Labor Trafficking in the United States
Current and Future Research

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's webpage on human trafficking defines such trafficking as:

- The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

**KEY FINDINGS**

- A review of the published literature and interviews with experts on labor trafficking revealed that this topic is underresearched and that victims are underidentified.
- Analysts identified 18 research questions that should be addressed in the next six years.
- Eight of these questions were prioritized as more time-critical, needing to be addressed in the coming year.
- Addressing these questions will help the U.S. Department of Homeland Security set a policy agenda to reduce labor trafficking and will establish a basis for ongoing research on the problem.
WHY IS LABOR TRAFFICKING SO CHALLENGING TO STUDY AND ADDRESS?

What makes labor trafficking especially challenging to address is that identifying its victims is very difficult:

• Victims often are not aware of their rights.
• Victims can be undocumented or displaced people whom current state and federal laws might not adequately protect (e.g., victims fear deportation if they come forward).
• There is no centralized reporting mechanism.
• Victims could be undercounted because investigating, and prosecuting labor trafficking cases can be very difficult.

Human trafficking occurs in three forms: sex trafficking, labor trafficking, and child exploitation. Labor trafficking—the most common form of human trafficking worldwide—includes both bonded labor or labor exploitation (in which the victim is forced to work to repay a debt) and forced labor (in which the victim is forced to work against their will). The International Labour Organization (ILO) has estimated that more than 12 million people worldwide are victims of forced labor at any given time, and the U.S. Department of State has estimated that 14,500 to 17,500 people are trafficked into the United States each year to perform bonded or forced labor, and the dimensions of this problem are growing.

The federal government has prioritized reducing the prevalence of human trafficking in all its forms—including labor trafficking and sex trafficking—across the United States, relying primarily on the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). In
2020, DHS developed a strategy to guide its efforts to curb trafficking worldwide, *Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking, the Importation of Goods Produced with Forced Labor, and Child Sexual Exploitation*. Principally, the strategy calls for improving the identification and reporting of suspected trafficking. DHS’s Science and Technology Directorate asked the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center (HSOAC), a federally funded research and development center (FFRDC), to assess the current state of research on U.S. labor trafficking and future research needs—questions that need to be answered—as the initial step in building a research agenda focused on labor trafficking.

**The research had three main objectives:**

- Identify key areas of research on labor trafficking—both published and unpublished—and the findings of the research.
- Understand the topics most pressing to stakeholders.
- Identify high-priority research needs for combating domestic labor trafficking.

**The researchers took a multipronged approach to identify trafficking research and policy:**

- conducted a literature review that included published research and government documents describing programs, policies, and objectives
- solicited trafficking experts from key government agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (such as survivor advocacy organizations) for policy and other strategic and operational documents
- searched social media for relevant unpublished studies
- also interviewed experts, both for their views of research priorities and for additional key terms for the literature review
- then analyzed the literature and interview transcripts to identify themes and gaps—that is, underresearched topics—particularly those most relevant to the United States
- identified several of the most-commonly recurring topics, compiled unanswered research questions for each topic, and prioritized the questions—both by perceived importance and by immediacy.
The Researchers Identified Five Topics of Note

The researchers identified the five most frequently researched topics on labor trafficking and then determined the least understood questions for each topic.

1. Identification, investigation, and training

The processes of identifying and screening trafficking victims, properly intervening, investigating and enforcing cases, and training are some of the most studied. Still, many knowledge gaps remain, such as the best practices for each of these processes. For example, despite the identification of a set of indicators, a large proportion of the victims remain undetected, partly because of vague, overlapping, or outmoded definitions and indications.

2. Trafficking practices

Important characteristics of trafficking practices include profiles of typical victims, recruitment methods, industries, and supply chains. Although victims are often immigrants with low-wage jobs who are unaware of their rights, some groups of victims are invisible or remain silent for fear of reprisal. Likewise, technology is changing recruitment practices and making them more difficult to detect. Particular industries—such as farming, fishing, and domestic work—are well known for labor trafficking and likelier to be the subjects of research. However, other industries, such as manufacturing, might fly under the radar because of their complex nature. Supply chains, one of the most-researched topics in labor trafficking, remain one of the most challenging because of the increasing globalization of goods, which has created transnational networks of buyers, suppliers, transporters, and consumers, thereby increasing the difficulty in tracking the workers involved.

Questions identified for the topic of trafficking practices included the following:
- What are the industry-specific recruitment methods for labor trafficking?
- When during the immigration process are people recruited?
- Who are the traffickers?
- What are traffickers’ characteristics?
- How do traffickers operate and communicate?
- How do traffickers engage victims?
- What risk factors influence migrants’ high vulnerability to being forced into labor?

3. Methods and data gaps in the labor trafficking research field

High-quality research is needed to create and further evaluate the effectiveness of evidence-based policies and programs. However, the complexity of labor trafficking fundamentally challenges efforts to conduct quality research. Among the complexities and challenges is the absence of universally accepted terminology, definitions, standards, and outcome measures, which result in poor data quality or simply a lack of data. Ethical issues preclude the use of some forms of data, especially legal proceedings or personal information.

One question the researchers identified for the topic of methods and data gaps
in the labor trafficking research field was this:

• How can federal, state, and local data systems be coordinated and organized to promote data-sharing, quantitative analysis, and rigorous evaluations?

4. Victim experiences

Because information that could be obtained only with direct access to victims is generally unavailable, little is known about victims’ actual experiences and their perceptions of them. Also, victims are often inaccessible because they fail to access information about their rights and avoid services intended to assist them. Reasons include lack of information in their languages or the much stronger fear of deportation or of losing employment or housing.

One question related to the topic of victim experiences was this:

• How can stakeholders reduce undocumented workers’ reluctance to participate in services, programs, and research?

5. Roles of multinational organizations and partnerships

Because labor trafficking is so complex, much work and research are needed to understand companies’ roles in the perpetuation of human trafficking, including practices that are within businesses’ control and scope to change. Information is needed on business relationships and sourcing choices and on measures that they are already implementing to mitigate trafficking. Researchers have also found that cooperation and communication among companies, governments, and NGOs are important.

Questions identified for the topic of roles of multinational organizations and partnerships included the following:

• How helpful are initiatives and technologies for an effective traceability scheme?

• How can appropriate ethical supply chain tool kits be developed and introduced?
Ultimately, the answers to these questions will be needed to drive new policies that address labor trafficking issues, reducing victimization and increasing identification, investigation, and prosecution.