

In Harm's Way

*How Systems Fail Human
Trafficking Survivors*

Survey Results from the First National Survivor Study

JANUARY 2023

 **Polaris** Freedom
happens
now.

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Ethical Protections

The National Survivor Study received ethical approval from the **Biomedical Research Alliance of New York (BRANY) Institutional Review Board (IRB)**. The study also received **Certificate of Confidentiality (CoC) through the National Institutes of Health (NIH)**, which protects the privacy of research participants by prohibiting disclosure of identifiable, sensitive information to anyone not connected to the research team.



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Key Definitions

Human trafficking: This study used the United States' federal definition of human trafficking, including sex trafficking and labor trafficking (forced labor). These are defined as follows:

- Sex trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age.
- Forced labor is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.¹

Institutions: Formal and informal rules that organize social, political, and economic relations.² They are the systems of “*established and prevalent social rules that structure social interactions.*”³ These include policies, laws, and norms that govern how different groups and individuals in society behave and interact.

Livelihoods: This term “*comprises people, their capabilities and their means of living, including food, income and assets.*”⁴

Organizations: “*A group, association or agency, as a structure of recognized roles and positions that are ordered in some relationship to achieve a specific goal.*”⁵

Structures: “*Public and private sector organizations that set and implement policy and legislation; deliver services; and purchase, trade, and perform all manner of other functions that affect livelihoods.*”⁶

Survivor: In this context, the term survivor is used to refer to individuals with lived experience of human trafficking. We recognize that not all individuals with lived experience identify as such.

1 Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, 22 U.S.C. §7101 (2000). Retrieved from <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-106publ386/pdf/PLAW-106publ386.pdf>.

2 North, D. (1990). *Institutions, institutional change, and economic performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511808678

3 Hodgson, G. (2006). What are institutions? *Journal of Economic Issues*, 40(1), 1-25. doi:10.1080/00213624.2006.11506879

4 Chambers, R., & Conway, C. (1992). *Sustainable rural livelihoods: Practical concepts for the 21st century*. Institute of Development Studies. Retrieved from <https://www.ids.ac.uk/publications/sustainable-rural-livelihoods-practical-concepts-for-the-21st-century/>

5 Christensen, I., & Pozarny, P. (2008). *Socio-economic and livelihoods analysis in investment planning: Key principles and methods*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Retrieved from <https://www.fao.org/3/bq859e/bq859e.pdf>

6 Serrat, O. (2017). *The sustainable livelihoods approach*. In: Knowledge Solutions. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-0983-9_5

Executive Summary

The National Survivor Study (NSS) is a scientifically rigorous research project designed to shed light on the experiences and needs of human trafficking survivors — so that survivors and communities can design effective strategies to fight it.

The need for high-quality research in the anti trafficking field cannot be overstated. What research has been done generally relies on secondary sources, including the data set created via the National Human Trafficking Hotline. There remain enormous gaps in our understanding of the problem and therefore, of the solutions.



In addition to improving our understanding of human trafficking, this project piloted a dramatic shift in the way human trafficking research has traditionally operated.

Filling this gap with empirical evidence, while vital, was not the only purpose of the NSS. In addition to improving our understanding of human trafficking, this project piloted a dramatic shift in the way human trafficking research has traditionally operated — moving from a standard social science model of collecting data “on” a particular community to designing a research project in partnership with that community.

Polaris conceived of the National Survivor Study after operating the National Human Trafficking Hotline since 2007 and building the largest known data set on human

trafficking in the United States from that work. Data from the Trafficking Hotline has great utility in shedding light on the types of human trafficking most commonly occurring in the United States, but it also has substantial limitations. The information is gathered passively. Survivors are asked only questions necessary to provide them the help they are seeking. They share only what they need to share - not necessarily with a chance to consider further what might be helpful for others to know down the line. Furthermore, not all survivors choose to or are even able to contact the Hotline while in their trafficking situations.

While passive information gathering does not fully tap into the expertise of survivors, it is far from the worst of the models.

This partnership began with asking survivors what areas of the trafficking experience they were most interested in having studied. Based on their input, **the NSS was designed to examine survivors’ experiences and perceptions of the institutions, structures, and organizations that impact their ability to achieve positive livelihood outcomes.** This was achieved through a survey of survivors in the United States and through qualitative methods such as focus groups and cognitive interviews.

Below are key findings from the survey portion of the NSS. Future analyses of this data will delve more deeply into the “why” of what survivors reported, adding layers to what we understand about the experiences of those who lived through human trafficking.



Survivors of human trafficking are not thriving.

- The systems that were supposed to protect victims — often as children — failed and failed miserably.
- The systems that were supposed to protect victims during trafficking — including the criminal justice and legal systems — failed. Survivors broke free from trafficking through what amounted to sheer force of will.
- The system that is supposed to support survivors after trafficking is failing. Few have access to services — notably mental health and employment supports — they need to heal and thrive. Survivors are excluded from mainstream financial systems that would allow them to rebuild, and their children are all too often taken away.
- Likely as a result of all of these factors, survivors are living in poverty or near poverty far too often. Survivors are working or trying to work. Some work more than one job, and are struggling to make ends meet.



ABOUT THE NATIONAL SURVIVOR STUDY

- The National Survivor Study received IRB approval by the Biomedical Research Alliance of New York (BRANY) Institutional Review Board (IRB). The study also received Certificate of Confidentiality (CoC) through the National Institutes of Health (NIH).
- The NSS survey was online and self-administered, with options open for respondents to call in via telephone and participate with the help of NSS team members.
- Both the formative data collection and the survey were offered in English, Spanish, or Mandarin Chinese.
- 457 survivors responded to the survey.
- All participants were compensated for their time.
- Participants self identified as survivors by answering a series of questions that align with sex and labor trafficking definitions (See Appendix B)

Key Survey Data Points



Income and employment after exiting trafficking

The simplest measure of positive livelihood is income. By this standard, survivors are lagging behind the rest of the population

- Of survey respondents, 43 percent were making under \$25,000 per year, compared to 26 percent of the general US population.



Vulnerabilities to trafficking

The vast majority of trafficking survivors faced trauma, abuse, poverty, mental health challenges, and other struggles in childhood. To assess the linkages between these vulnerabilities and survivors, the NSS adapted the widely used CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) questionnaire to fit the context of human trafficking.

For the NSS, these experiences were organized into six categories. Respondents reported experiencing each at an alarming rate.

1. Experienced poverty: 83 percent
2. Ran away from home: 69 percent
3. Experienced abuse (physical, sexual, emotional): 96 percent
4. Experienced substance abuse and mental health challenges: 93 percent
5. Lived with someone who experienced substance abuse and mental health challenges: 93 percent
6. Other family or household instability: 96 percent



Availability of services and supports for trafficking survivors

Accessible, affordable and trauma-informed mental health support was what respondents most frequently reported needing and had trouble getting.

- At time of exit, 75 percent of respondents reported needing support accessing behavioral or mental health services with providers that understood their trauma. At the time of the survey, the same need was reported by 39 percent of respondents.
- Other needs reported by a large proportion of respondents at time of exit included finding trustworthy people and communities for support, and assistance finding a stable, living-wage job.
- Other reported needs at the time of the survey included assistance paying off debt, repairing credit scores, and managing long-term health impacts.



Barriers to financial inclusion and stability



Survivors of sex and labor trafficking faced some unique barriers to financial and societal inclusion that may not similarly affect survivors of other kinds of violence.

- **Criminal records**

Roughly 40 percent of respondents reported some kind of criminal records and of those 90 percent reported that all or some of their arrests were related to their exploitation. Criminal records can stand in the way of economic inclusion, education opportunities, and finding stable housing.

- **Financial abuse/lack of access to financial systems**

One of the many ways victims of human trafficking are exploited is through misuse of their identity by their trafficker for various financial schemes.

- Over 60 percent of respondents reported experiencing financial abuse by their trafficker.
- Respondents were twice as likely to be unbanked compared to the general US population.
- Respondents were 11 times as likely to take out a payday loan than the general US population.

Next Steps

The systems that failed — pre-trafficking, during trafficking, and after exit — have numerous opportunities to improve. In some cases, that work is underway. Many states are creating or strengthening laws to help survivors clear criminal records. A few forward-looking banks have begun to waive certain requirements to open an account or credit card, making financial planning and services more accessible. These are only the first steps, however, of what it will take to create survivor-friendly institutions. The NSS findings provide a starting point for survivors and allies to start taking bigger, more impactful steps to improve trafficking prevention and response efforts in the United States.

Introduction

Although the movement to end human trafficking has grown substantially over the last few decades, quality research and empirical evidence remain largely lacking in the field. Existing resources have relied heavily on the Polaris-operated U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline, which has generated the largest data set on trafficking in North America. However, this data has notable limitations: Not all victims and survivors choose to or are able to contact the Trafficking Hotline; when they do, they are often in crisis situations and share information to connect to services, not for research purposes. Furthermore, such a passive role in data collection skews power dynamics and leaves survivors without control over what story the data tells and how it is used.

★ *People who have lived experience of human trafficking are in the best possible position to help others understand how it happens, and how the anti-trafficking field can do better.*

More evidence is urgently needed, not only to fill these data gaps and build effective programs and policies, but also to empower survivors through the research process. People who have lived experience of human trafficking are in the best possible position to help others understand how it happens, and how the anti-trafficking field can do better. Although that sounds obvious, to date, research aimed at better understanding human trafficking has been primarily the province of those who hold certain academic or professional credentials.

In this context, researchers choose the topics, create and ask the questions, and apply their own lenses to analyzing the results.

Survivors are generally confined to the role of research subject, asked to share often painful memories or deeply personal aspects of their current lives, and offered no agency over how the information they share is interpreted and used.

The National Survivor Study (NSS) is a scientifically rigorous, multi-phase inquiry that attempts to upend that dynamic and provide an early example of new anti-trafficking research — one in which studies are conducted *with* survivors, as opposed to *about* survivors.

In practice that means that survivor leadership and expertise were included in every step of the process, from creating research questions to conducting participant outreach and facilitating focus groups. Even now, survivor participation continues after the data has been collected, as survivors will be full partners with the research team in understanding how this information can and should be shared and utilized to make change.

That process is itself one of the two key outcomes of the NSS: Survivors have now honed a blueprint for inclusive research that can be replicated by other organizations and in other parts of the world. The second is the rich data set itself, which offers insight from survivors with a wide range of experiences and diverse backgrounds.

Over time and with survivor guidance, deeper analysis will be conducted to understand how experiences or perspectives vary in different communities and among different demographic groups. These insights are the building blocks of interventions that actually work to support victims, survivors, and people vulnerable to trafficking.



Research Objectives and Framework

The NSS sought to understand survivors' experiences and perceptions of the **institutions, structures, and organizations** that impact their **livelihoods**. The objectives of the study were to:

1. Understand **survivors' experiences with systems and institutions that intersect with livelihoods** (e.g., related to employment, financial services, criminal justice, including the ways in which different norms, policies, rules, and practices impact their ability to make a living).
2. Describe **informal sources of innovation, community assets, and sources of resiliency** that survivors leverage to establish economic stability.

The above topics were explored with the goal of understanding the differences and similarities in the **experiences and perspectives** of survivors when examined through the lens of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status, age, immigration status, family status (single parent, extended family), education level, socio-economic status, and culture (religion, region), as well as the type of trafficking situation.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach,⁷ originally used to explain livelihood strategies and environmental context in order to improve conditions for rural people living in poverty, was used in articulating the scope and definitions for this research study (see Figure 1 below). The livelihoods framework helps describe the complexity of people's livelihoods by seeking to understand various dimensions and the associated strategies, opportunities, and constraints.⁸ The vulnerability context of individuals frames this approach, with access to certain assets or resources in the social, institutional, and organizational environment.⁹

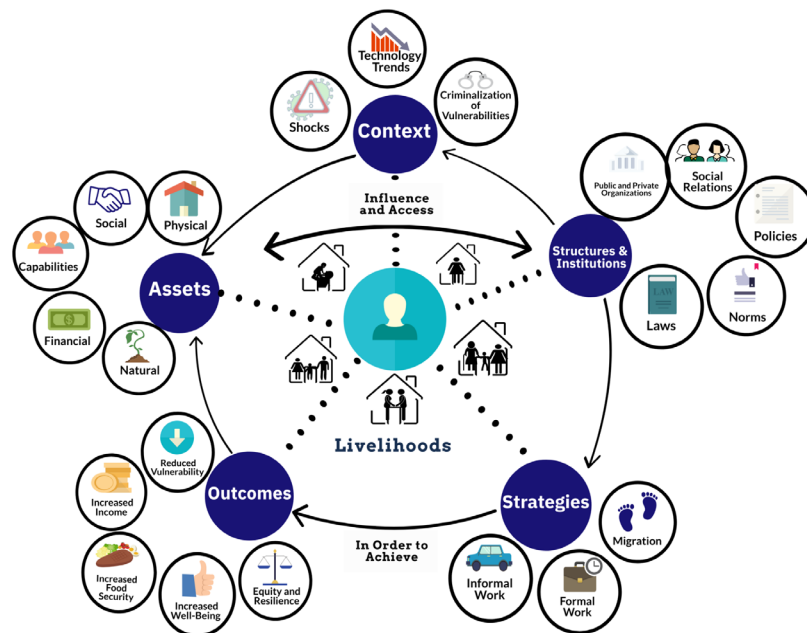


FIGURE 1
Sustainable Livelihoods Model for Trafficking Survivors

Adapted from Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2006). Building on gender, agrobiodiversity, and local knowledge: A training manual. Retrieved April 26, 2020 from <http://www.fao.org/3/y5956e/y5956e04.html#ch2.1>. Reproduced and Adapted with Permission.

7 Christensen, I., & Pozarny, P. (2008).

8 Ellis, F. (2000). *Rural livelihoods and diversity in developing countries*. Oxford University Press

9 Christensen, I., & Pozarny, P. (2008)

Study Design

Process

Polaris initiated the study design process in late 2020 by conducting a needs assessment with internal and external stakeholders to determine an initial scope of appropriate and useful topics. The results of the needs assessment were coupled with a literature review on existing knowledge of labor and sex trafficking in the United States and a gap analysis which helped pinpoint how the NSS might be best used to fill gaps in existing data. After reviewing community engagement research models, the team developed a meaningful survivor-engaged model for the NSS. More importantly, this model of engagement was led and facilitated by the survivors on our research team.

Next, in line with this engagement model, Polaris deployed a two-round Delphi study¹⁰, and we engaged with a diverse group of anti-trafficking professionals in a conversation about the most critical and relevant areas that should be investigated in the NSS. More than 130 anti-trafficking professionals — 66 during the first round and 134 during the 2nd — participated between March and April 2021; of these, more than 50 percent were survivors.

The NSS also formed a Community Advisory Group (CAG) in May 2021 to engage individuals who had relevant expertise and lived experience. The CAG reflects adherence to the principles of community engagement throughout the research process, as well as a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This project was developed and implemented by a research team that included survivor leaders, and the CAG membership complemented demographic and lived experience gaps within the primary NSS research team.

CAG members were engaged in meaningful, collaborative activities to support the NSS. Members were given clear roles and responsibilities to ensure transparency prior to their commitment to join the group. CAG members attended periodic meetings to provide insight and feedback on the NSS, including the research design and protocol. Group members also informed the development of research questions and instruments, offered population-specific strategies for outreach and recruitment of study participants, provided input and feedback on analysis of the data collected through this study, and offered recommendations for dissemination. All CAG members were compensated for their time.

Outreach to people who could take the survey was also a participatory process that included hiring survivors to develop targeted strategies to reach specific communities in culturally appropriate ways.

Methods

The NSS employed a mixed-methods approach, using qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. This type of approach is best suited for participatory action research and provides an important platform for engaging the community in the iterative design, implementation, and analysis of the study. A variety of methods — including in-depth and key-informant interviews, structured surveys, and facilitated group discussions — were employed during the different phases of this research.

