saturation of adulterants, optical instruments struggle to identify low levels of fentanyl within mixtures. Mass-based instrumentation offers higher sensitivity to fentanyl mixtures but often requires sample handling and potential destruction of the sample. Colorimetric and immunoassays are also common products in the field, offering rapid analysis at lower costs than portable instrumentation. However, unlike portable instruments, assays lack analog specificity and,

in the case of colorimetric assays, are privy to false positives and negatives.

The more scientists understand these emerging substances and the equipment to detect them, the greater protection and safety they can deliver to the first responder community encountering this threat. This is why scientists at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory (PNNL) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Science and Technology Directorate (S&T) have been leading projects focused on closing the gap between detection equipment and what responders encounter in the field. These projects include updating standards for, expanding chemical libraries used by, and ultimately assessing detection equipment.

For example, it helps when there is consistency in how to safely and efficiently use equipment, which can be achieved through standards. Bringing together more than 100 scientists, first responders, drug enforcement officials, equipment manufacturers, and others to help ASTM International develop three new laboratory standards:

- Two addressed the performance of equipment and methods to test for fentanyl and related compounds in the field.
- One provided a guide for first responders encountering fentanyl in the field.

This work benefitted from considerable input from first responders and strong relationships, in part through the Northwest Regional Technology Center.

It also helps when equipment has the most up-to-date information. In the case of synthetic opioid detection, this is in the form of spectral libraries used by detection equipment. These spectral libraries are like a set of chemical



Source: Andrea Starr/Pacific Northwest National Laboratory

fingerprints. A bigger spectral library widens the aperture on substances a first responder can identify during an encounter. PNNL and DHS S&T scientists updated the libraries for portable instruments that give first responders insight into their encounters. They added about 50 chemical structures, including information on drugs like heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine. The expansion of spectral libraries is a constant need as trends change in the compounds encountered in field and is not limited to only synthetic opioids. As these trends become apparent, researchers and vendors work to update libraries to include such chemicals.

This work came together in a rigorous assessment of detection equipment to understand the limitations of commercial products commonly used by the first responder community. Together, the team safely prepared, validated, measured, and analyzed the necessary samples and the corresponding data. Scientists tested and evaluated 17 detection instruments and eight assays. Test samples included a suite of pure fentanyl analogs, 1 percent and 10 percent fentanyl mixtures, and other pure or mixed compounds created to mimic real-world scenarios. The [results are publicly available](#) and can help inform the procurement of field detection systems by DHS partners, first responder agencies, and other end users.

PNNL scientists are even looking at ways to get ahead of detection by using powerful computational chemistry techniques to predict possible fentanyl analogs before reaching the street. This research is part of an effort to reduce reliance on libraries based on the analysis of physical samples. By predicting and ranking chemical structures that may be

present in a sample based on fundamental scientific principles, scientists would be able to detect potential threats from other forms of fentanyl or sources earlier without relying on previously known threats.

Protecting the Protectors

The current opioid epidemic is continuously expanding, and so is research and outreach to combat this rapidly evolving threat. The outcomes of this type of research and development benefit first responders and front-line personnel by providing the knowledge needed to adapt and optimize current protocols for existing deployed handheld devices (e.g., combining different technology class detection capabilities when feasible) and to inform future procurements of equipment to improve the safety of first responders and the public. To the extent possible, the results of this work are available to the first responder community to help provide the best tools to detect fentanyl and related compounds. For example, the DHS National Urban Security Technology Laboratory's System Assessment and Validation for Emergency Responders ([SAVER](#)) program regularly publishes the results of focus groups, market surveys, assessments, and more to provide emergency responders with information to inform their procurement decisions. In addition to detection performance or target sensitivity, several other factors must be considered when selecting commercial-off-the-shelf products to deploy during chemical incidents of unknown materials. These factors include (but are not limited to) ease of use, operability when wearing personal protective equipment, ruggedness, response time, sample preparation, and consumption.

