



PREVENTING HUMAN TRAFFICKING AFTER DISASTERS

Understanding the Risks
& How to Help

Presented by : Paloma Bustos, MSW

SUNITA JAIN ANTI-TRAFFICKING INITIATIVE



Advancing Prevention Through Research, Policy, and Education

MISSION

We are a practitioner-led, survivor-informed, evidence-based, and community-informed think tank that intentionally fills gaps in human trafficking prevention through an intersectional framework that fosters systemic change and progressive policy innovations.

VISION

We envision a world where all individuals are free from force, fraud, or coercion in their pursuit of self-determination. To make this vision a reality, SJI works to prevent and ultimately eliminate human trafficking and exploitation.





PRESENTER

- Co-launched RISE Clinic at Loyola Law School.
- Served as Director overseeing the partnership with LAPD as part of the Domestic Abuse Response Team (DART).
- Coordinated trainings for law enforcement, advocates, counselors, and community members.
- Provided Support/Accompaniment to self-represented survivors in Criminal, Family, and Dependency Court.
- Facilitated support groups to help survivors process experiences.



Paloma Bustos



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

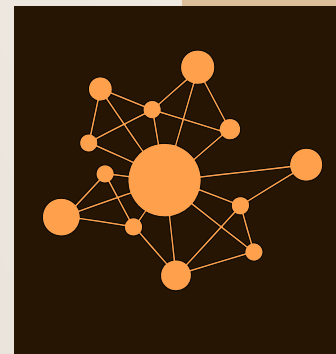
What You'll Learn

Disaster recovery often brings increased demand for workers, disrupted support systems, and urgent community needs. Understanding these risks can help prevent trafficking before it occurs.



The Basics

Learn the basic elements of human trafficking and how people are exploited.



The Connection

Understand why disasters increase the risk of trafficking and exploitation.



Recognizing the Signs

Recognize common indicators of trafficking during disaster recovery.



Prevent and Respond

Learn how to prevent trafficking and connect people with support.



DEFINITION

Trafficking isn't always obvious
Trafficking often looks like:

- False job promises
- Withheld wages
- Threats or intimidation
- Debt and financial control
- Unsafe working conditions

It does not always involve
physical captivity.



1

Sex Trafficking

Involves using force, fraud, or coercion to make a person engage in sexual acts for someone else's benefit.

2

Labor Trafficking

Involves using force, fraud, or coercion to make someone work or provide services. This often includes threats, lies, or abuse, and usually happens in unsafe conditions with little or no pay.

3

Forced Criminality

A form of labor trafficking where a person is forced to engage in illegal activities as labor or service.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE



EXPLOITATION

- Unpaid or underpaid wages
- Unsafe working conditions
- Excessive hours or denied breaks
- Worker able to leave
- Violates labor laws
- **Not all exploitation is trafficking**

TRAFFICKING

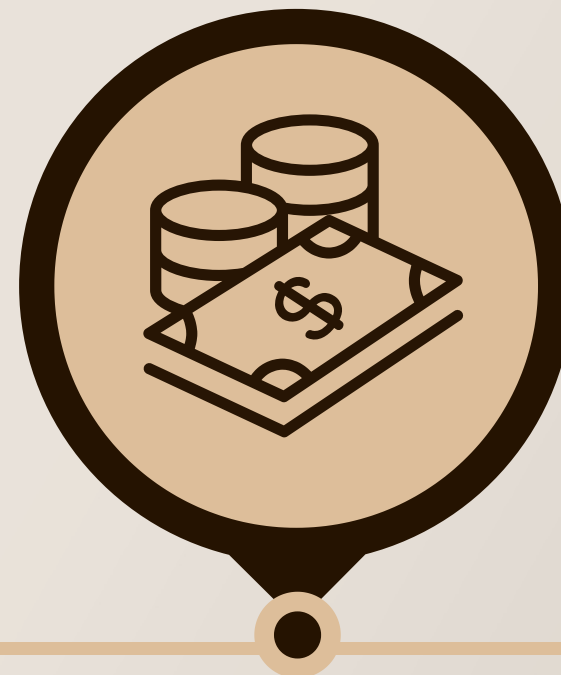
- Forced, fraud, or coercion
- Debt used to control a worker.
- Threats involving police or immigration
- Withholding documents
- Worker unable to leave safely
- **Human trafficking is a crime**

WHY DISASTERS INCREASES RISK



Disaster Strikes

Communities face a major emergency (Wildfire, flood, hurricane, earthquake)



Systems Break Down

Housing, income, transportation and support may be lost.



Vulnerability Increases

Displacement, debt, urgent needs and limited options can increase risk.



Traffickers Exploit Crisis

They may pose as employers, recruiters, landlords, or people offering help.



HOW TRAFFICKERS EXPLOIT DISASTERS

Common Tactics Used During Disaster Recovery

Traffickers often present themselves as trusted employers, landlords, recruiters, or helpers, using deception and people's immediate needs to gain control.

