

# Human Trafficking Victims

## WITH DISABILITIES OR MENTAL ILLNESS

***CVR Library's annotated bibliographies collect and summarize research about difficult-to-search topics in victim research – your shovel to start uncovering buried knowledge!***

According to several global reports, people with disabilities or mental illness are more likely to be targeted by traffickers than people without disabilities or mental illness. However, collecting data on trafficking victims is challenging and there is not yet a global or U.S. estimate for how many trafficking victims have disabilities or mental illness. This annotated bibliography gathers research on trafficking victims with disabilities or mental illness and includes individual studies, journalistic reports, and legal cases. Non-English publications and medical case reports are excluded.

Searches were conducted in English in CVR Library collection, Google Scholar, Google Books, PubMed, NCJRS, and United Nations and U.S. State Department websites. Most papers were published between 2012 and 2018 and are organized by topic. Reports from the same authors or organizations are grouped together and described in a single paragraph. Contact the CVR [Research Librarian](#) for assistance locating full text or additional articles.

## TRAFFICKING RESEARCH

*Reports that cover global populations are listed first, followed by research about survivors in the United Kingdom and United States.*

**[Trafficking in Persons Report, 2017](#)**. (U.S. Department of State, 2017) <https://www.state.gov/j/tip>

See also: **[Trafficking in Persons Report, 2012: Topics of Special Interest](#)**. (U.S. Department of State, 2012)

Each year, the State Department investigates trafficking crime in every country. Throughout the 2017 country narratives are references to specific instances of trafficking involving individuals with disabilities, in particular for forced street begging and sex trafficking. The special topic section of the 2012 report summarizes that year's findings on trafficking that involved people with disabilities or mental illness, mostly in forced labor and street peddling.

**[Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2016](#)**. (United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, 2016)

<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/glotip.html>

This report is a good starting place to understand the worldwide scope of human trafficking, common trafficking locations, and profile information about survivors (gender, age, relationship to trafficker). It covers global patterns, criminal justice responses, trends, and forms of exploitation, organized by regional statistics and narratives. Cases in Moldova and Austria mention victims who have a physical or cognitive disability or mental illness (page 31).

**[The Health Needs and Healthcare Experiences of Young People Trafficked into the UK](#)** by Nicky Stanley et al. (*Child Abuse & Neglect*, 2016, vol. 59, 100–110) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2016.08.001>

Researchers interviewed victims of trafficking about their health needs after escaping trafficking and interviewed healthcare professionals about the UK’s system of referrals and responses to trafficking. The study found that sex work and domestic servitude were the most common forms of exploitation; headaches, psychological distress, and PTSD were common health complaints in this sample. One third of the young women interviewed reported learning disabilities or reading difficulties (pages 103-104).

### **[Sex Trafficking in the U.S.: A Closer Look at U.S. Citizen Victims.](#)**

(Polaris, 2015) <https://polarisproject.org/sites/default/files/us-citizen-sex-trafficking.pdf>

This publication compiles information disclosed by sex trafficking survivors during hotline interactions, such as demographics, risk factors, and common experiences. Some callers shared with hotline workers that they had a physical or cognitive disability or mental illness, the reason they believe they were targeted by traffickers. “Mental health concerns” is one of the top ten self-reported risk factors identified by hotline callers (pages 4-5).

### **[Understanding the Organization, Operation, and Victimization Process of Labor Trafficking in the United States](#)**

by Colleen Owens et al. (Urban Institute, 2014) <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/understanding-organization-operation-and-victimization-process-labor-trafficking-united-states>

Using data from victim services records in four U.S. locations and interviews with victims and professionals in the field, Urban Institute researchers mapped how immigrant workers were recruited into exploitative working conditions, escaped trafficking, and accessed services. The report includes case narratives and profile information, such as industry, country of origin, socioeconomic status, and when available, information on survivors’ mental health problems or physical and mental disabilities (page 29).