Following are several publicly available resources to help stay up to date on standards, technology assessments, and other outreach tackling this threat:

- The following SAVER reports offer detailed information on popular handhelds on the market:
 - [Handheld Raman Spectrometers Focus Group Report](#)
 - [Handheld Raman Spectrometers Market Survey Report](#)
 - [Handheld Raman Spectrometers Assessment Report](#)
- The following performance assessment tested field-portable detection products against updated compound libraries and testing standards:
 - [Performance Assessment of Field-Portable Instruments and Assays for Fentanyl and Fentanyl-Related Compounds Test Report](#)
- The following ASTM standards were developed to assist first responders with use of field detection equipment:

- [ASTM E3243-21](#) Standard Specification for Field Detection Equipment and Assays Used for Fentanyl and Fentanyl-Related Compounds
- [ASTM E3289-21](#) Standard Guide for Using Equipment and Assays for Field Detection of Fentanyl and Fentanyl-Related Compounds
- [ASTM E3290-21](#) Standard Test Method for Establishing Performance of Equipment and Assays for Field Detection of Fentanyl and Fentanyl-Related Compounds

By providing information ranging from equipment costs to summarized performance data of common field-deployable equipment, scientists hope to enhance public safety and add tools and resources for first responders to easily pull from when faced with difficult and high-risk situations.



Ashley Bradley is a biomedical scientist with a background in analytical chemistry and molecular biology. She graduated from Washington State University magna cum laude with a BS in biochemistry and a double major in genetics. Since joining the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory (PNNL) in 2017, her work has focused on spectroscopic signatures of solid, liquid, and gas-phase samples. Most notably, she has been a key contributor to the liquid signatures effort, playing a major role in collecting important data used in high-fidelity spectral libraries. She is currently a principal investigator for a project that utilizes this capability to expand spectral libraries of instruments used by first responders.



Kristin Omberg is a senior technical advisor in the National Security Directorate at PNNL. Her technical work focuses on developing science and technology solutions that can be deployed in operational environments or used to inform policy decisions. Before joining PNNL, she spent more than 15 years at Los Alamos National Laboratory, where she was a program manager and principal investigator for numerous projects for the DHS and Defense.



Source: Meg Aghamyan/Unsplash+

From Shadows to Light: Addressing the Aftermath of Human Trafficking

By Michael Breslin

Human trafficking is a violation of human rights that leaves profound and lasting impacts on victims and society. The consequences are multifaceted, encompassing physical, psychological, and socioeconomic hardships that persist long after the trafficking experience ends. Victims endure severe conditions, including forced labor, significant health risks, and intense mental trauma. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder ([PTSD](#)) is prevalent among survivors, often accompanied by cognitive impairment, depression, and, in extreme cases, suicide.

Socially, victims face [isolation](#), loss of community support, and significant barriers to earning a livelihood. Moreover, society struggles to fully comprehend and address the far-reaching consequences of this heinous crime, which undermines public health, erodes trust, and affects the overall well-being of its members. By recognizing the profound impact of human trafficking, preparedness professionals can better advocate for effective

interventions and support systems to aid survivors and strengthen societal resilience against such atrocities.

Human trafficking survivors are resilient. They exhibit remarkable strength – mental, physical, and emotional toughness – in the face of unimaginable adversity. Despite enduring physical and emotional trauma, they find ways to rebuild their lives by connecting with others, seeking support, and adapting to new circumstances. Many survivors channel their experiences into [advocacy](#), raising awareness about human trafficking and fighting for justice. Their powerful stories are reminders of the human spirit's capacity to endure and overcome even the darkest circumstances.

Probing Human Trafficking in the United States: A Focus on Victims Under Age 18

Human trafficking affects millions of people worldwide and disproportionately [impacts](#) vulnerable populations in the United States, particularly minority women and [children](#).

It is important to delve into the prevalence of human trafficking, the financial costs associated with it, and its broader societal impact, as well as key indicators and associated stigmas that highlight the profound consequences for victims and society at large.

Prevalence and Financial Costs Associated With Human Trafficking and the Broader Societal Impact

Globally, [about 25 million people](#) are subjected to human trafficking and forced labor, generating approximately \$150 billion in illicit profits annually. These profits stem from various criminal activities, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, and organ trafficking. Human trafficking erodes the safety and health of communities, disrupts transportation networks, and compromises border security. Additionally, it weakens the economy and undermines the rule of law.

Determining the exact number of victims is challenging due to the hidden nature of trafficking, but it remains a major problem affecting thousands of individuals each year. Substantial amounts of illicit funds fill the coffers of organized crime groups and traffickers. In the United States, many adult and child victims are exploited for commercial sex.