Misleading Job Opportunities

Offers of Housing or Assistance

Financial Exploitation

Threats & Control



INDUSTRIES MOST AT RISK

Industries Commonly Impacted After Disasters

After a disaster, demand for rebuilding and recovery creates new employment opportunities. Without adequate protections and oversight, some industries may face a higher risk of labor trafficking and exploitation.



Construction

Debris Removal

Landscaping

Hospitality

Domestic Work

Temporary Staffing



WHAT RESEARCH SHOWS

Evidence from Post-Disaster Recovery

A **2024 study surveyed 903 construction workers** in Houston who worked during post-disaster recovery after Hurricane Harvey.

Researchers found widespread labor trafficking and labor exploitation, demonstrating that disaster recovery can create conditions where workers face increased risk.



903 workers surveyed

77% experienced
trafficking or exploitation

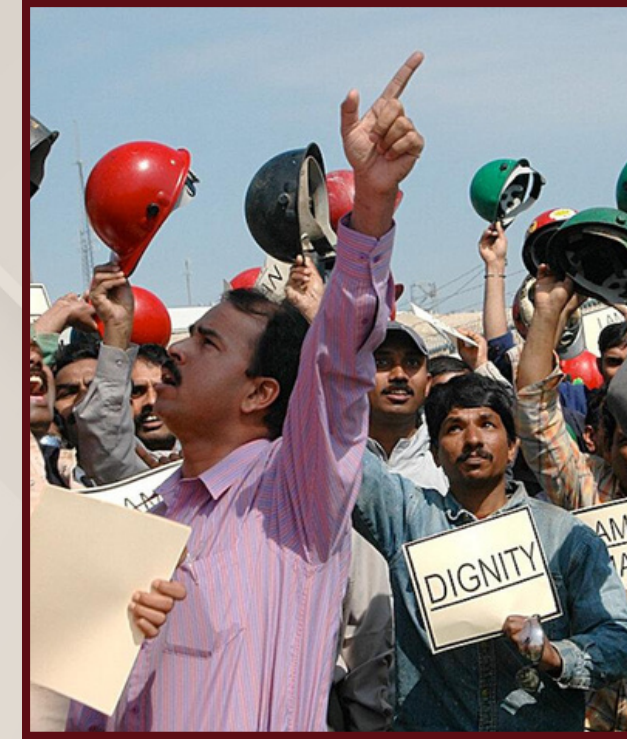
32% of workers
faced trafficking

25% paid illegal fees

More threats and
unpaid wages



LESSONS: HURRICANE KATRINA



Hurricane Katrina showed how weak oversight during disaster recovery can increase the risk of labor trafficking.

Recruitment

Workers were recruited from India with promises of good jobs and green cards.

Debt

Many workers paid \$10,000–\$25,000 in recruitment fees before arriving.

Exploitation

Passports withheld, poor housing, unpaid wages, and deportation threats.

Outcome

Largest trafficking case that led to multimillion-dollar settlements.



THE 2025 LOS ANGELES FIRES

Turning Research into Local Action

Following the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires, SJI worked with community partners and policymakers to reduce the risk of labor trafficking and exploitation during disaster recovery.



January 2025

Los Angeles wildfires highlight risks to recovery workers and displaced communities.



Research and Advocacy

SJI reviewed national research and developed policy recommendations.



City and County Action

LA County and LA City unanimously passed motions directing anti-trafficking protections be integrated into disaster response.



Community Outreach

Developed multilingual outreach materials, service provider guidance, and worker education resources.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from national research and SJI's work following the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires, we identified key strategies to strengthen prevention efforts.



Public Awareness

Provide multilingual worker rights information and community education.



Training

Train disaster responders, contractors, and community organizations to recognize trafficking.



Ethical Procurement

Require labor standards, contractor oversight, and accountability in recovery contracts.



Coordination

Strengthen coordination among government agencies, community organizations, and worker advocates.



WHAT YOU CAN DO



Community

- Learn the warning signs.
 - Share information.
 - Report suspected exploitation.
 - Check in on vulnerable neighbors.
-

Organizations

- Train staff and volunteers.
 - Develop referral pathways.
 - Provide multilingual outreach.
 - Partner with trusted agencies.
-

Employers

- Follow labor laws.
 - Provide information.
 - Monitor subcontractors.
 - Maintain safe working conditions.
-



RESOURCES

Helpful resources for reporting concerns, learning more, and connecting with support.



REPORT • GET HELP

National Human Trafficking Hotline

- **Call:** 1-888-373-7888
- **Text:** 233733 (BEFREE)
- 24/7 confidential support
- Call or text for information and referrals

LEARN MORE

SJI WEBSITE

- Disaster trafficking prevention materials
- Worker rights and community resources
- **Link:** www.ils.edu/sunitajain

LOCAL SUPPORT

CAST (Coalition to Abolish Slavery & Trafficking)

- (888) KEY-2-FREEDOM

Bet Tzedek Legal Services

- (323) 939-0506



213-252-7442



anti-trafficking@lls.edu



www.lls.edu/sunitajain



Loyola Law School
919 Albany St, Los Angeles, CA 90015

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