The study was implemented in distinct stages, including a screening process to determine eligibility beginning in September 2021, two main data collection phases, an analysis and sensemaking phase, and a final dissemination phase.

10 Barrett, D., & Heale, R. (2020). What are Delphi studies? *Evidence-Based Nursing*, 23(3), 68-69. doi: 10.1136/ebnurs-2020-103303



The two data collection phases were:

- **PHASE I** - Formative study - September 2021-March 2022
- **PHASE II** - Cross-sectional survey - March-August 2022

During Phase I of the study, Polaris employed both online group discussions and individual key-informant interviews. Results from the formative phase were analyzed and incorporated into the development of Phase II in a few important ways. First, Phase I was used to inform the development of the overarching study design and implementation. Second, Phase I activities informed our outreach, recruitment, and retention efforts, providing critical guidance about who was missing from our population of study and how we might develop a more diverse and inclusive study. Third, results from Phase I helped define and map the range of economic institutions that impact livelihoods.

Phase II of the study was primarily implemented as a self-administered online survey with options open for respondents to call in via telephone and participate with the help of NSS team members. Study participants were self-identified human trafficking survivors. Given the ease of participation and relatively high payment, the team received hundreds of entries that were flagged by the survey platform as potentially fraudulent or duplicates. Respondents that were flagged with multiple indicators were then asked to verify basic information they provided in the survey. The NSS team made efforts to verify that respondents were real people but did not attempt to verify anyone's lived experiences.

Questions chosen for the survey were finalized in a participatory process of cognitive interviewing, where survivor and allied research team members went through key questions with study participants in a semi-structured interview to check for understanding, appropriate language, and relevance, and ask for feedback and edits. This process helped to ensure that community participation was paramount, even down to the questions used in the survey.

Ethical Procedures

Because ethical considerations are essential to all research involving vulnerable populations, but especially so in research involving human trafficking survivors, we took special measures to ensure the experience of exploitation was not replicated at any point during the research process. All phases of the study were approved prior to data collection by an institutional review board (IRB) charged with ensuring the protection of human subjects in research. All team members completed human subjects research certification prior to participation in the collection or analysis of data. We followed applicable standards of ethical research, including informed consent, voluntary participation, privacy and confidentiality, minimizing risk to participants, providing opportunities for grievance and feedback on the experience of participation, and providing payment that balances against undue inducement.

During both phases of data collection, all survivor participants were compensated for their time. Participants engaged in the qualitative portions of the study, including group discussions and in-depth interviews that could take more than one hour, were provided with a \$75 stipend, and all participants in the survey estimated to last from 30 to 45 minutes were provided with \$40.

Informed consent was prioritized by ensuring that potential participants had access to full and transparent information about the study, including its purpose, our intentions

for the use and dissemination of the data, and our procedures to protect the privacy of the data. All participants were advised that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they were welcome to end their participation at any time with no detriment to their relationship with Polaris or their eligibility to receive compensation. Information from the study was stored in secure platforms that could only be accessed by researchers, and all identifying information was kept separately from the main data and used only to compensate participants.

Understanding that disclosure of traumatic experiences always carries the risk of emotional triggers, which can be destabilizing if not properly managed, the research team implemented a variety of safety protocols, such as always including a survivor consultant in all group sessions, having a peer-only debrief session after every discussion, and providing participants with access to the National Human Trafficking Hotline service provider directory should they wish to search for local resources.

Finally, the CAG and the IRB served as two independent bodies to hear grievances, complaints and make recommendations for the most appropriate course of action.

Limitations

The goals of the NSS were purposefully challenging, and we acknowledge that there are some limitations to the results.

First, we were not able to reach all communities with the representation we would have liked for a number of reasons. Many people with experience of trafficking are not connected to any formal survivor community and are therefore hard to reach through traditional survivor outreach. Additionally, many survivors may simply choose not to participate in the survey for other reasons. In the formative phase of the NSS, many report having had retraumatizing experiences with research and the anti-trafficking field and understandably do not trust the process.¹¹

On the other side of the ledger, survivors who are already connected with the anti-trafficking field through organizations and networks of survivor anti-trafficking professionals are likely overrepresented.

Based on our formative research and conversations with survivor participants and team members, we included many different types of experiences in our section on exploitation experiences to make the survey inclusive to most participants. However, there were still some participants who did not see their experiences represented.

Further, our inclusion criteria were designed to meet ethical standards of research in the United States set forth by our IRB and thus were limited to survivors of trafficking who both experienced some part of their exploitation in the United States and who were currently living in the United States. Because of the nature of some types of labor trafficking and the connections to temporary visas, there were many survivors who may have been otherwise eligible to participate but had returned to their home countries after exiting their trafficking situations.

¹¹ Polaris (2022). *What is meaningful engagement in research for survivors of human trafficking?* Retrieved from <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Meaningful-Engagement-in-Research-by-Polaris.pdf>



To ensure informed consent to participate, we also excluded those who currently lived in a facility, such as a jail, prison, assisted living facility, or otherwise supervised care facility, where someone else may make decisions for them; as such, some disabled individuals and the incarcerated population are underrepresented in the sample. Moreover, although we found that our data collection methods, which were all by phone and online due to COVID-19, made participation easier for some participants who were experiencing health issues or caretaking responsibilities, we did not actively seek out survivors with disabilities or caretakers. Despite this, we did find that a large number of survivors reported having at least one type of disability.

Additionally, though we extended opportunities for participation to Spanish and Mandarin Chinese speakers and included speakers of these languages in our outreach team, more work is needed to build trust in these communities, and thus the majority of our sample are English speakers. Speakers of languages other than English, Spanish, or Mandarin Chinese were not included at all, which skews the data towards the experiences of those who spoke the languages we did provide. Further collaboration with organizations who serve these non-English speaking communities could improve our representation here.

Because of these and other reasons related to sampling among hard to reach populations, **our data is not representative of all trafficking survivors and generalizations about all survivors should not be made from this data.** This data is only representative of those who had the opportunity and willingness to participate. In addition, the study was **not designed to provide data on prevalence of trafficking** in certain communities or the prevalence of types of trafficking among survivors.

WHAT SURVIVOR EXPERTS SAID:

Study Participation Experiences



- Thank you for the opportunity to take this survey, to use my voice in this way. I felt heard by asking me the right questions that no one ever asks. As I was going along in this survey, I realized how good it felt to tell my experience and to those who care enough to know. It felt triggering and healing at the same time. I am glad I did it. For we survivors know more than anyone what happened and what it was like. I pray that my words in this survey help other rescued survivors and those waiting to be rescued. For those who didn't survive, I will see you in heaven, and say, "Me too." Thank you again.
- Was excited to find the survey and participate. Learning about trafficking and learning to find a voice and be a voice at my own pace has been extremely beneficial to my healing, and I look forward to helping be the light in others' darkness because it is often a lonely road home, and I know I am blessed because a lot of others don't ever make it home. Wanted to write some of the fill-in answers but wasn't quite ready, hopefully in the future.

Demographic Summary of Participants

A total of **457 survivors** of human trafficking responded to the final survey, making this the largest national survey of survivors in the United States.

The NSS did not attempt to determine trafficking prevalence, including assessing proportions of individuals trafficked or their demographic profiles. Therefore, the demographic data below are summary statistics about who participated in the study, *not estimates applicable to a wider population*, and are offered to give context to the findings that follow.

Several data points provide key context for understanding who responded to the survey. These data points demonstrate that many respondents came from diverse communities, including people of color, sexual and gender minorities, people with disabilities, and rural residents. Due to cultural or outreach limitations, the survey sample has a limited number of male-identifying survivors, non-US-born survivors, and people who experienced labor trafficking only. The following data points are general identifiers of the survey population. A full description of the respondents' demographics is presented in Appendix A. Of survey respondents:

- 43 percent identified as a person of color.
- 86 percent identified as female.
- 45 percent identified as a sexual minority (gay, lesbian, bisexual, other).
- 86 percent reported being born in the United States.

Trafficking Exploitation Experience

Of the survey sample, 91 percent of respondents reported experiencing sex trafficking, and 59 percent reported experiencing labor trafficking. This indicates a significant number of respondents experienced both sex and labor trafficking.

In this report, data will be presented for the entire sample or either sex or labor trafficking. To see how the survey categorized an experience as sex or labor trafficking, see Appendix B.

TABLE 1

Type of Trafficking	
Sex	91%
Labor	59%
N ¹²	457



37 percent of respondents experienced familial sex trafficking.

¹² N is the total number of survey respondents that answered the relevant question



Findings Overview: Surviving, Not Thriving

Overall, the information survivors shared via the NSS offers a sobering picture of life after exiting a human trafficking situation. But there are also significant glimmers of hope, as the stories survivors told us through the survey highlight extraordinary resilience in the face of significant societal barriers to success. The responses also offer some clear pathways to changing this picture.

In aggregate, survivors of human trafficking in the United States told us they are not thriving.

Far too many say they are struggling to make ends meet.

They told us that they have been failed at many levels and at many different times.

The systems that were supposed to protect them — often as children — failed and failed miserably.

The systems that were supposed to protect them during trafficking — including the criminal justice and legal systems — failed.

The social services system that is supposed to support them after trafficking is failing. Few have access to services — notably mental health and employment supports — they need to heal and thrive.

Extraordinary barriers remain to survivors' participation in the mainstream economy in a robust way. Among the most significant of those barriers is exclusion from mainstream financial systems and the unfair burden of criminal records they are saddled with as a direct result of having been trafficked.

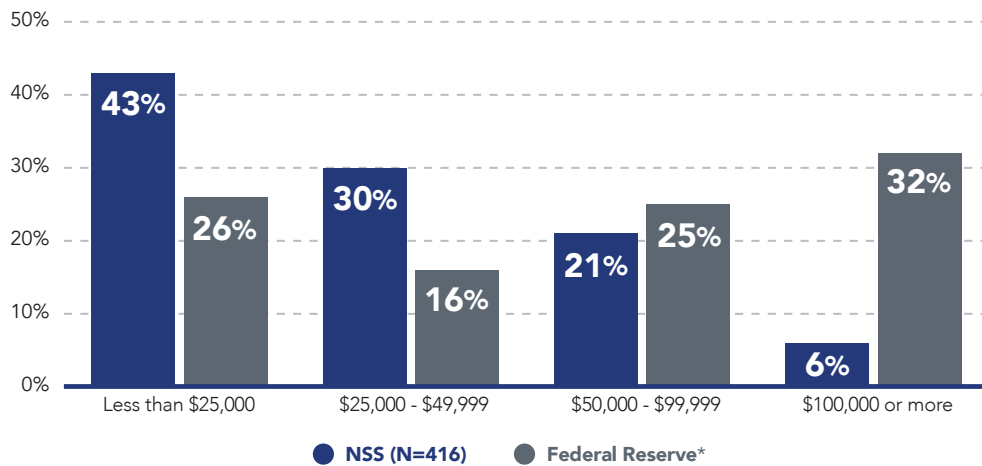
Survivor Livelihoods: Employment and Income After Exit

The NSS survey asked questions about income, employment status, employer-provided benefits, debt, savings, and access to financial tools, such as banks and loans. These questions were asked not only to establish if and to what extent respondents are able to meet basic needs like food and shelter, but also what opportunities exist for stability and growth.

Annual Household Income

The survey's simplest measurement of a positive livelihood outcome was income. Respondents to the NSS overwhelmingly reported they were making unlivable salaries, often despite working multiple jobs. Nearly 30 percent indicated they worked both regular and temporary positions.

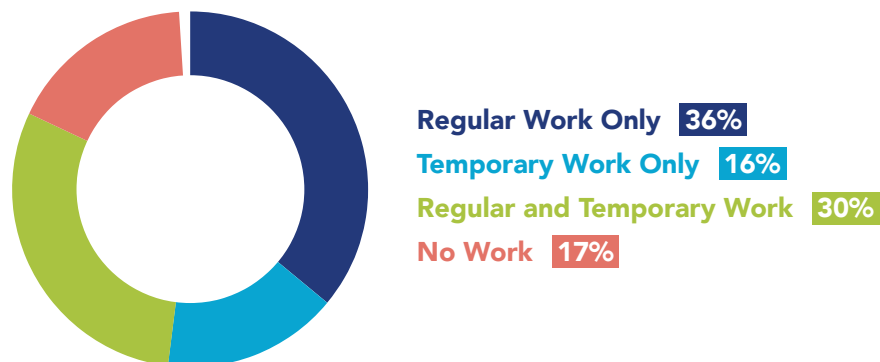
FIGURE 2
Annual Household Income – Respondents v. General U.S. Population¹³



Employment Status

Respondents reported a variety of statuses of current employment. A majority had at least regular work, if not both regular and temporary work.

FIGURE 3
Current Employment Status (N=437)



13 United States Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. (2022). *Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2021*. Retrieved from <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/2021-report-economic-well-being-us-households-202205.pdf>



Regardless of employment status, however, respondents were struggling to make ends meet. In fact, many respondents who had regular work or regular and temporary work were still making under \$25,000 per year. Regardless of state, a \$25,000 annual income is far below a liveable income, especially for a family. Across much of the southern United States, a minimum liveable wage is in the \$32,000–\$35,000 range for a single person.¹⁴ For one adult and two children, the minimum liveable wage in the same region is over \$80,000.¹⁵ In California, a liveable wage is \$45,000 for a single adult and \$114,000 for one adult and two children.¹⁶

These figures clearly show that having a regular job is not a guarantee that survivors are making ends meet. Worth noting is that more than half of respondents reported that they did not have work that provided benefits, such as health care, basic disability insurance, retirement, etc.

TABLE 2

Employment Status	Percent with Annual Income Under \$25,000
Respondents with regular work (N=145)	30%
Respondents with regular and temporary work (N=123)	31%
Respondents with temporary work only (N=66)	53%

57 percent of respondents reported they did not have stable work that provided benefits, such as health care, basic disability insurance, retirement, etc.



The story of survivors struggling, often despite having a job, was similar across a wide range of trafficking experiences, though survivors who had been out of their situations for longer did eventually appear to do slightly better than peers who were more recently exploited. Unfortunately, that slight improvement does not mean those survivors have established successful livelihoods, either.

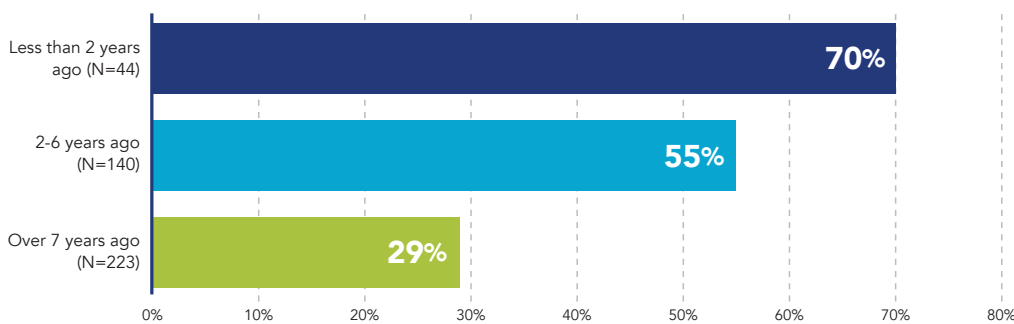


FIGURE 4
Respondents Who Make Less than \$25K a Year by Time Out of Exploitation

14 Moser, S., & Swalina, C. (2004). *A Calculation of a Living Wage*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Retrieved from <https://livingwage.mit.edu/articles/99-a-calculation-of-the-living-wage>

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

Of respondents who exited their trafficking less than two years ago, 70 percent were making less than \$25,000 per year. While this rate decreased as the time since exiting trafficking increased, 29 percent of respondents who exited their trafficking over seven years ago were still making less than \$25,000 per year.