Hidden Costs to Society

Efforts to prevent human trafficking, enforce laws, and support victims entail significant expenditures. Federal agencies dedicate substantial resources to [anti-trafficking initiatives](#), focusing on collaboration across government and non-governmental entities. The U.S. Department of Justice, for instance, [allocates millions of dollars](#) to combat trafficking, support victims, and enhance research and evaluation efforts.

The intangible costs to society from sexual exploitation and trafficking are difficult to quantify. While some expenses are easily

measurable, many are not immediately apparent or easily identifiable. These hidden costs extend beyond immediate financial implications, impacting community safety, public health, and social stability.

Community awareness campaigns, survivor support services, and specialized training for law enforcement add to the overall societal expense. [Addressing human trafficking](#) demands significant financial investment, but the long-term benefits of effective prevention and protection strategies far surpass the associated costs. Sharing information about potential indicators and the impacts on victims and society is a start:

- Potential indicators of human trafficking (several indicators suggest possible human trafficking situations):
 - *Recruitment and control* – Victims are often [lured](#) with false promises of employment, education, or a better life. Traffickers exert control through physical violence, threats, or manipulation.
 - *Isolation* – Victims may be isolated from family, friends, and community support networks.
 - *Exploitative conditions* – Victims endure harsh working conditions, sexual exploitation, and physical abuse.
 - *Restricted movement* – Traffickers limit victims' freedom of movement, confiscating identification documents and isolating them from the outside world.
- Impact on victims:
 - *Physical and psychological trauma* – Victims suffer physical injuries, sexually transmitted infections, and mental health issues.

- *Loss of freedom* – Trafficked individuals lose their autonomy and basic human rights.
- *Stunted development* – Child victims miss out on education, social development, and emotional well-being.
- *Long-term consequences* – Survivors face lasting trauma, making it difficult to reintegrate into society.
- **Impact on society:**
 - *Economic costs* – Human trafficking undermines economic stability by perpetuating poverty and hindering development.
 - *Public health burden* – Trafficking contributes to the spread of diseases, including HIV/AIDS.
 - *Criminal justice system strain* – Investigating and prosecuting traffickers requires significant resources.
 - *Social fabric* – Trafficking erodes trust and social cohesion within communities.

Stigmatization – Its Impact on Human Trafficking Victims and Challenges for First Responders

Human trafficking's consequences are far-reaching. Efforts to combat human trafficking must prioritize prevention, victim protection, and prosecution of traffickers. Raising awareness, supporting survivors, and implementing effective policies are steps toward eradicating this crime and ensuring a safer, more just society. A less often discussed yet important factor impacting victims of human trafficking is the stigmatization surrounding the word itself, including the person who suffered under its weight and the families of those directly impacted. Stigma plays a significant role in the lives of human trafficking victims, especially

minors. Here are some key points regarding stigmatization and its impact:

- *Individual trauma* – Trafficked victims may experience physical violence, sexual abuse, and forced labor, and be deprived of basic needs, which can cause severe physical, psychological, and emotional trauma. Long-lasting effects from this trauma can affect their mental health, self-esteem, and ability to trust others. In severe trauma cases, some may not ask for help or even identify as victims.
- *Social stigma* – Misconceptions about their trafficking experiences can cause victims to face stigma, discrimination, and social rejection, further isolating them from the support networks, help, and services they need.
- *Community impact* – Human trafficking often creates cycles of exploitation, poverty, and vulnerability that can destabilize communities and undermine laws.
- *Stigmatization as a result and catalyst* – Trafficking survivors often face stigmatization, which can lead to isolation and violence. Being discredited or disgraced because of their identity or circumstances, survivors may be framed as outside social norms, thus hindering access to support services and resources.
- *Race, gender, and vulnerability* – Discrimination based on race, gender, or other identities can make children vulnerable to trafficking. Easily identifiable at-risk youth may be denied resources, services, and safe employment. Harmful gender norms disproportionately affect girls, making them susceptible to trafficking.
- *Long-term consequences* – Stigmatization can lead to victim blaming and shaming, as well as ostracization. Survivors may

face barriers in seeking physical and emotional health.