## LEGAL CASES

*News stories and legal cases on trafficking often include whether victims have disabilities or mental illnesses. Compiling individual cases can provide another way to begin to understand prevalence.*

### **[Case Digest: Evidential Issues in Trafficking.](#)** (United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, 2017)

<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/publications.html>

This digest reviews evidence used in human trafficking legal cases to contribute to prosecutors’ “arsenal of possible creative solutions.” It includes a section on cases involving victims with disabilities (pages 74-75).

### **CVR Library Search Strategy**

Below are similar or related keywords for:

- **Trafficking:** exploitation, forced labor, modern slavery, servitude, prostitution
- **Disabilities:** impaired, disabled
- **Mental illness:** disorder, depression, anxiety, bipolar, psychotic, schizophrenia
- **Prevalence:** risk, vulnerability, target, frequency

Login to [VictimResearch.org](https://www.victimresearch.org) and view an [example](#) of how to combine search terms to create a database search string.

**Human Trafficking of People with Disabilities**, interview with Sarah Bessel. (Disability Justice, 2017)

<https://disabilityjustice.org/human-trafficking>

See also: **Justice Denied: Exploitation**. (Disability Justice, n.d.) <https://disabilityjustice.org/exploitation>

See also: **Trafficking of Persons with Disabilities in the United States Fact Sheet**. (Human Trafficking Legal Center 2016)

<http://www.htlegalcenter.org>

Disability Justice is an online resource to educate legal professionals on the forms of abuse, violence, and crime that people with disabilities face, and how to adapt legal services and court practices to meet their needs. Bessel discusses individual cases in the United States involving people with disabilities who have been trafficked. The Justice Denied webpage gathers news articles about cases between 2009 and 2016. Disability Justice links to a fact sheet produced by Human Trafficking Legal Center (Bessel's workplace), which lists similar legal cases by type of trafficking and by victim-perpetrator relationship.

## DISABILITY AND MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH

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*Articles in this section contain research that concentrates on individuals who had disabilities or mental illnesses prior to trafficking. Physical and mental consequences of trafficking and exploitation are also discussed.*

**Sex Trafficking of Girls with Intellectual Disabilities: An Exploratory Mixed Methods Study** by Joan Reid. (Sexual Abuse, 2018, vol. 30 no. 2, 106-131) <https://doi.org/10.1177/1079063216630981>

This paper fills a gap in research about sex trafficking of minors, or juvenile sex trafficking (JST) victims, who have intellectual disabilities (ID). The researchers compared social services case records in Florida for girls with intellectual disabilities and girls without intellectual disabilities who had experienced trafficking, and interviewed service providers to understand the histories and experiences of all survivors. The study found that girls with intellectual disabilities had a much higher risk for being trafficked, when compared to girls without intellectual disabilities in similar circumstances that commonly led to juvenile sex trafficking, including a history of childhood abuse and running away.

**Recognising and Responding to Young People with Learning Disabilities Who Experience, or Are at Risk of, Child Sexual Exploitation in the UK** by Anita Franklin and Emilie Smeaton. (Children And Youth Services Review, 2017, vol. 73, 474-481)

<https://pure.coventry.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/11039352>

This study focused on the risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE) for children with learning disabilities in the UK. Researchers collected survey data from local authorities and social services supporting children with disabilities in the UK in addition to and interviewing service providers and children with learning disabilities. They found four factors that increase the risk of child sexual exploitation for young people with learning disabilities: they rarely have opportunities to develop their independence and social skills; they are rarely listened to or believed in other matters, which may deter disclosure; they are often socially isolated and not educated on sex, healthy relationships, or internet security; and adults rarely recognize signs of child sexual exploitation. This paper is especially valuable for its interviews with young people with learning disabilities who have experienced, or are at risk for, child sexual exploitation.