This suggests that for many survivors, their income prospects and therefore their livelihood prospects, do not improve as their lives go on. As poverty is an indicator for vulnerability to trafficking, living in poverty after the end of a respondent’s trafficking experience supports the idea that vulnerability does not stop existing when a trafficking experience ends. The respondent is likely to be vulnerable long after the end of their initial trafficking experience.

Finally, of respondents who are responsible for others (i.e., have dependents), 43 percent made less than \$25,000 per year. In these situations, there is less money for a larger group of people, leaving not only survivors but their dependents living in poverty.

TABLE 3

Of those respondents who are financially responsible for others, those that make ...	
Less than \$25K a year	43%
N	211

Income and Employment Findings – Select Groups

This section presents select findings for income and employment among different groups within the survey population. A fuller profile is presented in Appendix C.

- For both survivors of sex trafficking and of labor trafficking, approximately 45 percent of respondents were making under \$25,000.
- For respondents who identified as a sexual minority, 50 percent reported earning less than \$25,000 per year. Hispanic or LatinX and American Indian or Alaska Native respondents also reported earning under \$25,000 at a rate of over 50 percent.
- No category of racial, sexual, or gender identity reported earning between \$50,000 and \$99,999 at a rate more than 24 percent.
- More than half of respondents who reported having a disability were earning less than \$25,000 per year.
- For respondents who reported living in rural locations, 44 percent had an income of less than \$25,000.

These initial findings suggest the majority of survivors face significant livelihood challenges upon exiting their trafficking situation and for significant time thereafter. This is the case regardless of their time since exit or their racial, sexual, or gender identity.



WHAT SURVIVOR EXPERTS SAID:

Livelihood Outcomes



- Currently trying to get back on my feet after leaving my exploitation. I'm dancing in a strip club almost every single day, trying to save as much money as possible so I can pursue other sources of income. Right now stripping is the only thing I know how to do and I do well. It's hard to let go.
- Estaba bien hace un mes, pero a partir de este mes mi salario bajó y tendré que buscar un empleo secundario para poder seguir pagando la renta y los pagos que tengo. [I was fair a month ago, but as of this month my salary is low, and I will have to look for a secondary job to be able to continue paying the rent and the payments that I have.]
- I'm broke.
- This year (10 years out) is the first year I am making thriving wages and can not only support my family but pay off debt and start saving.
- My employer took away all my benefits during COVID and hasn't reinstated them, which is very stressful for me because of financial trauma, and makes me feel trapped and not secure (now I work for them less). I started an organization that is doing pretty well, but it's been really hard to get a house because of self employment.... There are also not enough organizations willing to help survivors financially or à la carte outside of their own rigid programs. It's always going to be a journey, no certificate of completion in healing from this.

Vulnerabilities That Set the Stage for Abuse

Human trafficking does not happen in a vacuum. As these results make clear, trafficking is the largely predictable end result of countless failures of systems that are supposed to protect people — notably children — from abuse. These failures are the starting point for all that follows in the lives of individual survivors and the baseline from which to view the struggles most face with maintaining positive livelihoods and economic stability.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Research across fields from economics to health has definitively shown that the presence of one or more adverse experiences during childhood affects a range of outcomes related to livelihoods — either directly or indirectly.¹⁷ To assess these linkages among survivors, the NSS adapted the widely used CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) questionnaire to fit the context of human trafficking.¹⁸

For the NSS, such experiences were specifically defined as:

- Experienced **poverty** (food, clothes, home) at least some of the time during childhood
- Experienced **physical, sexual, or emotional abuse** at least some of the time during childhood
- **Ran away** at least some of the time during childhood
- Struggled with **substance abuse and/or mental illness**, including alcohol or illicit or prescription drugs, at least some of the time during childhood
- Lived with someone who experienced **substance abuse and/or mental illness**, including alcohol or illicit or prescription drugs, at least some of the time during childhood
- Experienced other **family structure or caretaker instability** at least some of the time during childhood

Table 4, below, provides an overview of the childhood experiences that respondents reported.

17 Smith, M. L., Herbert, A., Hughes, A., Northstone, K., & Howe, L. D. (2022). Socioeconomic position and adverse childhood experiences as risk factors for health-related behaviour change and employment adversity during the COVID-19 pandemic: insights from a prospective cohort study in the UK. *BMC Public Health*, 22(1), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-14184-8>

Harter, C. L., & Harter, J. F. (2022). The link between adverse childhood experiences and financial security in adulthood. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 43(4), 832-842. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-021-09796-y>

Mosley-Johnson, E., Garacci, E., Wagner, N. et al. (2019). Assessing the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and social well-being: United States Longitudinal Cohort 1995–2014. *Quality of Life Research*, 28(4), 907–914. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11136-018-2054-6>

18 Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., et al. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14(4), 245-258. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797\(98\)00017-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8)



TABLE 4

Experience	Percent of survey respondents experiencing	N
Poverty	83%	450
At some point in my childhood, I DID NOT HAVE enough to eat. *	72%	449
At some point in my childhood, I DID NOT HAVE clean clothes to wear. *	66%	447
At some point in my childhood, I experienced homelessness, houselessness, or housing insecurity.	64%	442
Abuse (physical, sexual, emotional)	96%	450
At some point in my childhood, I experienced sexual abuse.	84%	438
At some point in my childhood, the adults responsible for caring for me DID NOT treat me with dignity and respect. *	92%	445
At some point in my childhood, I lived with or spent time with people who were physically abusive to me.	80%	443
Runaway	69%	439
At some point in my childhood, I ran away from home or the place I was living in.	69%	439
Struggled with drug abuse or mental health issues	93%	443
At some point in my childhood, I struggled with substance abuse, including alcohol or illicit or prescription drugs.	62%	438
At some point in my childhood, I struggled with depression and/or other mental illness.	91%	435
Lived with someone who experienced drug abuse or mental health issues	93%	446
At some point in my childhood, I lived with or spent time with someone who had a problem with drinking or abusing illicit or prescription drugs.	77%	440
At some point in my childhood, I lived with someone who struggled with depression and/or other mental illness.	85%	434
Other family or household instability	96%	451
At some point in my childhood, the loss of a parent or guardian through divorce, abandonment, or death affected me.	70%	428
At some point in my childhood, I lived with or spent time with people who were physically abusive to each other.	76%	441
At some point in my childhood, I DID NOT HAVE someone who protected and cared for me. *	83%	443
At some point in my childhood, I lived with or spent time with someone who went to jail/prison.	53%	440
At some point in my childhood, I lived with or spent a lot of time with someone involved in prostitution.	43%	430

*This question was reverse coded to present the findings (i.e. the question was presented to respondents in the opposite).

The survey results are startling but not surprising. With a single exception, respondents experienced the situations measured in the NSS at a rate of over 50 percent. Clearly there is a need for increased prevention efforts targeted at youth, especially youth who regularly experience food or housing insecurity, substance abuse, or household instability.



WHAT SURVIVOR EXPERTS SAID:

Childhood Experiences

- In my situation I was trafficked as a child, then as an adult after not having help in healing through what I went through. I was domestically trafficked but didn't realize that till 20 years later. A family put up an ad for childcare. I would be a live-in nanny. Get paid room and board. Expected to work 40 hours a week for three kids, unpaid. I was only allowed to shower two times a week, etc. And expected to get a job outside the house to earn any money for my food, etc. Due to what I'd gone through being sexually trafficked as a child, I didn't realize I was being re-exploited as an adult.
- I got a DUI at 16. I was addicted to alcohol. In the mandatory program I was put into as a result, I met people who introduced me to drugs, creating my strong drug addiction.

Common points of intervention for vulnerable youth are the juvenile justice or child welfare systems. To understand if survivors had ever come into contact with these intervention points and whether they were effective, the NSS asked survivors if they had interacted with either system. The results are presented below.

Involvement in the Juvenile Justice System

A missed opportunity is evident in the data surrounding survivor involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Of the survey sample, 22 percent reported having experience specifically with the juvenile justice system, with 56 percent of those reporting the experience occurred during their exploitation. This could indicate that the juvenile justice system was a source of their exploitation or more likely that instead of being given care/child welfare services, they were arrested and sent to juvenile detention instead.

TABLE 5

Were you ever in the juvenile justice system in the United States?	
Yes	22%
No	78%
N	437

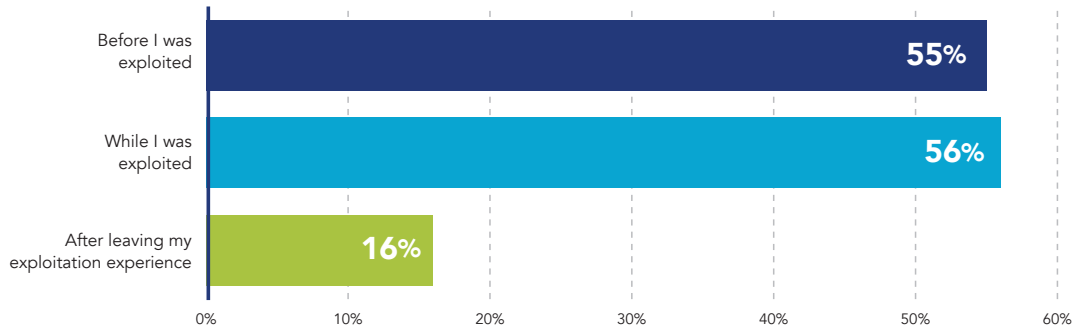


FIGURE 5
When were you in the juvenile justice system? (N=94)

Interaction with Child Protective Services (CPS)

Similarly, the data shows that the child welfare system, which is supposed to be protective, failed to keep a substantial portion of survivors safe. Thirty-four percent of respondents indicated they had interacted with the child welfare system when they were under the age of 18, and an additional 20 percent stated they had not but should have.

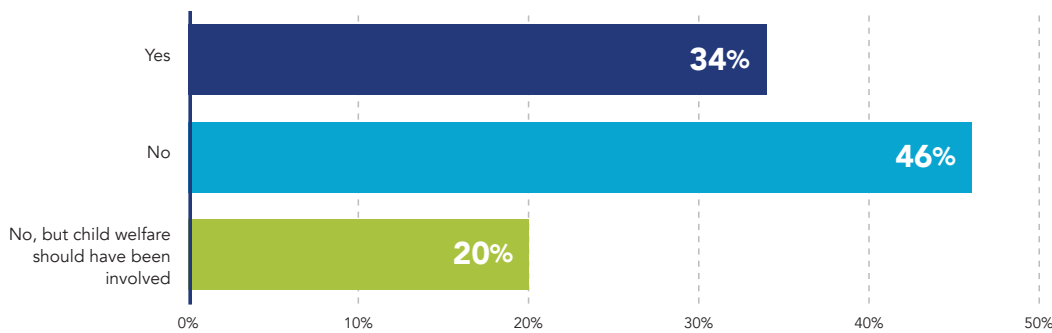
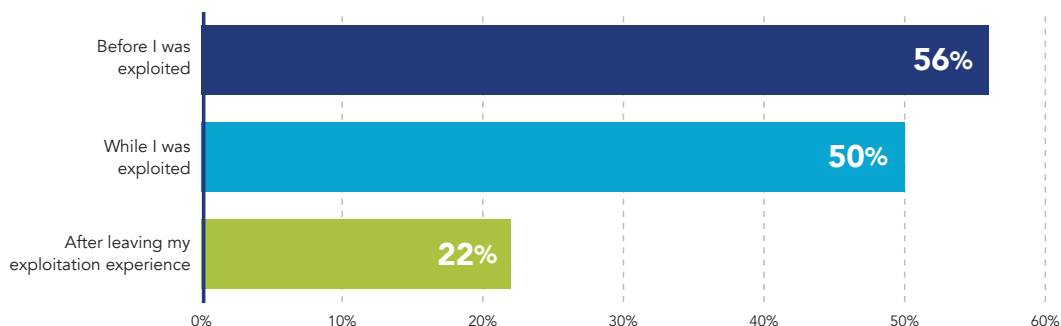


FIGURE 6
When you were under the age of 18, did anyone from the child welfare system contact any of your primary guardians with concerns about your well-being? (N=413)

This response indicates that not only is interaction with the child welfare system a common experience among survivors, but also that many more vulnerable children were not detected by child welfare. This is supported by the findings in Figure 7, which illustrates that respondents who had interacted with child welfare while under the age of 18 frequently reported that they had not interacted with child welfare services until their exploitation had already begun or after leaving their exploitation. These findings suggest that CPS intervention is often too late or never comes at all.

FIGURE 7
When did the child welfare system contact any of your guardians? (N=131)



Broadly, the data in this section clearly shows that the survivors in the survey sample faced considerable vulnerability during their youth. Many of these vulnerabilities either went undetected by the systems that could help or were addressed too late to be helpful.



WHAT SURVIVOR EXPERTS SAID:

Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems

- No one ever asked me why I had committed the crime. They were only concerned with punishment. If someone would've asked me why, it would've revealed the abuse that was happening in my home. As a result I was labor trafficked and set up to be sexually exploited by my mother. Epic fail, juvenile justice system! You're not about justice at all!!!
- My experience of being on probation and being involved with the jail system and the law enforcement was really bad. I mean at the end of the day, they didn't ever press charges against our traffickers nor do they believe me, that is treating me as a runaway and treating me like I was the bad child when my father was the one on drugs the whole time and was the reason why I left. I was obviously crying out for help by skipping school and acting out and getting in trouble, and no one caught that.
- At the time, the child welfare system did get me removed, but my parent got me back after using my stepfather to be the "stable parent." Once I returned home, I experienced abuse up until age 17 when I left the home and met my trafficker not too long after that.



During Trafficking and Exit: The Systems That Fail Survivors

The availability and efficacy of a range of systems, from legal structures and policies to the systems that comprise the social safety net, all play a significant role in how survivors fare during and after their trafficking situations. The NSS findings show, however, that many institutions are failing survivors, both during their trafficking and as they exit. These failures create significant barriers for survivors who are working towards recovery and reintegration.

In examining these failures, the NSS focused on:

- Worker protections
- Human needs at the time of exit
- Human needs at the time the survey was taken
- Experience with family court system

Worker Protections

The findings in this section pertain specifically to respondents who reported experiencing labor trafficking (N=245). The existence of labor trafficking in the United States itself is an indicator that there are failures in the enforcement of labor law. In its examination, the NSS focused specifically on the different types of labor trafficking experiences reported by survivors, including contractual issues, working conditions, and knowledge of grievance mechanisms.

Of those who reported experiencing labor trafficking, the most common form of exploitation was being tricked into doing work that was different from what they were told they would be doing for little or no pay. A significant portion of respondents also reported having wages or payment withheld or experiencing debt bondage.

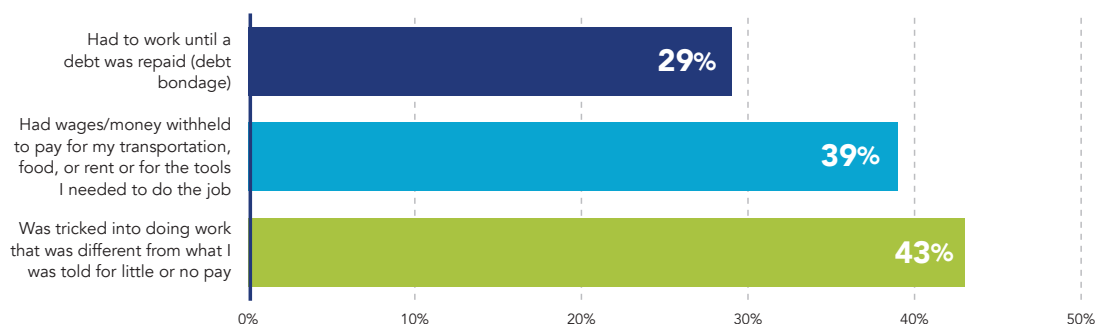
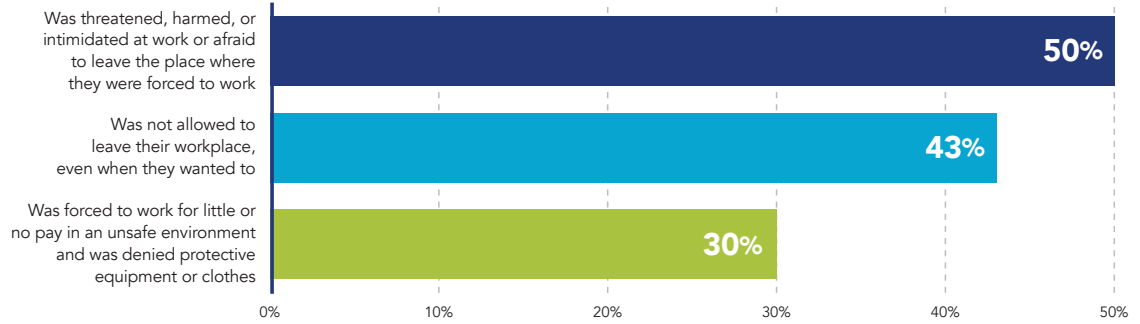


FIGURE 8
*Contractual Issues
During Labor
Trafficking (N=235)*

When asked about common workplace conditions during their labor trafficking, approximately half of respondents indicated they were threatened, harmed, or intimidated while working or afraid to leave the place they were forced to work. Over 40 percent reported they were not allowed to leave their workplace, even if they wanted to.