Understanding the role of stigmatization and addressing it properly is crucial for supporting trafficking survivors and preventing further exploitation. There are many myths and misconceptions surrounding this issue that must be dispelled. Survivors should be humanized and respected, not judged, or blamed. Special care and a respectful tone and language used to describe the survivor and their unique circumstances should be used at the core of every communication – verbal or written.

Public policies should be promoted to support victim protection, rights, and support. Reducing the stigma around trafficking survivors can help reduce the harm already done to them, enable their recovery, and promote a more compassionate and empathetic society. The U.S. Department of Justice lists some key legislation on its website.

Challenges to Public Safety Professionals

Law enforcement and first responders encounter many challenges when identifying and reporting potential human trafficking victims. A lack of uniform priority across agencies and jurisdictions for human trafficking crimes impacts victim identification, investigation, apprehension, and prosecution of the traffickers. The majority, if not all agencies are subject to varying levels of resource constraints, including funding, personnel, space, and equipment. Many public safety organizations lack the requisite resources for training, staffing, subject matter expertise to properly investigate, and front-line personnel like patrol officers and first responders.

Foreign language skills necessary for proper victim identification are also a gap in law enforcement's much-needed capabilities. Here are some additional key obstacles confronting public safety personnel:

- *Lack of training* – Patrol officers and first responders often lack specific training on victim identification. Detectives may receive training, but those who unknowingly encounter trafficking victims need education on recognizing signs and appropriate responses.
- *Language and trust barriers* – Victims may not speak English or may be reluctant to trust law enforcement due to their traumatic experiences. Building rapport with victims is essential, but language barriers can hinder effective communication and prevent needed intervention.
- *Hidden nature of trafficking* – Human trafficking operates covertly, making it challenging to identify victims. Victims often fear harmful physical retaliation from traffickers if they report their abuse to the police.
- *Fear of being wrong* – First responders may hesitate to report suspicions due to the fear of false accusations. Balancing the need to act swiftly with the risk of misidentification is a delicate challenge.

These challenges, although daunting, are not insurmountable. Countless examples of success in combatting human trafficking by law enforcement and first responder professionals include properly identifying potential victims, rescuing survivors, and apprehending criminals behind the illegal trade. However, efforts to address these challenges must continue and expand to include improved training, proactive identification strategies, and public education about human trafficking.

Community Actions to Prevent Human Trafficking

Like any complex problem confronting society, no single government agency, not-for-profit, or law enforcement organization can provide the sole remedy. A whole community approach

can combat the harms associated with human trafficking. Communities play a crucial role in the prevention and reporting of such a grave problem. By working together, residents and communities can help create a safer environment and contribute to eradicating human trafficking. Here are some actionable steps to take:

- *Raise awareness* – Educate community members about the signs of human trafficking. Host workshops, seminars, and awareness campaigns to inform people about this crime.
- *Share resources* – Distribute information at local events and public gatherings. Encourage community members to report suspected trafficking incidents to federal law enforcement by calling 1-866-347-2423 or contacting the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888.
- *Engage businesses and industries* – Encourage companies to prevent trafficking in their supply chains. Advocate for transparency and accountability in supply chain management and sourcing practices.
- *Support vulnerable populations* – Reach out to underserved communities, migrants, and at-risk youth. Provide

resources, mentorships, and safe spaces to prevent exploitation.

- *Collaborate with law enforcement* – Foster partnerships with local police and federal agencies. Provide adequate training and resources to first responders to recognize trafficking indicators and respond appropriately.
- *Receive alerts* – Stay aware of local threats and help locate missing persons by signing up for alerts within targeted geographic areas.

Although human trafficking remains a disruptive and far-reaching global problem, there is hope for positive change. Increased awareness, education, and community engagement are powerful tools in preventing trafficking. By fostering empathy, supporting survivors, and advocating for stronger policies, communities can collectively work toward eradicating this heinous crime.

Equally important and necessary are identifying and targeting the financial facets of the human trafficking business. The road that leads to a future where every individual is free from exploitation, and where society stands united against human trafficking is a long and onerous one. However, if not taken, the consequences are far more terrifying.