**Characteristics of Trafficked Adults and Children with Severe Mental Illness: A Historical Cohort Study** by Siân Oram et al. (The Lancet Psychiatry, 2015, vol. 2, no. 12, 1084 – 1091) [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(15\)00290-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(15)00290-4)

See also: **Prevalence and Risk of Violence and the Physical, Mental, and Sexual Health Problems Associated with Human Trafficking: Systematic Review** by Siân Oram et al. (PLOS Medicine, 2012) <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001224>

This study, published in 2015, compares case files of adult and child survivors of trafficking and non-trafficked patients who contacted mental health services in London. The researchers found that many trafficking victims had experienced violence and contacted mental health services before they were trafficked. The paper builds on Oram's 2012 paper, which reviews the existing literature on consequences of trafficking to measure "the prevalence of physical, mental, and sexual health problems, including HIV/AIDS, among trafficked people." The 2012 review does not note if survivors may have had these conditions before they were trafficked.

**Access to Mental Health and Psychosocial Services in Cambodia by Survivors of Trafficking and Exploitation: A Qualitative Study**

by Charlotte Aberdein and Cathy Zimmerman. (International Journal of Mental Health Systems, 2015, vol. 9, no. 16) <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13033-015-0008-8>

Researchers interviewed service providers about the mental health needs of trafficking survivors in Cambodia, measuring access through availability, accessibility, accommodation of client needs, affordability and acceptability. Service providers noted that trafficking victims' mental illnesses often go undiagnosed and that victims with mental illness or disability were a low priority within organizations, partly due to societal stigma and the lack of specialized staff. One provider estimated that 15% of clients in their sexual assault program have disabilities and noted the difficulty that clients with disabilities have finding accommodations after the program.

**No Justice: Torture, Trafficking and Segregation in Mexico** by Priscilla Rodriguez et al. (Disability Rights International, 2015)

<https://www.driadvocacy.org/media-gallery/our-reports-publications>

See also: **No Way Home: The Exploitation and Abuse of Children in Ukraine's Orphanages** by Eric Mathews et al. (Disability Rights International, 2015).

See also: **Precautionary Measures Petition—334 patients at the Federico Mora Hospital, Guatemala.** (Disability Rights International, 2012)

Disability Rights International (DRI) investigates human rights violations of people with disabilities, particularly within institutional settings, and publishes findings in country reports. Investigators interview staff and residents and record video during their visits to institutions. In addition to isolation, cruel physical restraints, improper healthcare, and sexual abuse of people with disabilities, these three DRI reports document: instances of sex trafficking, forced labor, and improper documentation and movement of people in Mexican institutions (pages 16-19); trafficking rings, organ harvesting, child pornography, and prostitution in Ukrainian orphanages (pages 29-37); and drug and alcohol trafficking involving patients, and sex trafficking of female patients in a Guatemalan hospital (pages 7-8).

**Forgotten Sisters: A Report on Violence Against Women with Disabilities: An Overview of Nature, Scope, Causes and Consequences** by Stephanie Ortoleva and Hope Lewis. (Northwestern University School of Law Faculty Publications, 2012, no. 166)  
[https://lsr.nellco.org/nusl\\_faculty/166](https://lsr.nellco.org/nusl_faculty/166)

While this publication includes all types of violence against women with disabilities, it also summarizes the narratives from the 2011 State Department Trafficking in Persons report where trafficking survivors with disabilities are discussed (pages 79-80 of the PDF). Also, the authors explore stereotypes of people with disabilities through the social model and discuss international and regional laws aimed at addressing violence against women with disabilities and countries' compliance with these laws.

### More Information

- [National Human Trafficking and Disabilities Working Group](#)
- [HEAL Trafficking](#) (Health Education Advocacy Linkage)  
little research on disabilities specifically, but this organization does include research on mental illness
- [End Abuse of People with Disabilities](#)  
directory of organizations; broader statistics on abuse, though not trafficking specifically
- [Trafficking Matters](#)  
governmental and non-governmental reports, though none specifically on the intersection of trafficking and disabilities or mental illness

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