FIGURE 9
Workplace
Condition Issues
During Labor
Trafficking
(N=235)



Few labor trafficking survivors knew who they could contact to make a complaint about their working conditions at the time of their trafficking, a supervisor or otherwise. Confidentiality was another concern, as very few workers knew of a way to make a complaint without it being tied directly back to them. Perhaps most importantly, of those who experienced forced labor, only 11 percent of respondents reported an inspector or outreach worker visiting their workplace at least once. Among those who experienced forced labor trafficking:

TABLE 6

Grievance Mechanisms Available to Labor trafficking Survivors	Yes	N
Percent of respondents who knew who to contact to make a complaint about working conditions	20%	184
Percent of respondents who knew someone other than your supervisor to go to at workplace for work-related issue	17%	174
Percent of respondents who had a way to complain without employer knowing it was you	11%	176
Percent of respondents who reported an inspector or outreach worker from the government came to your workplace at least once	11%	172

These findings demonstrate clear instances of abuse in a variety of ways. Not only were respondents deceived or threatened into working jobs they did not understand or were different than what was promised, often for little or no pay, but they could not report this abuse even if they wanted to. This suggests vast inadequacy of labor inspections across the country, allowing for labor trafficking to go on unchecked. Even worse, it denies labor trafficking survivors the support they are entitled to.



WHAT SURVIVOR EXPERTS SAID:

Worker Protections



- Nos pagaban y nos descontaban todos los servicios que nos daban y nos hacían trabajar muchas horas. [They paid us and deducted all the services they gave us and made us work long hours.]
- La verdad, uno como inmigrantes a veces no conoce sus derechos y lo humillan y lo convierten en víctima. [The truth is that one as an immigrant sometimes does not know his rights, and they humiliate him and make him a victim.]

Supporting Recovery: What’s Needed and What’s Failing

Each survivor’s needs are different, depending on their individual experience and circumstances. Needs are also likely to change over time. To better understand the different types of needs and whether current services provide support adequately, the NSS asked respondents about their unique needs at the time of exit and at the time the survey was administered, and their experience in having those needs met. The needs included in the survey were identified through the formative phase of the study, which included individual and group interviews.

TABLE 7

Top 10 Reported Needs at Exit (N = 457)	
Accessing behavioral or mental health services with providers that understand my trauma	75%
Finding people I trust that care about me and could help me	73%
Finding a safe place to stay	70%
Getting a stable, living-wage job	69%
Getting a job that is a good fit for me	68%
Accessing a healthy, supportive community	66%
Accessing quality, trauma-informed medical services	65%
Repairing relationships with safe friends or family members	62%
Dealing with others who stigmatized or shamed me for being exploited or abused	60%
Getting an education or job training	60%

TABLE 8

Top 10 Reported Needs Currently (N = 457)	
Accessing behavioral or mental health services with providers that understand my trauma	39%
Accessing quality, trauma-informed medical services	34%
Paying off debt	34%
Finding people I trust that care about me and could help me	32%
Getting a job that is a good fit for me	32%
Establishing or repairing credit	31%
Managing chronic or long-lasting health issues	30%
Accessing alternative therapies (art, music, acupuncture, animal therapy, etc.)	30%
Accessing a healthy, supportive community	29%
Dealing with others who stigmatized or shamed me for being exploited or abused	28%

The top reported need both at time of exit and currently was access to trauma-informed behavioral and mental health services. Other needs that showed up both immediately upon exit and long after include finding a supportive and healthy community and finding a job that is a good fit. Notably, there are some differences. Respondents more frequently reported that their current needs relate to finding a suitable job, paying off debt, or repairing credit. This indicates that over time, the types of assistance they need are more directly linked to generating a sustainable income.



Access to trauma-informed behavioral and mental health services was the top reported need by respondents both at the time they exited their exploitation and currently.

Of reported needs relating to building a sustainable livelihood, one of the most critical for successful long-term outcomes is maintaining employment. Many respondents reported needing employment-related support when asked about their needs at time of exit. Specific needs included assistance related to obtaining employment, getting an education or job training, or assistance learning basic life skills upon exit.

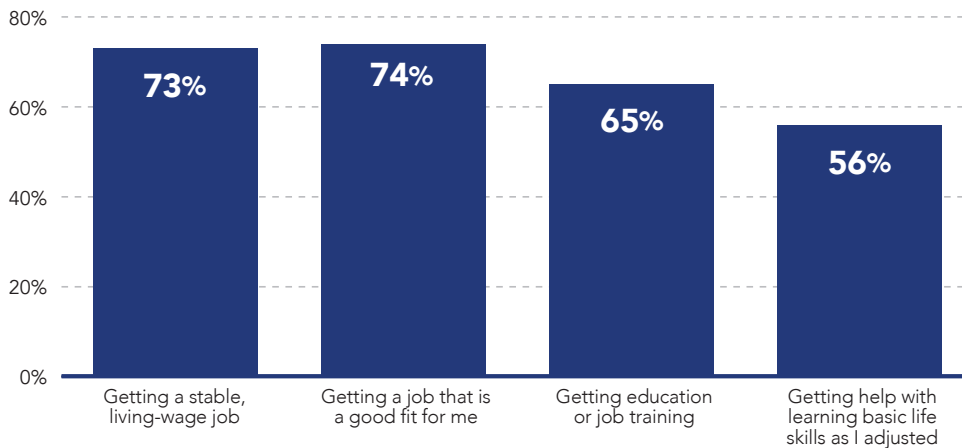


FIGURE 10
Employment-Related Needs for Respondents at Exit or Now (N=457)

WHAT SURVIVOR EXPERTS SAID:

Needs After Exit



- I struggle to find consistent work because of my disabling PTSD from my trafficking experiences. It is difficult for me to explain the gaps in my resume that are due to my mental health and taking informal work in order to support myself....

In addition to needs, the NSS explored the actual tools survivors used to exit or recover from their exploitation. Examining this question was important because it helped provide an understanding of what tools survivors knew of, used, and found helpful, and areas in which services can be improved. As an aside, it also thoroughly debunks the idea that identifying and “rescuing” adult trafficking survivors is a valuable strategic effort, as survivors overwhelmingly report having broken free of their trafficking situation without the help of law enforcement or anything that might be construed as rescue. Indeed, the most valuable support sources reported in the survey were “my own resourcefulness,” counseling and therapy, and relationships with other survivors.

TABLE 9

Most Valuable Sources of Support		N
My own resourcefulness	54%	445
Counseling/therapy	48%	446
Other survivors who experienced similar exploitation and understand what I was going through	42%	450
Hobbies (music, art, etc.)	40%	448
Support from an advocate	37%	446
Support groups	32%	446
Help from service provider/non-profit organization that is not explicitly faith-based	31%	448
Help from service provider/non-profit organization that is faith-based	30%	447
A faith community (for example, church, mosque, temple, synagogue, etc.)	28%	447
Friends (including chosen family)	28%	447

TABLE 10

Most Harmful Sources of Support		N
Intimate partner(s)	19%	445
Family	19%	446
A faith community (for example, church, mosque, temple, synagogue, etc.)	11%	447
Help from service provider/non-profit organization that is faith-based	6%	447
My employer/my job	5%	445
Internet, social media, listservs	4%	448
Friends (including chosen family)	4%	447
Support from a government agency	4%	446
Help from service provider/non-profit organization that is not explicitly faith-based	3%	448
Other survivors who experienced similar exploitation and understand what I was going through	3%	450

The findings here clearly indicate that while some survivors find service providers, advocates, or other support groups to be valuable, they are far more likely to rely on themselves or other survivors. This could indicate a lack of trust in the institutions and systems that could offer support or that survivors are unaware of the support services that are available to them.



Respondents reported their own resourcefulness as their most valuable resource in exiting their exploitation and rebuilding their lives.

A few support sources are noted in both the helpful and harmful tables, such as support from faith-based and non-faith-based organizations. One reason for this could be the evolution of care over time. Survivors who exited their trafficking experiences more recently may have experienced higher quality of care than those who exited in earlier years. Other reasons could include changes in levels of stigmatization over time, reflected in the care any faith- or non-faith-based organization may provide.

Overall, the findings in this section demonstrate two primary failures: a failure to enforce labor law and prevent labor trafficking, and a failure of support systems to provide survivors with the resources they most need. Ranging from healthcare to employment to financial services, there is a clear illustration in these findings that few survivors have access to the appropriate type and level of support that would lead to a positive livelihood outcome. Largely, survivors are, or feel that they are, on their own.



WHAT SURVIVOR EXPERTS SAID:

Exit Resources



- I think of the faith-based org I decided to call somewhat harmful as like an abusive relationship. It was somewhat helpful too. It can all be multifaceted.
- I didn't get help and knew no other survivors — I never met other familial trafficking survivors until recently. Thought I was the only one.
- I had nobody to help me. I didn't know anything about reaching out or finding people to support me. I spent many years without therapy, without assistance, without health care. It's caused detrimental mental damage to me.
- Meeting another survivor and putting a name to what happened to me — priceless.

Family Law Failures

One of the more devastating and distressingly consistent systemic failures survivors reported facing is how frequently they were failed by the family court system as they tried to rebuild their lives by gaining or regaining custody of a beloved child. The data shows a severe lack of understanding of the trafficking context within the family court system.

Of note, more than 35 percent of respondents with children reported that they had children with their exploiter.

TABLE 11

Experiences with Children	Yes	N
Do you have, or have you ever had, any children?	62%	420
For those with child/ren, was the child/ren with the person that exploited you?	35%	248

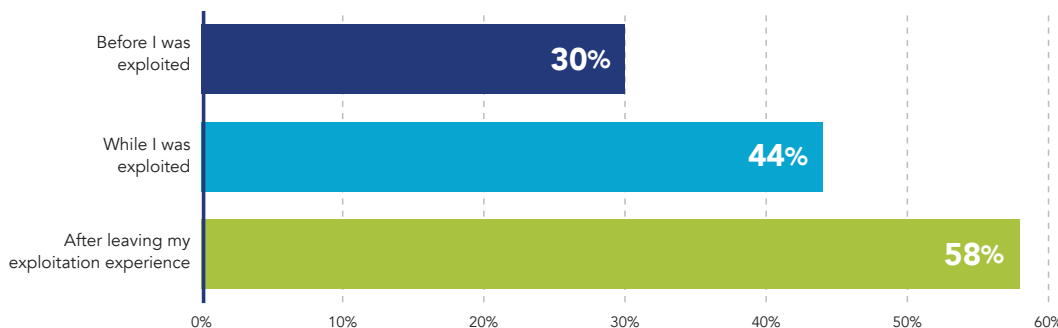


FIGURE 11
Did you have children before, during, or after your exploitation? (N=255)

Of those with children, many respondents reported that at some point they had been threatened with or lost custody of their children, either to the state or to someone else, including their exploiter.

TABLE 12

Child Custody Experiences	Yes	N
For those with child/ren, had the state at some point removed (or threatened to remove) child/ren from your custody?	31%	257
For those with child/ren, were you involved in a custody dispute over child/ren with someone other than the state?	36%	253
For those who have had a custody battle, have you lost custody of child/ren to someone other than state?	51%	90
For those who have had a custody battle, have you had custody disputes with the person who exploited you?	30%	89
For those who have had a custody battle with exploiter, did you lose custody to your exploiter?	62%	26

Clearly, there is significant work to be done to help family court stakeholders better understand the realities of human trafficking.



WHAT SURVIVOR EXPERTS SAID:

Child Custody

- Overall, Family Courts and Child Protective Services (CPS) do not have an understanding of how human trafficking can affect a survivor’s experience with obtaining and keeping custody of their children, especially when the other parent is a trafficker.



After Exit: Barriers to Achieving Economic Stability

After breaking free from trafficking, survivors still face significant barriers to inclusion in societal and economic systems that lead to or comprise positive livelihood outcomes. The most universal and significant barriers identified by respondents in the interview/formative period of the study were:

- The inability to access mainstream financial systems, which leave them at the mercy of expensive options like payday lenders, and
- The fact that many survivors have criminal records as a result of their trafficking, which makes it harder for them to find jobs or housing, get an education, or rebuild their lives in general.

Financial Barriers

Access to the mainstream financial system — loans, credit, bank accounts, and the like — can be a critical factor in survivor livelihood outcomes. Such access can be extremely challenging for anyone living in poverty or facing significant financial hardship, but there are also factors specific to human trafficking that make participation in traditional financial services even more challenging.

Financial abuse during trafficking

Financial abuse by exploiters was reported by a majority of respondents. In this study, financial abuse included misuse of personal identification for financial purposes, such as applying for government assistance, taking out loans, applying for credit cards, opening bank accounts, and more.

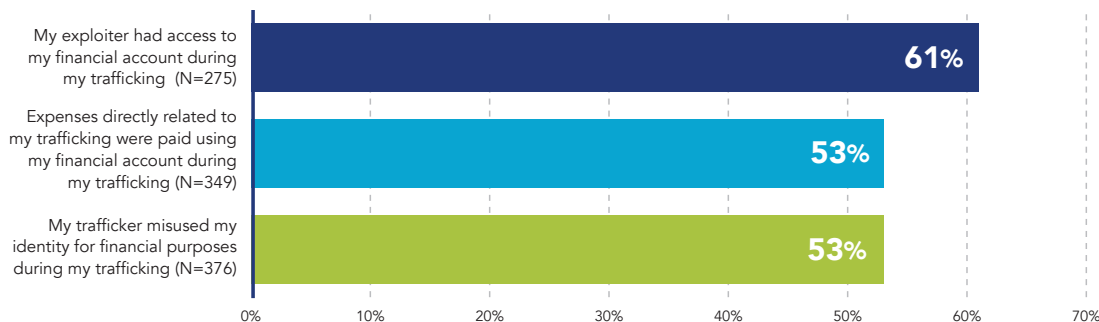
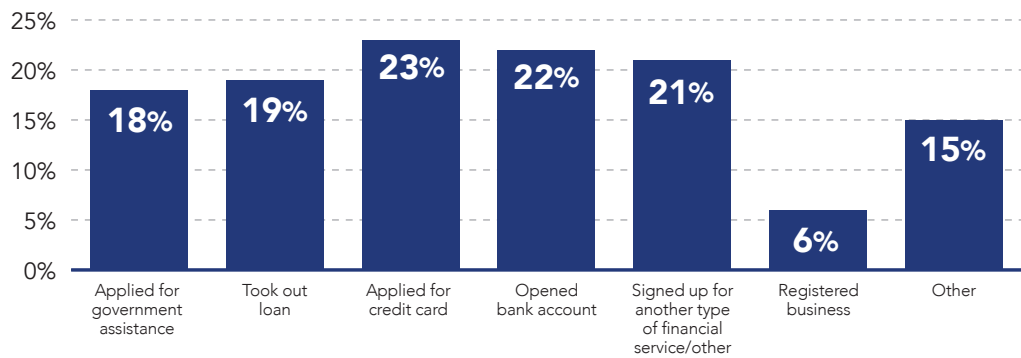


FIGURE 12
Financial Abuse During Trafficking

Misuse of identity by traffickers is a particularly consequential form of financial abuse during trafficking. By having their identity misused, survivors' credit scores and reports — and therefore ability to access financial tools like loans or credit cards — are severely inhibited after exiting exploitation. Figure 13 below details the most commonly reported ways respondents' identities were misused by their trafficker.