Michael Breslin is a retired federal law enforcement senior executive with 24 years of law enforcement and homeland security experience. He served as the deputy assistant director in the Office of Investigations focusing on the integrated mission of investigations and protection with oversight of 162 domestic and foreign field offices. He served as the event coordinator for the National Special Security Event Papal visit to Philadelphia in September 2015 and was appointed by the Secretary of Homeland Security to serve as the federal coordinator for the Papal Visit to the Mexico-U.S. Border in 2016. He is a member of the Senior Executive Service and is a published author of numerous articles on homeland security, defense, and threat mitigation methods. He serves on the Cyber Investigations Advisory Board of the U.S. Secret Service and is a board member of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. He also serves on the Preparedness Leadership Council. He has a B.A. from Saint John's

University, Queens, NY, an M.S. in National Security Strategy and a Graduate Certificate in Business Transformation and Decision Making from The Industrial College of the Armed Forces; and an MPA from John Jay College of Criminal Justice.



Source: [Unsplash](#)

Jane Doe – Responding to Vulnerable Patients

By Catherine L. Feinman

Many first responders get a call they will never forget or are not mentally prepared for, regardless of how long they have been in the field. For a seasoned paramedic, that call happened in May 2024. With decades of experience in the emergency medical services (EMS) field, he encountered what he believed was his first human trafficking case.

Unconscious and Alone

On a beautiful sunny day in the mid-afternoon, an ambulance crew and police officer responded to a call for an unknown and unconscious female child. Once on scene, they approached the young girl, who was wearing a dirty shirt and pajama-type pants. She was lying on her back on the side of the road. She initially was unresponsive to verbal stimuli but had an open airway and pulse. As standard procedure, the paramedic applied [painful stimuli](#) to assess the patient's responsiveness, at which point she moaned and began moving sluggishly. During the patient assessment, the medic observed signs of impairment from some type of substance. To determine proper care, the crew had to ask the child difficult questions related to substance use and sexual activity. With slurred speech, she stated that a man with

white hair gave her marijuana and a pill before sexually assaulting her.

The medic immediately turned to the police officer to confirm that she heard the girl's statement. The officer also confirmed that she had her body camera on to document evidence from the scene that could protect the patient and the responding personnel. The online medical notification and consultation center linked the information from the crew to the hospital as the crew, accompanied by the officer, transported the patient.

En route to the hospital, the young girl vomited and faded in and out of consciousness. From a medical perspective, the primary task was to protect her airway, which required suctioning, but there was so much more to this case. Upon arrival, the crew informed the intake nurse of their assessment that the "Jane Doe" was a possible rape or human-trafficking victim. The hospital staff marked the case as confidential. The police officer and investigators took the medic's statement and collected available evidence, which included her clothing, shoes, and the suction tubing and catheter containing the vomit.

The Impact on Responding Crews

The true story of the unconscious and alone girl on the side of the road left the responding crew shaken. Over the years, they had seen a lot of medical emergencies and trauma, but that call was different. After several hours, the sheriff's office was able to track down the patient's mother, who lived nearby. Apparently, that 13-year-old girl had run away and was found 20 minutes from her home. While the case is still under investigation, the paramedic wanted to share what he learned and how the crew responded to that call.

There are many scenarios that first responders hope they never encounter, but what they do in these situations can impact their patients and themselves for the rest of their lives. So, it is imperative to be prepared. In any potential criminal case, providing the best care for the patient includes protecting the scene, evidence, and anything else that can help the patient during the investigation. Thorough patient assessments can dispel unsubstantiated assumptions and provide evidence to properly care for patients and report criminal activity.

Actions to Protect Potential Victims and Responders

Whether on duty or off duty, it is important to maintain situational awareness and recognize signs of human trafficking and other criminal activity. In an EMS setting, this is particularly important when assessing patients. For patients who are afraid or unable to speak, it may be easier to assess them through observation than conversation. In any case, it is each person's responsibility to recognize and act upon the signs of human trafficking and the endangerment of vulnerable patients. Steps to consider for

protecting the life, health, and well-being of others include the following:

