



Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Human Trafficking Awareness in Native Communities

A Tradition of Resilience

Native culture is dynamic and resilient, and Native peoples have always adapted and endured.¹ In Native culture, "tradition" refers to generations of handed down values, practices, and beliefs that were established long before colonization.¹ Prior to European contact, roles, responsibility, and status were equitable among genders in Native communities; Native women were, and in many tribes still are, considered highly sacred, revered, and respected.^{1,2} They are community leaders and keepers of ancient practices. Negative sexual health outcomes among AI/AN women, including outcomes from human trafficking, trace back to colonization, racism, and oppression. Additionally, a norm of shame and silence around abuse and sexuality also results from colonization, specifically Christian missionizing and brutal state sponsored violence. Allowing Native women to share stories of survival has proved to promote healing and resiliency.¹ Despite attempts to force inferiority and inequality on Native women, they remain resilient.³ A great deal of that resiliency and healing comes from the strength, courage, support, and endurance of Native culture. Native survivors draw hope and healing from family and community support.³

What is human trafficking?

Human trafficking is a forceable action that may include fraud or coercion to obtain some type of labor or sex act. The traffickers usually lure their victims and force them into sexual exploitation and/or labor.⁴ Among Native communities, trafficking is a real danger and is challenging to identify at times.

Anyone can be a victim to human trafficking. According to research, traffickers seek out persons perceived to be vulnerable. This vulnerability comes in many forms, including age (minors), poverty, homelessness, chemical dependency, prior experiences of abuse, lack of resources and/or support systems, and so forth.⁵ Traffickers then use various tactics to control vulnerable persons, including inflicting sexual, emotional, or mental abuse; luring those struggling with addictions by enabling these addiction(s); withholding money or identifications needed to travel or access help; being physically violent and/or threatening assault.⁵

SOS Hand Signal for Help

People who are trafficked don't have typical ways to ask for help. This hand signal can be used to alert passers-by and authorities that someone is in trouble and needs help.

SIGNAL FOR HELP



1). PALM TO CAMERA AND TUCK THUMB

2). TRAP THUMB

The silent, one-hand gesture is made by putting one's hand up with the palm facing outward, tucking the thumb in while the four fingers face up, then folding the fingers to "trap" the thumb.⁹

While human trafficking predominantly affects women, both young men and the LGBTQ+/Two Spirit community also are at high risk, especially when they have the vulnerabilities listed above.⁵ Here are some additional resources on human trafficking:

<https://htcbc.ovc.ojp.gov/media/video/896>

<https://www.dhs.gov/medialibrary/assets/videos/21883>

<https://htcbc.ovc.ojp.gov/signs-human-trafficking>

Our People, Our Voice

S.1942 – Savanna’s Act ¹⁰

On June 28, 2016, a collective from Montana created Senate Resolution 514 which declared May 5, 2017, National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Native Women and Girls. Savanna’s Act, S.227, was initially introduced in 2017 by Senator Heidi Heitkamp after the horrific murder of Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind, a pregnant member of the Spirit Lake Tribe. Senator Lisa Murkowski reintroduced the bill in 2019, and the Senate passed it in March 2020. Savanna’s Act clarifies federal, state, tribal, and local law enforcement responsibilities concerning missing or murdered Indians; aims to increase communication and coordination between federal, tribal, state, and local law enforcement agencies; improves tribal access to resources and information such as the federal criminal information databases needed to respond effectively to missing and murdered Indian cases; requires data collection related to missing and murdered Indian people, regardless of where they reside; and directs U.S. attorneys to develop regionally appropriate guidelines for responding to missing or murdered Indians.¹⁰

Research shows that 9 out of 10 trafficking victims suffer neurological symptoms and depression. PTSD increases after escaping sex slavery, and attempted suicides decrease by half. Regarding reproductive health, two-thirds had contracted a sexually transmitted disease or infection. When the study asked about the violence experienced by the victims, more than two-thirds reported being punched, beaten, kicked, raped, and threatened with a weapon.¹¹



Supporting Survivors, Saving Lives

Supporting survivors is vital so that once identified, there is a better chance of saving a life. Too often, people who have been trafficked are arrested and considered criminal offenders. It can be difficult to know when some survivors need help, but the most important thing to remember is that the safety of all is paramount. Do not attempt to directly assist someone you believe is being trafficked or approach a trafficker. Look for and contact authorities to assist, as this may have the best outcomes for saving one’s life.



To get help:

StrongHearts Native Helpline: Call or text 1-844-762-8483

National Human Trafficking Hotline: 1-888-373-7888 or text HELP or INFO to BeFree (233733)

To report suspected human trafficking to **Federal law enforcement:** 1-866-347-2423



Resources for Tribes and Organizations

[Native Youth Toolkit on Combating Human Trafficking](#) raises awareness to prevent trafficking of Native youth. The toolkit includes resources such as stories from survivors, safety tips, and suggestions to mobilize communities.

[Tribal Community Response When a Woman is Missing: A Toolkit for Action](#) describes what members of a community should do when a woman goes missing. This toolkit importantly describes when it is important to take or not to take certain actions.

[Resource Guide on U.S. Government Entities Combating Human Trafficking in American Indian and Alaska Native Communities](#) for policymakers and tribes, produced by a federal interagency working group on human trafficking and American Indians and Alaska Natives.

[SOAR Online](#) offers several modules, including one that teaches health care professionals to identify, treat, and respond to individuals who are at risk or who have been trafficked, and a Native Communities module that includes resources relevant to Indigenous populations and building trauma-informed and culturally responsive interventions to human trafficking in American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander communities.

[National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center \(NHTTAC\)](#) builds the capacity of communities to identify and respond to the complex needs of survivors of all forms of human trafficking and address the root causes that make people vulnerable to human trafficking. Call 1-844-648-8822 or email info@nhttac.org.

[National Human Trafficking Hotline](#) assists victims in crisis through safety planning, emotional support, and connection to local resources. Call 1-888-373-7888, text “BeFree” (233733), or live chat at <https://humantraffickinghotline.org>.

[Administration for Native Americans](#) provides grant support for locally determined projects designed to reduce or eliminate community problems and achieve community goals. Projects include efforts to prevent or address human trafficking.

[StrongHearts Native Helpline](#) is a no-cost, culturally appropriate, anonymous, confidential service dedicated to serving Native American survivors of domestic violence and concerned family members and friends. Dial 1-844-7NATIVE (1-844-762-8483) nationwide 24/7 to connect one-on-one with knowledgeable StrongHearts advocates who can provide lifesaving tools and immediate support to enable survivors to find safety and live lives free of abuse.

COVID-19 & Human Trafficking

Human trafficking intersects with many social factors including poverty, education quality and access, environment, social justice, and mental and physical health care quality and access. Unfortunately, the outbreak of COVID-19 exacerbated these glaring issues and risks with many public entities such as schools and public transportation experiencing shut downs to mitigate the spread of the virus.¹² Limiting in-person interactions might seem like a good way to combat human trafficking, but online communication has expanded. This may give traffickers greater chance of reaching potential targets, especially vulnerable or marginalized populations.¹³ In fact, online sexual exploitation drastically increased during the height of the pandemic, including the online sexual exploitation of children. It is also worth noting that closures and layoffs created a deficit in financial and human resources among anti-trafficking organizations.¹³ As we navigate life in a recovering world, we must be cognizant of the effects COVID-19 has had on survivors currently being trafficked and those who may have experienced retraumatization.

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