FIGURE 13
Misuse of Respondents Identity by Traffickers (N=376)



Unsurprisingly, this type and extent of financial abuse leads to poor credit. Upon exit, respondents reported assistance repairing their credit as their top financial need.



WHAT SURVIVOR EXPERTS SAID:

Credit Issues

- My entire life is a wreck due my credit history, which I wasn't even in any control of.
- I had no independent bank account, credit, lease, or financial means that weren't co-signed or co-account/joint with my exploiters. All things were joint.
- I'm a single mom of two children and one more baby coming in February. I was recently assaulted, which caused the unplanned pregnancy. My traffickers used my social security number and ID to open credit cards and phone bills, etc., and racked up collections under my ID; it's impossible to get rid of the debt. They also claimed me and my children since leaving that life and got all of the stimulus for all of us and continue to steal it from us. We are struggling so much. I'm doing counseling as well as [training], trying to grow and learn. Financially we are a mess. State assistance still leaves us hungry with prices that have gone up. I go to food banks and even beg on the street for money if I have to.



Access to bank accounts

Respondents heavily emphasized the need for assistance in opening a bank account. Without bank accounts, survivors are left with inefficient and extremely expensive options, such as payday loans. Compared to the general US population, survey respondents were twice as likely to be unbanked.

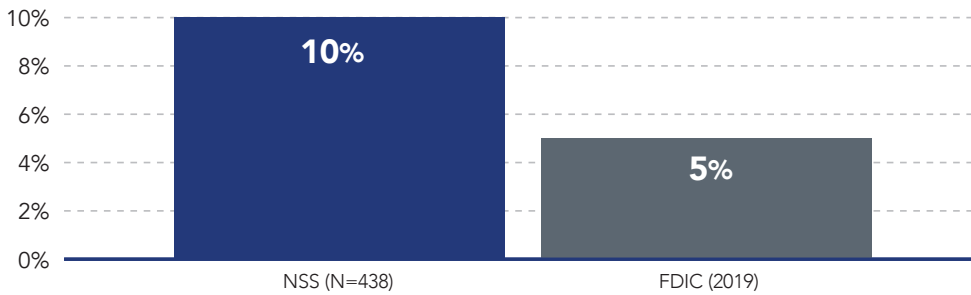


FIGURE 14
Respondents Currently Without Bank Account vs. General US Population (N=438)

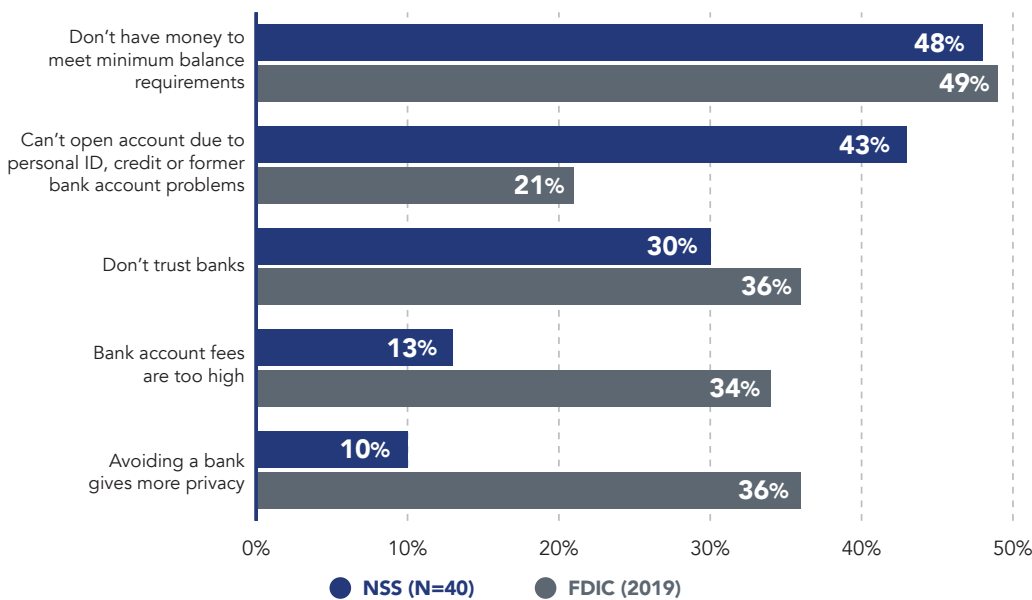
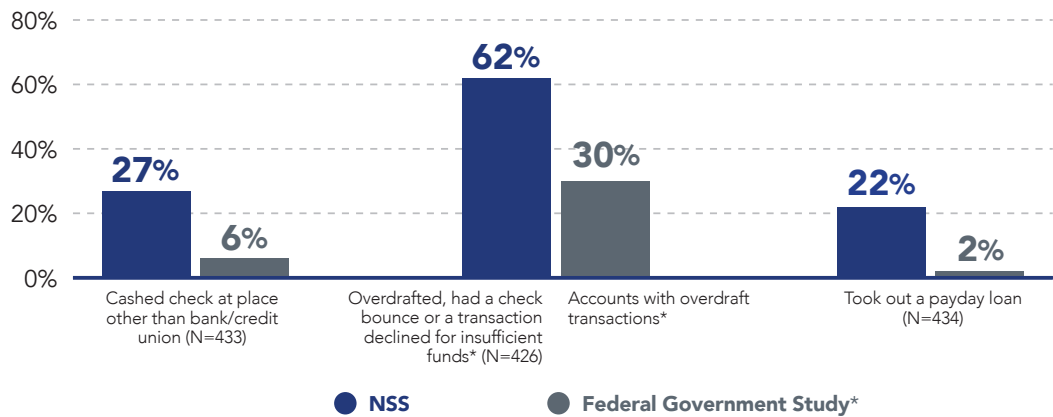


FIGURE 15
Common Reasons Provided for Not Having a Bank Account — Unbanked Respondents v. Unbanked US Population (N=40)

When asked why they did not have a bank account, respondents cited not being able to meet the minimum balance requirements, similar to the general unbanked US population, as the top barrier. Another key reason respondents had for not having a bank account, however, was not being able to open the account due to ID, credit, or former bank account problems, which can be directly tied to their trafficking experience.

For those with bank accounts, a majority of respondents reported overdrafting or a bounced check or transaction due to insufficient funds. This finding suggests the importance of banks supporting survivors by establishing special accommodations to address the unique challenges they face. This could include providing access to bank accounts without overdraft fees and penalties.

FIGURE 16
Financial Experiences in the Last 12 Months
 — Respondents v. General US Population^{17,18}



As many respondents did not have bank accounts or had trouble obtaining one at some point, the NSS also examined non-bank-facilitated financial activities. The survey found that survivors took out payday loans at a rate more than 11 times that of the national average (Figure 16). Use of non-bank lenders, such as payday and car title loans, are more likely than interaction with other financial institutions to lead to a cycle of debt.²¹ Payday loans often charge up to 400 percent in annual interest rates and are associated with increased likelihood of bank penalty fees, bankruptcy, delinquency on other bills, and bank account closures.²²

While financial abuse accounts for some of these issues, others are a matter of income-based access. For example, loans that carry minimum income requirements are not achievable purely because survivors are not earning enough. Income is tied closely to other non-financial issues, such as education and skills, but compounds with financial barriers to make positive livelihood outcomes more difficult for survivors.

Overall, the findings demonstrate the severe, lasting consequences of trafficking and the persistent barriers survivors face long after they have exited their trafficking. Some have taken action to repair small parts of these failures, such as the Debt Bondage Repair Act of 2021, aimed at helping survivors to repair their credit score. But there is much more that can be done to support survivors’ financial outcomes.

19 Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) (2020). *How America Banks: Household Use of Banking and Financial Services*. Retrieved from <https://www.fdic.gov/analysis/household-survey/2019/index.html>

20 Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. (2014). *Data Point: Checking Account Overdraft*. Retrieved from https://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/201407_cfpb_report_data-point_overdrafts.pdf

21 Haughn, R. (2022). *Payday loan statistics*. Bankrate. <https://www.bankrate.com/loans/personal-loans/payday-loan-statistics/>

22 Stop the Debt Trap. *What is Payday Lending?* <https://stopthedebttrap.org/about/whatispaydaylending/>



WHAT SURVIVOR EXPERTS SAID:

Interactions with Financial System



- I had a lot of fraud committed on my bank accounts, and for a while I was blacklisted from having my own bank account. When I got out of exploitation, my grandmother had to vouch for me at her bank and be a joint owner for years until I could prove that I could have the account on my own. Years after exploitation, there is still often fraud on my account and I often wonder if it is tied to my social security number or name on the dark web because my husband and family don't ever have this many issues with fraud.
- My debit card was frequently used to purchase hotel rooms in my name. My pimp/trafficker would send me the funds that I earned that he was keeping through Cash App. I used a fake ID with my real name to buy the rooms alongside the debit card. (Since hotels require you to be 21 and I was only 19, he gave me fake IDs to use). He put it in my name to maintain his privacy from any potential law enforcement situations at the hotel.

Law Enforcement and Criminal Records Barriers

Encounters with law enforcement are some of the first institutional interactions for many survivors of trafficking. Whether as a juvenile, pre-trafficking, or after exit, law enforcement and the justice system play a large role in many survivors' lives.

Of respondents, 62 percent were arrested, detained, or cited by law enforcement. Of those arrested, detained, or cited, 81 percent reported that it happened during their trafficking experience.

The impact of arrest on survivors is both an emotional challenge and a logistical one. Of those who were arrested, detained, or cited, 71 percent had a criminal record as a result.

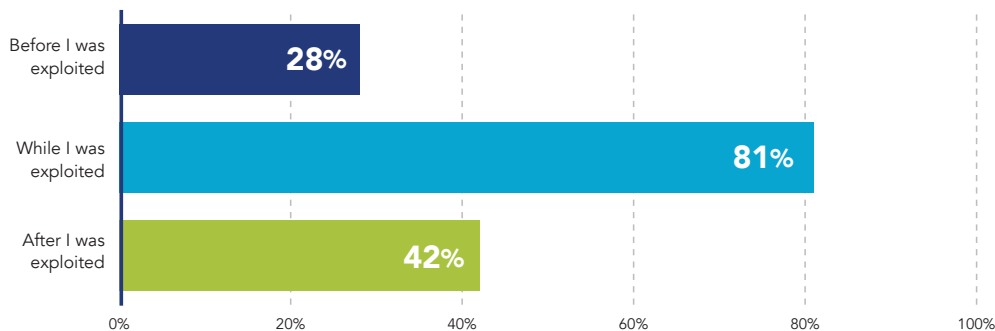


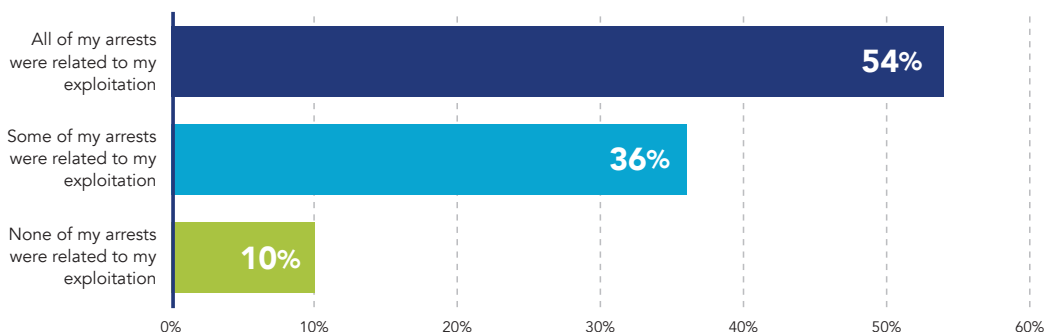
FIGURE 17
Timing of When Respondents Were Arrested, Detained, or Cited in Relation to Trafficking (N=265)

TABLE 13

	Percent of respondents	N
Have been cited, arrested, or detained by law enforcement at least once	62%	439
Among those who were cited, arrested, or detained, had/has a criminal record	71%	244
Of all survey respondents, had/has a criminal record	42%	413

Of those who had a criminal record, 90 percent reported that some or all of their records were related directly to their exploitation.

FIGURE 18
How Much of Criminal Record Was Related to Trafficking Victimization (N=163)



This high proportion of survivors with criminal records is an indicator that even if adequate support services exist in a given survivor’s environment or community, they may not have access to them because of their record.



WHAT SURVIVOR EXPERTS SAID:
Criminal Justice System

- I was sentenced to five years in state prison alongside the person who exploited me. Furthermore, when I was arrested, I was put in a room by myself for a very long time. I was never offered help or resources. Because I refused to give a statement for my own safety I was taken to jail and kept there for two years while I fought my case. I was never released prior to being sentenced. I am also ineligible for record relief due to my conviction being classified as a violent felony.
- There’s so many needs that you can’t get when you have a criminal record. It makes it more difficult to get your employment, it makes it more difficult to get housing, it makes it more difficult to get services. It affects everything.



Conclusions

The information gathered by the NSS paints a challenging picture, if not a particularly surprising one. Sadly, in over 20 years since the passing of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, the landmark legislation that brought comprehensive federal human trafficking law to the United States, too little progress has been made towards actually improving the lives of survivors.

Although this survey data cannot be seen as a tool for estimating prevalence of trafficking, it does capture a broad cross-section of trafficking survivors, particularly as they relate to livelihoods and economic stability.

In short, existing systems that are supposed to prevent trafficking or support survivors are not working. In virtually every direction, **survivors are confronted with barriers to achieving financial stability.**

These barriers range from lack of ability to access basic financial tools, like bank accounts and credit cards, to difficulty getting a living-wage job after exit and threats of removal of children. All of these factors actively prevent survivors from achieving positive outcomes.

The systems that failed — pre-trafficking, during trafficking, and after exit — have numerous opportunities to improve. Actors across government and policy, criminal justice and legal systems, service providers, and financial institutions can step up to ensure that those systems no longer fail victims, survivors, and people vulnerable to trafficking. Indeed, they *need* to step up so that trafficking is more effectively prevented, and existing survivors can get the support that will help them rebuild their lives.

Some stakeholders are taking action. In some cases, like criminal records relief, policymakers in specific states are stepping up to the plate to support vacatur for survivors. Although the federal government does not have a legal pathway for survivors to clear their criminal records, legislation has been introduced in several sessions of Congress. In the finance sector, some banks have begun to waive certain requirements to open an account or credit card, making financial planning and services more accessible.

These are only the first steps, however, of what it will take to create survivor-friendly institutions. By providing the first such data on survivor livelihoods, the NSS provides a starting point for survivors and allies to begin taking bigger, more impactful steps to improve trafficking prevention and response efforts in the United States. And its process serves as a valuable model for true survivor partnership in research, recognizing those with lived experience as the true experts of the movement.



The systems that failed — pre-trafficking, during trafficking, and after exit — have numerous opportunities to improve.