- Maintain awareness of the threat to communities and the associated signs of trafficking (e.g., [88% of human trafficking victims](#) have at least once had access to healthcare during their situation);
- Understand [EMS protocols](#) for professionals;
- With a suspected crime, do not disturb the scene or clean the patient to preserve fluids and other [potential evidence](#);
- Involve [law enforcement](#) in any potential case and, when possible, have them accompany the patient transport;
- When possible, transport to a hospital designated as a [sexual abuse and rape assessment center](#);
- Notify the [hospital](#) en route and upon arrival that the patient is a potential human trafficking or sexual assault victim to ensure confidentiality;
- Clearly document all details of the call – clothing, demeanor, statements, and any other observations – using “[the same incident report writing standards](#) for suspected human trafficking cases as they do for documenting other suspected criminal behaviors”;
- Report possible human trafficking situations to the [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#);
- Remember the [four priorities of EMS](#): self, crew, community, and patient;



Source: [Mathurin NAPOLY/matnapo/Unsplash](#)

- Do not let second-guessing hinder the duty to act and report signs of possible criminal activity; and
- Seek mental health assistance when needed.

The paramedic who received that unforgettable call in May offered one more bit of advice, “Remember that we are all human and must be strong and smart. We need to build a strong support system to help us cope after difficult calls.” Combatting human trafficking involves the entire

community. EMS and other first responders may encounter more cases than they realize. Training and education can help build observational capabilities to identify signs and report them to the proper authorities while protecting victims, crews, and the community around them. EMS regularly works with other first responders and the broader community to ensure the health, safety, and well-being of victims. This tragic story and its lessons learned are examples of that collaboration.



Catherine L. Feinman, M.A., joined Domestic Preparedness in January 2010. She has more than 35 years of publishing experience and currently serves as editor of the Domestic Preparedness Journal, DomesticPreparedness.com, and The Weekly Brief. She works with writers and other contributors to build and create new content that is relevant to the emergency preparedness, response, and recovery communities. She received a bachelor’s degree in International Business from the University of Maryland, College Park, and a master’s degree in Emergency and Disaster Management from American Military University.



Source: [CDC/Unsplash](#)

A Plan to Protect the Youngest Children

By Marie O’Connell

Today’s world presents many challenges that impact school children. Targeted violence, drug addiction, and human trafficking do not exclude children, including those in preschools. In October 2022, a tragic incident occurred at a Thailand daycare, resulting in the death of 24 children. In February 2024, two teens were apprehended while traveling to Texas after threatening to carry out a shooting at a daycare there. In May 2024, a man poured flammable liquid at the entrance of a preschool with 48 children inside. As deadly incidents like [Uvalde](#) and alarming threats continue, there is an ever-increasing focus on assisting K-12 public schools with training, notification systems, and environmental improvements. However, those educating the youngest, most vulnerable children are likely unable to access specific resources.

Studies have recognized that the earliest years of a child’s life are where strong learning habits and abilities are developed, such as [language development](#). Parents today see the benefits of early childhood education beyond just providing “daycare.” With the number of children enrolled in [preschool rebounding](#) since the COVID-19 shutdowns, the emphasis remains on providing the safest environment possible. While there have been no documented events carried out at preschools in the United States, the threats are present,

which is precisely the reason to raise awareness of this overlooked segment and bring resources directly to them before their vulnerability leads to a tragic event. Saving lives is possible with knowledge, preparation, and focus.

Training the Preschools’ “First Responders”

Preschools generally exist as independently owned and operated facilities rather than part of the public school system. The [Marjorie Stoneman Douglas School Safety Act of 2018](#), enacted after the Parkland shooting, introduced a mandate and funding for armed resource officers in public schools. This act did not provide armed officers to preschools operating as independent businesses. Budgets for this privately operating business segment are often restrictive, with resources focused on providing quality teachers and curriculums. These entities operate under the oversight of organizations that monitor licensing, quality, safety, and teacher qualifications. These schools are responsible to evaluate and understand the concept of planning for a possible active assailant event or potential issues with human trafficking, custody disputes, and drug addiction.

According to the [Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools](#), “Training is a key component of school safety. Schools and districts should train stakeholders on the emergency operations plan (EOP) and their

roles and responsibilities.” While Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools explicitly targets K-12 schools, these principles also apply to preschools. Planning and preparation are essential and should include readily available resources and support for these schools to minimize the heavy lift for these small businesses.