Appendix

A: Full Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

Age, Gender, Sex, Race, Ethnicity, Disability

Current Age	
18-25	11%
26-35	41%
36-45	28%
46-55	15%
55 and older	5%
N	454

Gender	
Female	86%
Male	7%
Non-binary/Gender fluid	6%
Other	1%
N	453

Transgender	
Yes	5%
No	95%
N	444

Gender Minority	
Yes	8%
No	92%
N	453

Sexuality	
Asexual	6%
Bisexual	24%
Fluid	3%
Gay	2%
Lesbian	4%
Other	1%
Pansexual	7%
Queer	6%
Questioning	3%
Straight (heterosexual)	60%
N	439

Sexual Minority	
Yes	45%
No	55%
N	439

Race/Ethnicity	
White only	57%
Person of color	43%
N	448



Ethnicity	
American Indian or Alaskan Native	7%
Biracial or multiracial	11%
Black or African American	12%
East or Southeast Asian	5%
Hispanic or Latinx	15%
Middle Eastern, North African, or Arab	2%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	1%
Other	2%
South Asian	1%
White	66%
Combined AAPI	6%
N	448

Disability	
Yes	59%
No	41%
N	418

Location, Origin, Language

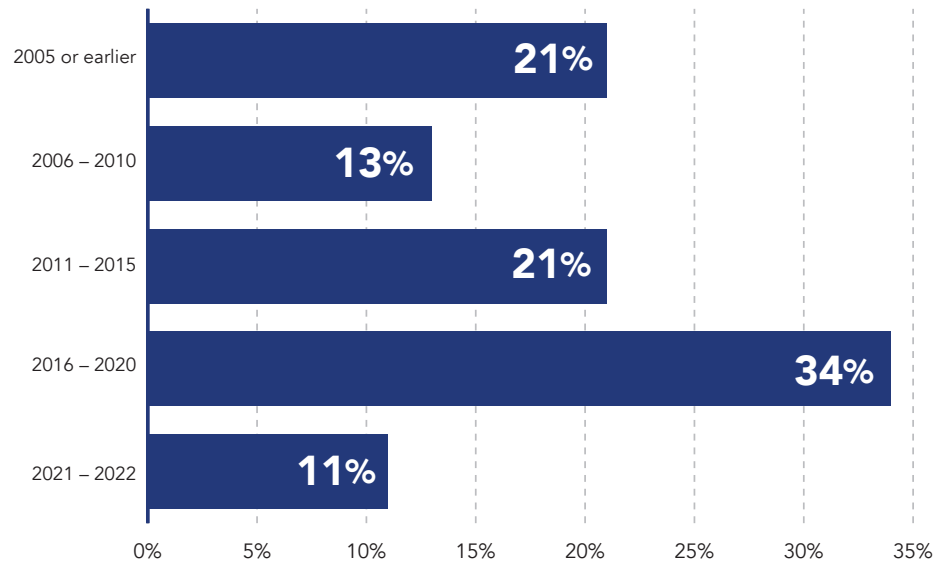
Region	
Midwest	24%
Northeast	12%
South	36%
West	28%
N	441

Language most spoken with friends and family		
English	93%	415
Spanish	5%	24
Mandarin Chinese	1%	4
Other	1%	4
N	447	

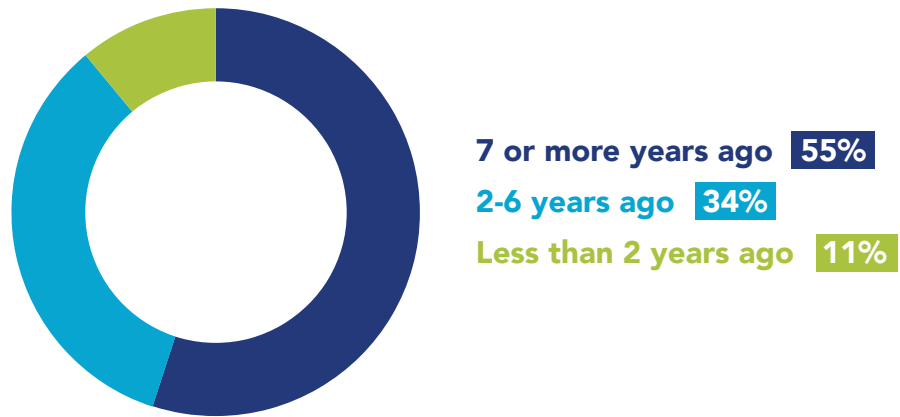
Location of residence	
Rural	22%
Suburban	40%
Urban	38%
N	396

Date, Length, and Type of Trafficking

Date of Last Exploitation (N=443)



Length of time since last exploitation (N=443)



Born outside US, coerced, tricked, or forced by someone else to come to the US	
Yes	37%
No	63%
N	57



B: Survey Definitions of Sex and Labor Trafficking

The following questions were used in the survey to determine participants' experiences as labor and/or sex trafficking.

Questions to identify sex trafficking survivors

Please select all the sexual exploitation-related situations that describe your experience. *(Select all that apply)*

- A. When I was under the age of 18, I had to engage in a sex act for things like money, drugs, a safe place to stay, and/or basic necessities.
- B. When I was under the age of 18, I was forced, manipulated, or pressured to sell sex.
- C. When I was under the age of 18, a family member forced, manipulated, or pressured me to engage in sex.
- D. As an adult, I was forced, pressured, threatened, harmed, or intimidated to engage in a sex act in exchange for things like money, drugs, a safe place to stay, legal documents, and/or basic necessities.
- E. I was required to give what I earned from engaging in sex acts to someone else.
- F. I stayed somewhere I didn't want to be while engaging in sex acts for money, drugs, a safe place, or basic necessities.

[If any of the above were selected] **Did any of the sexual exploitation you experienced involve the following?** *(Select all that apply)*

- G. I was not able to keep any or a lot of the money I made from engaging in sex acts.
- H. I had to engage in sex acts to pay back money I owed.
- I. I was threatened, harmed, intimidated, or afraid to leave the place or situation I was forced to engage in sex acts.
- J. I was forced to engage in sex acts for extremely long hours.
- K. I was tricked into engaging in sex acts instead of the job I was promised.

Questions to identify labor trafficking survivors

Please let us know which of the following describe your forced labor or labor exploitation experience not associated with the sex trade. *(Select all that apply)*

- A. I had to work for no pay or almost no pay.
- B. I had to work until a debt was repaid.
- C. I was required to work for little or no pay in exchange for things like a safe place to stay, legal documents, and/or basic necessities.
- D. I was threatened, harmed, or intimidated at work or afraid to leave the place where I was forced to work.
- E. I had wages or money withheld to pay for my transportation, food, or rent or for the tools I needed to do the work.
- F. I was not allowed to leave my workplace, even when I wanted to.
- G. I was forced to work extremely long hours for little or no pay.
- H. I was forced to work for little or no pay in an unsafe environment and was denied protective equipment or clothes to keep myself safe.
- I. The well-being of my family was threatened to keep me from leaving my workplace.
- J. I was tricked into doing work that was different from what I was told for little or no pay.

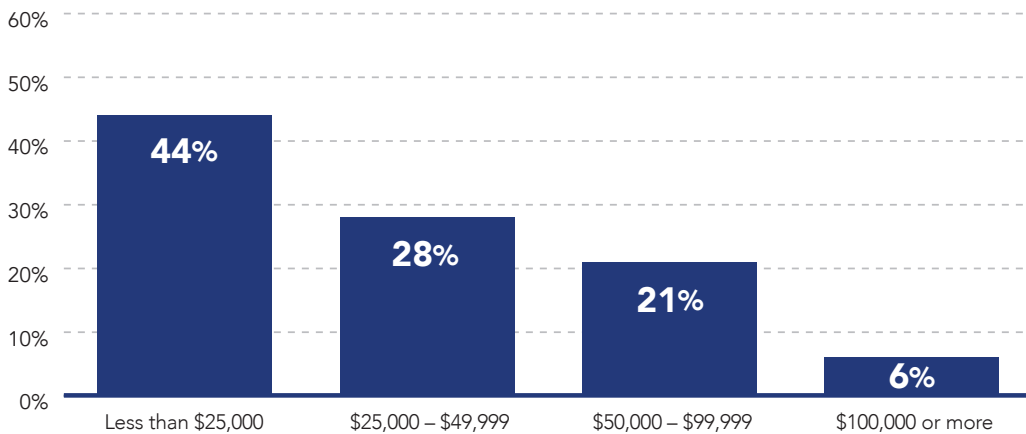


C: Income and Employment of Different Groups of Survivors

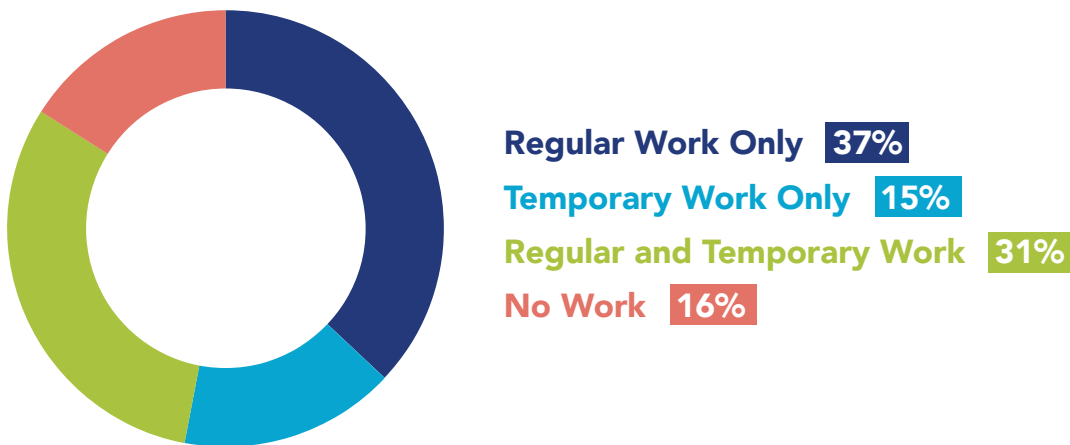
The following data shows employment and income outcomes for varying demographics. It is presented as a resource for partners and allied organizations working in different types of communities and with survivors who experienced different types of exploitation.

Sex Trafficking Respondents

Annual Household Income – Sex Trafficking Respondents (N=379)

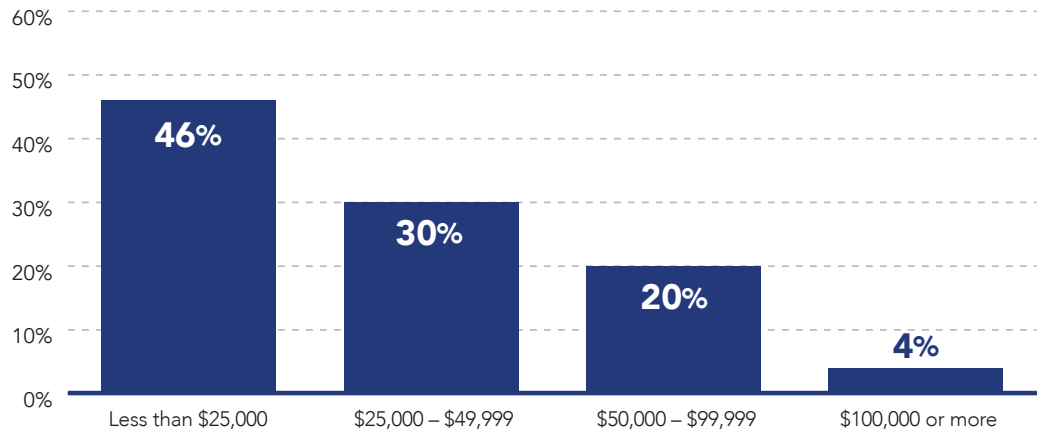


Employment of Sex Trafficking Respondents (N=379)

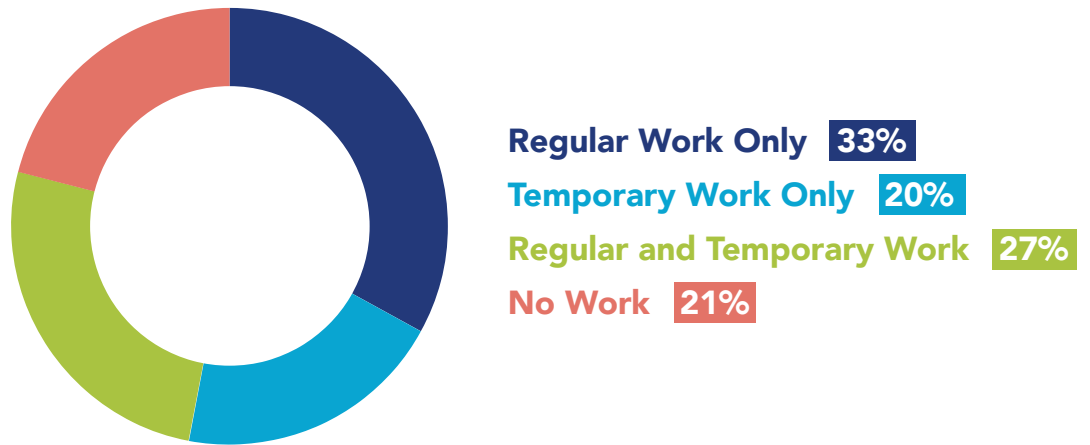


Labor Trafficking Respondents

Annual Household Income – Labor Trafficking Respondents (N=224)



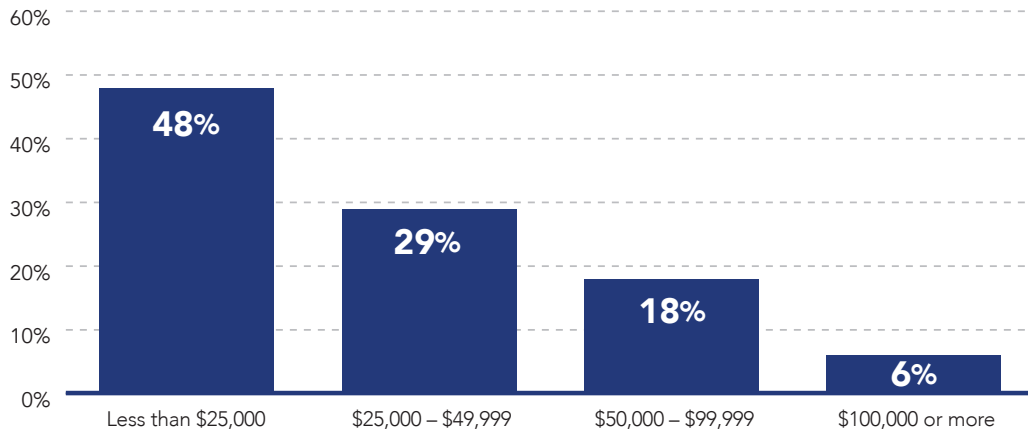
Employment of Labor Trafficking Respondents (N=230)



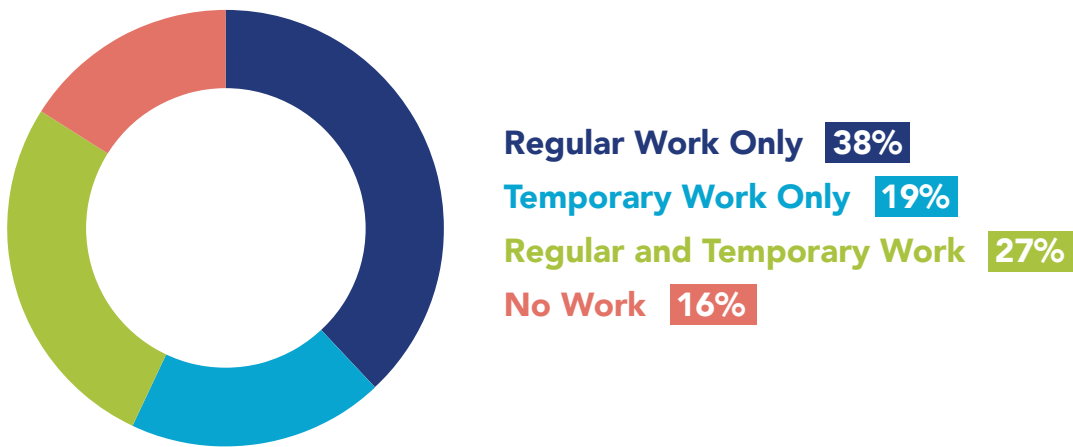


Respondents of Familial Sex Trafficking

Annual Household Income – Familial Sex Trafficking Respondents (N=153)