As part of the planning and preparation process, assessing the environmental design of schools and how to use the design process to save lives are essential building blocks of any safety plan. Breaking out of prior mindsets, such as “it won’t happen here,” and thinking in a new way by developing, understanding, and practicing a plan will support quick recognition of threats. Understanding the environment and utilizing situational awareness both enhance decision-making and actionable tasks that can change outcomes and prevent children from being easy targets for perpetrators. Within a school, a survival mindset is fundamental and, in stressful times, teachers must be effective leaders. While law enforcement takes control of the situation upon their arrival, teachers are indeed the first responders during critical moments at the onset of an event. According to a 2022 Everytown report, “For the last 20 years, students, educators, and parents have lived with the reality of increasingly frequent school shootings.” As soft targets, preschool teachers and staff need training, notification, and resources as much as any other school. However, one of the greatest challenges any school faces is finding a way to include additional training and education into an already stretched budget.

Learning Opportunities to Address School Safety Gaps

Targeted crime, drug-related activity, and human trafficking can impact anyone, and the number of victims killed, injured,

bought, or sold is staggering. Holes left in families’ lives by the tragic loss of a loved one due to violence or drugs cannot be filled. To mitigate future threats, communities must work collaboratively to find solutions to these continuing issues and alter the outcomes of future events. The following questions can help begin these collaborative discussions:

- What are the signs of drug addiction and related activities? How could we effectively intervene?
- What are the signs of human trafficking? How could we protect children from deceptive outreach efforts?
- What are the physical and psychological signs of potentially violent actors? How could we address underlying issues that drive individuals to commit acts of violence against schools?
- How can we engage preschools, parents, and other community members in raising awareness of these issues and developing preventative measures to protect and provide safe environments for the children?

Providing educators, staff, and parents of preschoolers with learning opportunities and danger notifications can help reduce their vulnerability. Training on these topics raises awareness of potential threats, introduces new ideas, and stimulates fruitful discussions. Notifications increase opportunities to respond quickly when a threat emerges. Many educational and training programs through governmental agencies, academic facilities, nonprofit organizations, and private sector companies can help. Free online courses remove potential availability and affordability barriers. For example:

- Federal Emergency Management Agency offers free courses on

developing and maintaining a school emergency operations plan ([IS-362.A: Multi-Hazard Emergency Planning for Schools](#)) and preparing for mass casualty incidents ([IS-360: Preparing for Mass Casualty Incidents: A Guide for Schools, Higher Education, and Houses of Worship](#)).

- Organizations such as School Safety (<https://www.schoolsafety.gov>) provide recommendations for K-12 schools on topics including targeted violence and child exploitation. The founders of Safe and Sound Schools (<https://www.safeandsoundschools.org>) and Sandy Hook Promise (<https://sandyhookpromise.org/>) began their efforts to stop school violence after having lost children in the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting in December 2022.

These programs provide valuable services but are not focused on preschools' distinctive needs. More public service and emergency agencies should concentrate on preschools' concerns and bring resources to support this important age group. With focused attention, chances are exponentially improved for a tragic event to be averted or the impact on lives minimized.



Marie O'Connell is the executive director of From Cradle to College Foundation Inc., a non-profit organization serving children and educators throughout the state of Florida. This role encompasses her experiences in business operations, human resources, risk management, and community service. Her passion for protecting young children led her to develop and lead a team that brings unique and relevant education to early educators through the PEARLS program.

Accelerating Training and Knowledge Across Jurisdictions

In 2018, the [State of Florida](#) and From Cradle to College Foundation took steps to address this safety gap by establishing the Preschool Emergency Alert Response Learning System ([PEARLS](#)), an educational program that is specifically for and available to preschools statewide at no cost to them. PEARLS empowers preschool teachers with options that illustrate how much their actions matter. Through the program, knowledge, planning, and preparation assist in building confidence in decision-making and actions when an incident occurs.

Teachers are natural protectors, so supporting them with accelerated emergency training fulfills an imperative component of their knowledge base. PEARLS is an example of how states can close school preparedness gaps by expanding education and training directly to preschools' "first responders." Preparedness professionals can learn more about this program at the website: <https://fromcradletocollegefoundation.org/pearls-program/>. Other states should consider developing similar outreach programs within their jurisdictions to better protect their youngest children.