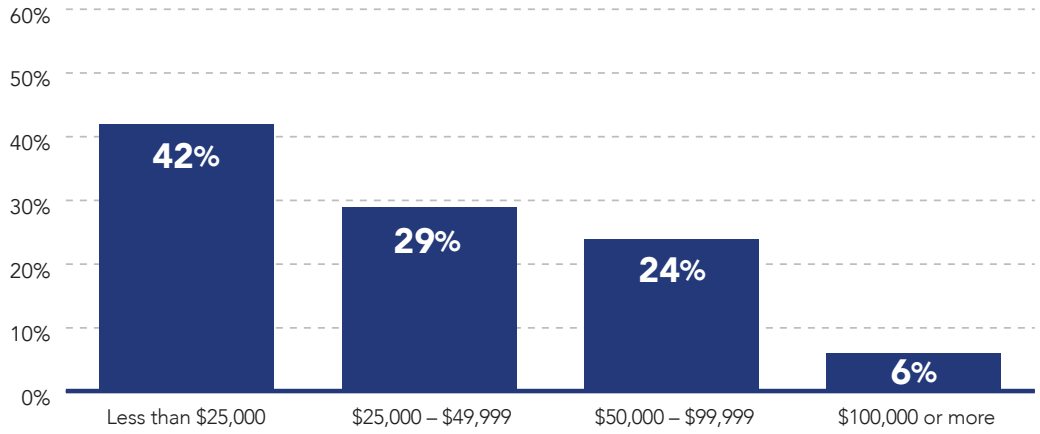


Employment of Familial Sex Trafficking Respondents (N=161)

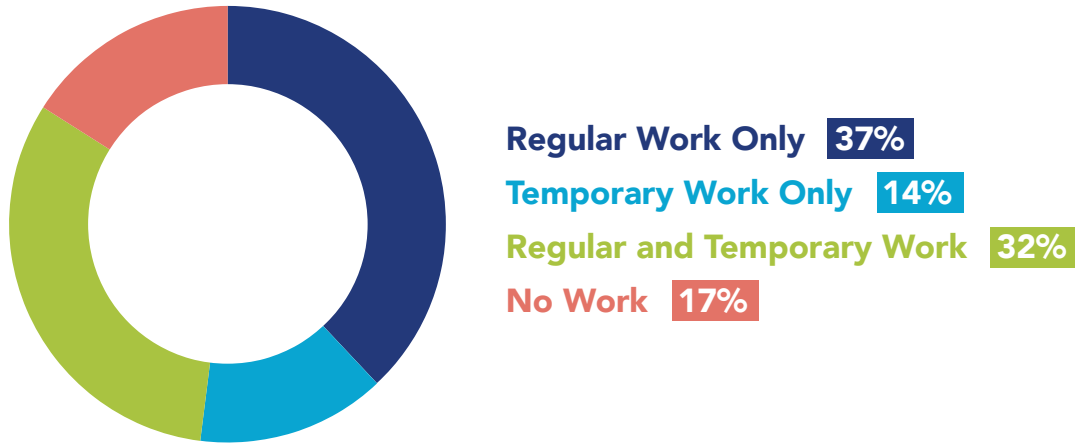


Respondents Who Identify as White

Annual Household Income – White Respondents (N=273)



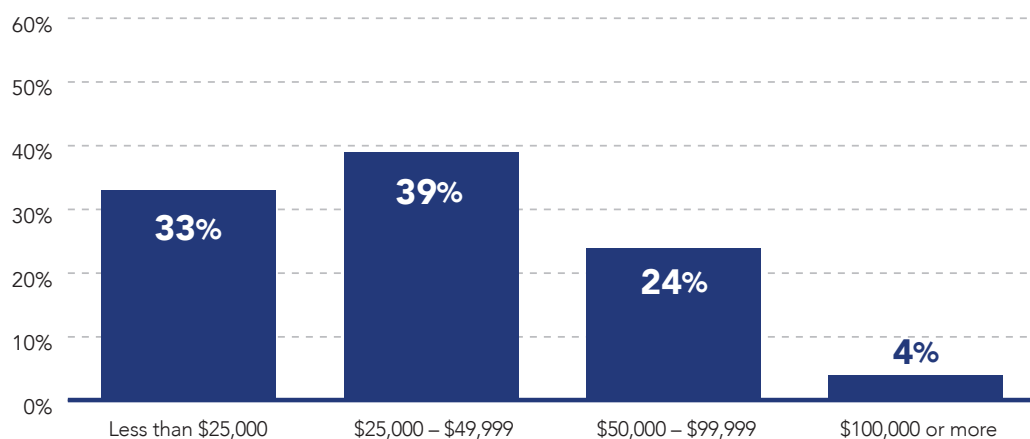
Employment of White Respondents (N=285)



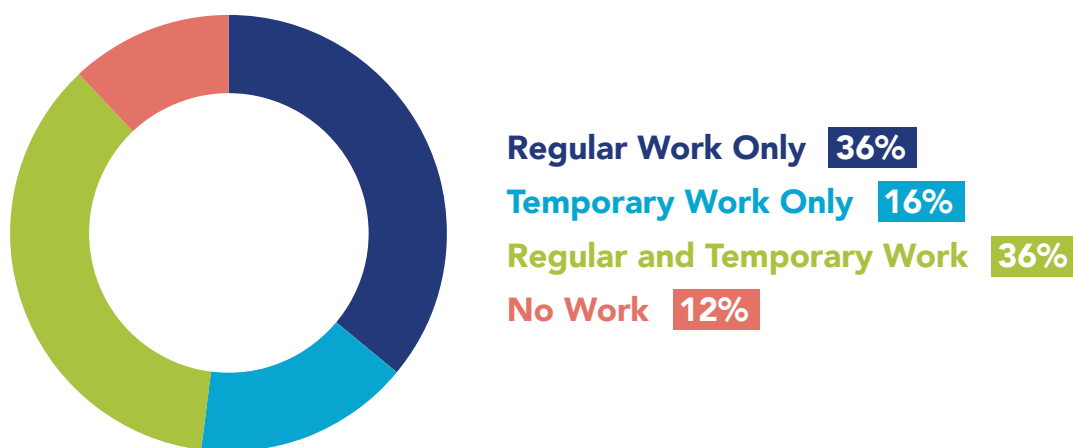


Respondents Who Identify as Black or African American

Annual Household Income – Black or African American Respondents (N=46)

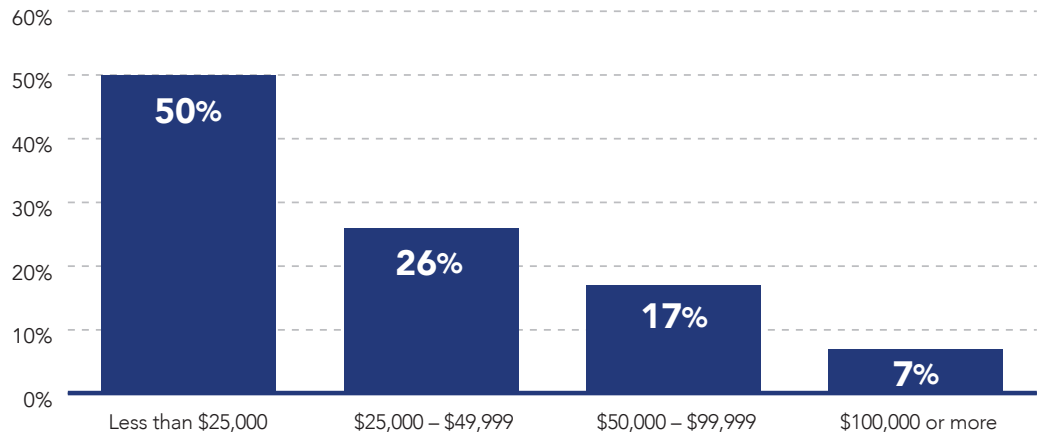


Employment of Black or African American Respondents (N=50)

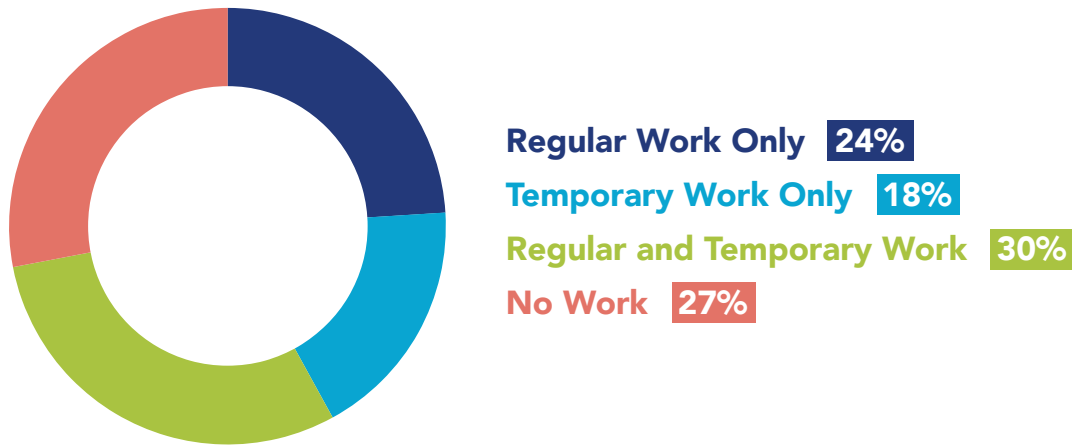


Respondents Who Identify as Hispanic/Latinx

Annual Household Income – Hispanic or Latinx Respondents (N=58)



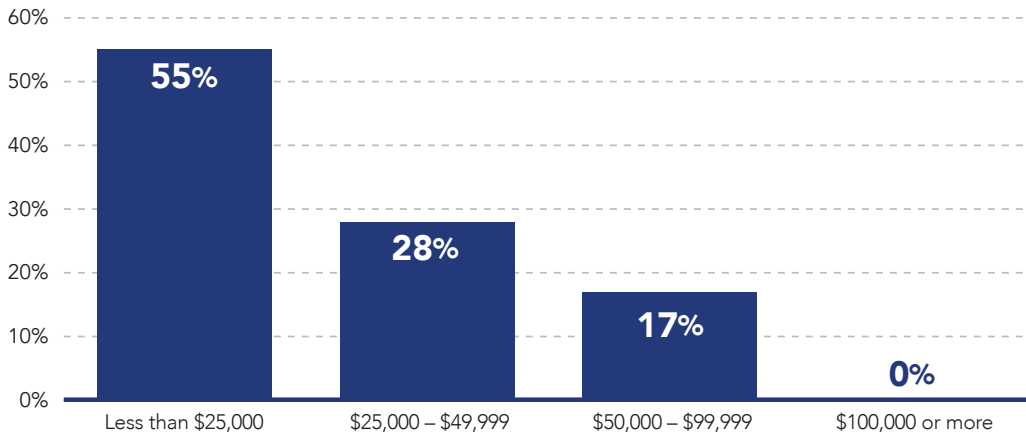
Employment of Hispanic or Latinx Respondents (N=66)



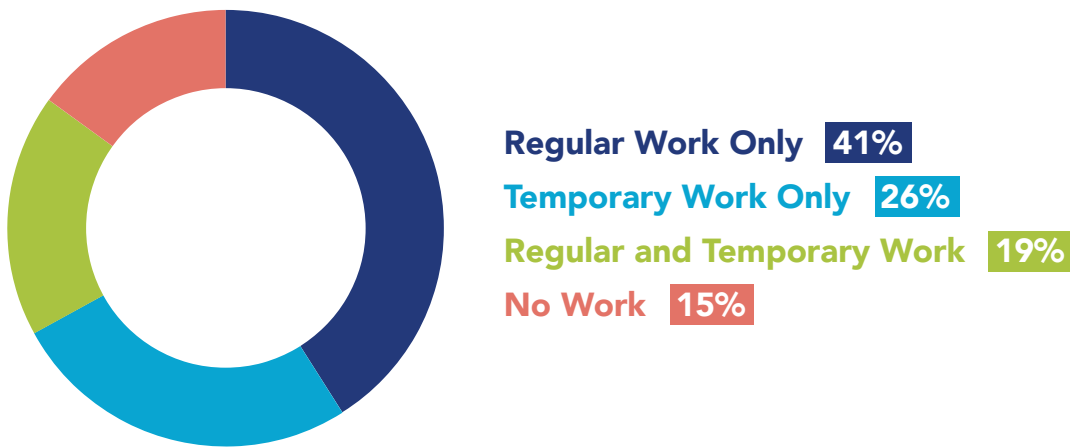


Respondents Who Identify as American Indian or Alaskan Native

Annual Household Income – American Indian or Alaskan Native Respondents (N=29)

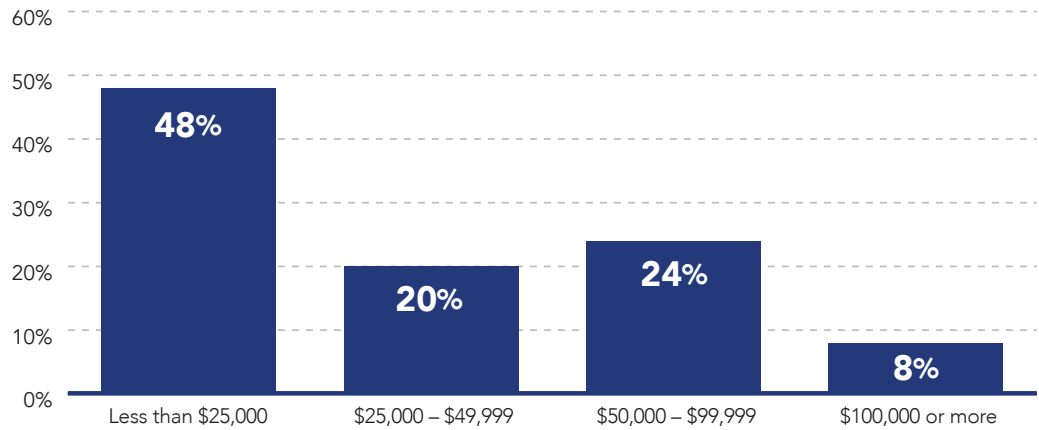


Employment of American Indian or Alaskan Native Respondents (N=27)

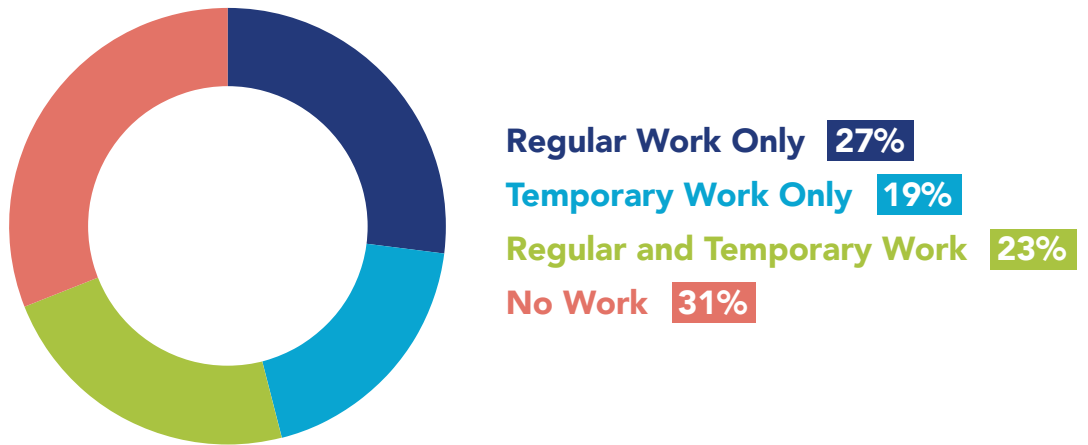


Respondents Who Identify as Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI)