A Modern Take on an Age-Old Biological Weapon

By Raphael Barishansky

Reports about [North Korea launching balloons](#) filled with both fecal matter as well as propaganda into South Korean territory were intriguing. With regard to public health concerns, this raises the question as to whether fecal matter could be utilized in modern times as an effective biological weapon.

History of Feces as a Form of Attack

The utilization of fecal matter as a biological weapon is not exactly new ground. One of the first recorded instances of using this unique agent was during the Middle Ages, where the feces of bubonic plague victims were flung over castle walls with catapults in an effort to infect those inside. Variations of an excrement catapult were utilized by the Chinese in the 12th century and then later by others.

Jumping forward to more modern times, during the Vietnam War, the Viet Cong made use of a simple but effective weapon known as punji sticks. The punjis were made by sharpening bamboo sticks, which would then be dipped in human fecal matter (or sometimes poison from plants or animals). The feces-encrusted spears would be placed

in the ground and concealed with foliage or under a trap door and left for the enemy to fall on.

Even more recently, in 2017, right-wing protesters in Venezuela, as part of an ongoing campaign against the government of President Nicolas Maduro, launched plastic bottles filled with human feces and water. They were quickly dubbed “[poop bombs](#)” or even “poopootov cocktails” for their likeness to the more deadly Molotov cocktail. While not common, it seems that waste has been used in political or disruption campaigns over the years and wise contingency planners should keep this in mind in the context of current events, including the upcoming election cycle.

Public Health Realities

Although the use of balloons as a delivery method may be new or novel, fecal matter and other bodily fluids have been spreading disease both intentionally and unintentionally for time immemorial. Many bacteria, viruses, and parasites that people may or may not be aware of can be [transmitted in feces and urine](#), including:

- Bacterioides spp., Salmonella, Shigella, Yersinia, Campylobacter, Aeromonas, Candida, E. coli O157:H7, Klebsiella, Cryptosporidium, Entamoeba histolytica;
- Viruses such as Norovirus and Hepatitis A; and
- Intestinal parasites.

In addition, the use of feces as a weapon has consequences because it can affect an area's water and environmental sectors. The feces affect not only the person targeted but can spread and cause widespread diseases, such as norovirus, giardiasis, and cryptosporidiosis, over time.

Public health professionals are consistently confronted with day-to-day situations where fecal matter is present and could potentially spread diseases – think nursing homes, cruises, Hepatitis A/B outbreaks in unhoused populations, and the list goes on. Preparedness efforts include but are not limited to public education, decontamination, various environmental measuring, and clean-up techniques. Public health professionals have the knowledge to handle said situations and work with various partners in response.

A procession of “poop” balloons is not the same as a nursing home outbreak. However, having the mechanisms in place – whether in regard to being informed of an emergency or even responding to said emergency with other response partners – to handle common emergencies can better prepare communities for new and unusual ones.

Preparing for Nontraditional Delivery Mechanisms

It appears that the answer to the initial question is yes, fecal matter can be utilized as a biological weapon. Although utilizing balloons may not allow for a targeted attack on a specific person, there may be a situation where an individual or organization – whether a terror group or nation-state – could utilize fecal matter from a known (or suspected) individual with one of the aforementioned illnesses to intentionally spread disease. For example, the intentional infection of a salad bar in Oregon by salmonella is a more refined situation where an organization wanting to inflict illness did just this.

In an attempt to gain political control over a county by influencing a 1984 election, members of the Rajneeshpuram cult contaminated the salad bars of four restaurants in The Dalles, Oregon, with Salmonella species they cultured in a laboratory on their compound. The result



Source: [CDC/Henry Mathews](#)



The Department of Defense Chemical, Biological Defense Program is adapting to and training its teams for emerging biological and chemical threats (Source: [U.S. Navy photo](#) by Matthew Poynor, 2023).

was [751 cases of gastroenteritis](#) and 45 hospital admissions.

In society today, there is a multifaceted preparedness and response climate. Both state and non-state actors have utilized – and will potentially continue to utilize – nontraditional methodology to deliver biological agents. It behooves public health preparedness

practitioners to maintain an awareness of delivery mechanisms, such as this one, in order to appropriately prepare and respond. To quote the former [Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales](#) five years after the September 11 attacks, “Since terrorists only have to succeed once and our efforts have to succeed every time, our coordination has to be even better than theirs.”



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