Annual Household Income – AAPI Respondents (N=25)



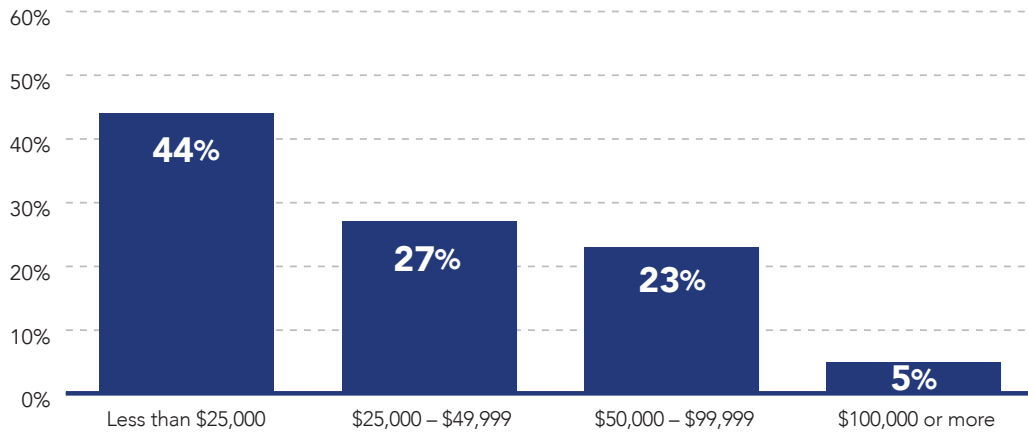
Employment of AAPI Respondents (N=26)



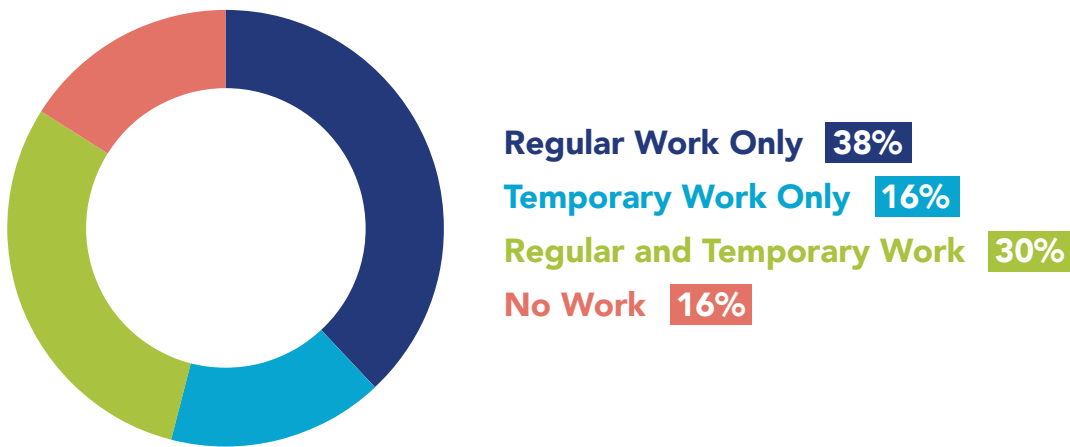


Female Respondents

Annual Household Income – Female Respondents (N=358)

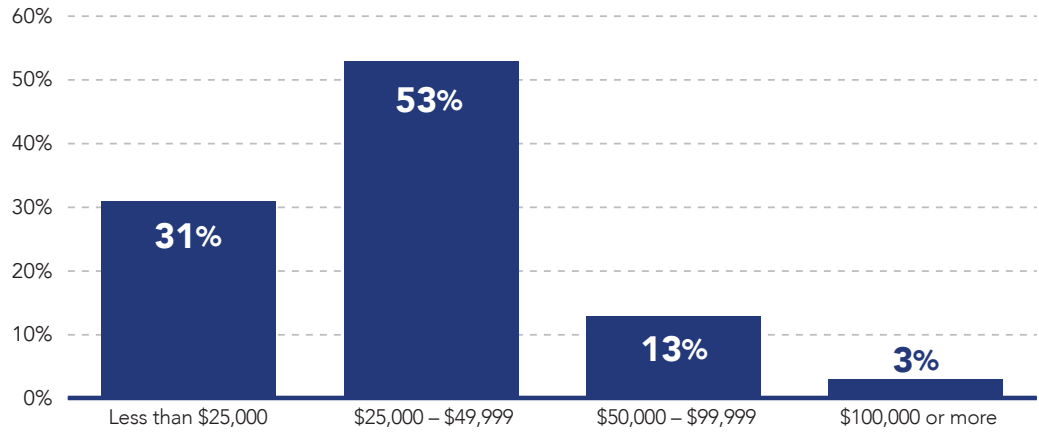


Employment of Female Respondents (N=374)

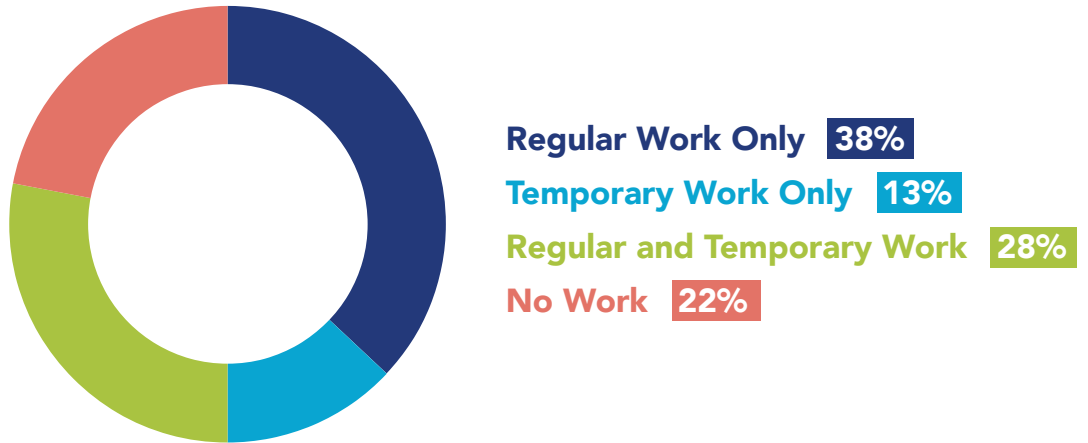


Male Respondents

Annual Household Income – Male Respondents (N=32)



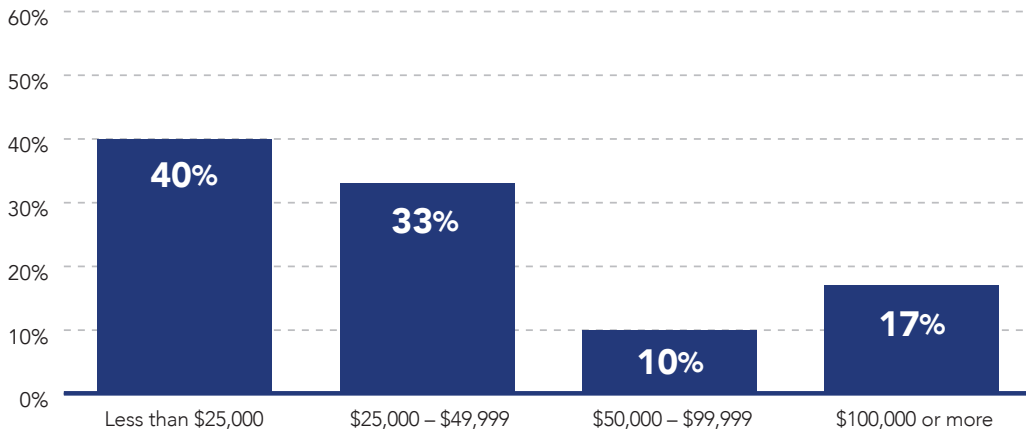
Employment of Male Respondents (N=32)



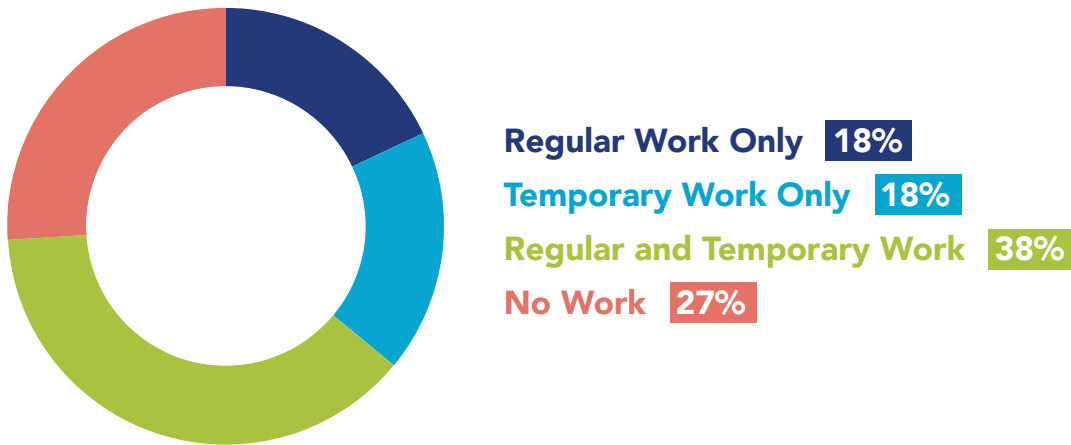


Respondents Who Identify as Gender Minority

Annual Household Income – Gender Minority Respondents (N=30)

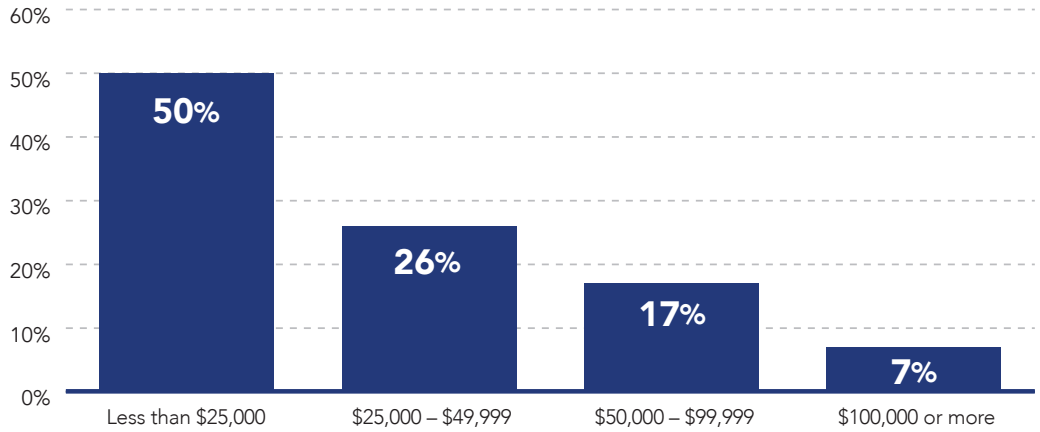


Employment of Gender Minority Respondents (N=34)

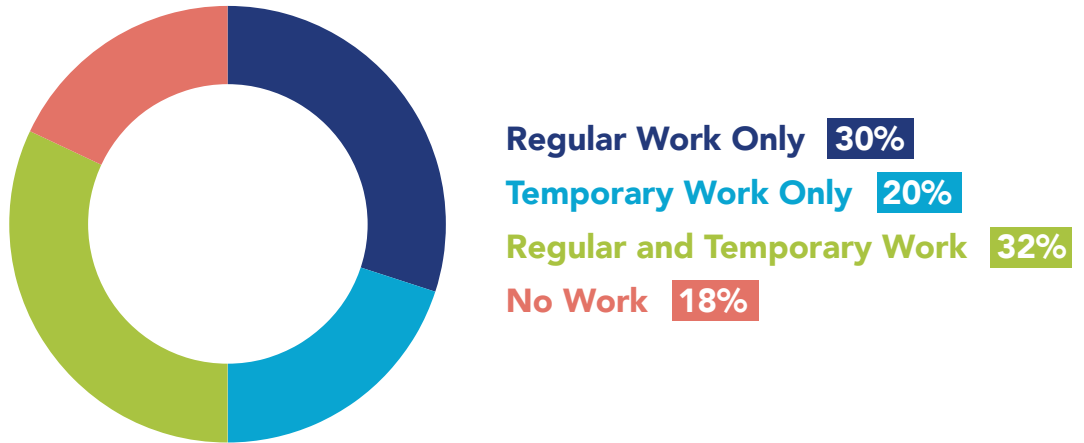


Respondents Who Identify as Sexual Minority

Annual Household Income – Sexual Minority Respondents (N=175)



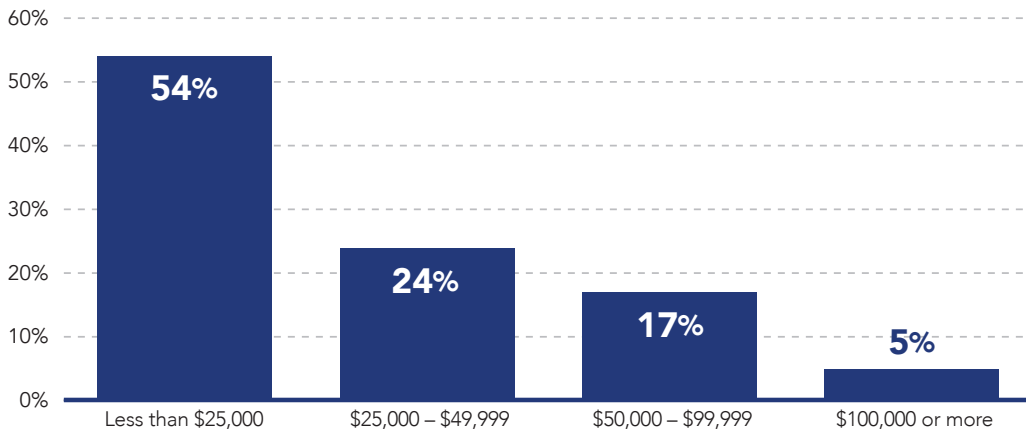
Employment of Sexual Minority Respondents (N=187)



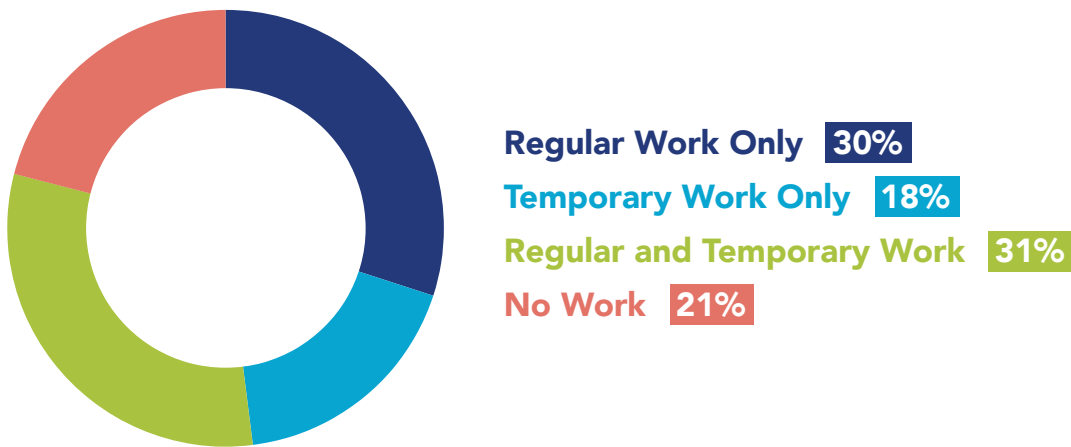


Respondents with Disabilities

Annual Household Income – Respondents With Disabilities (N=226)

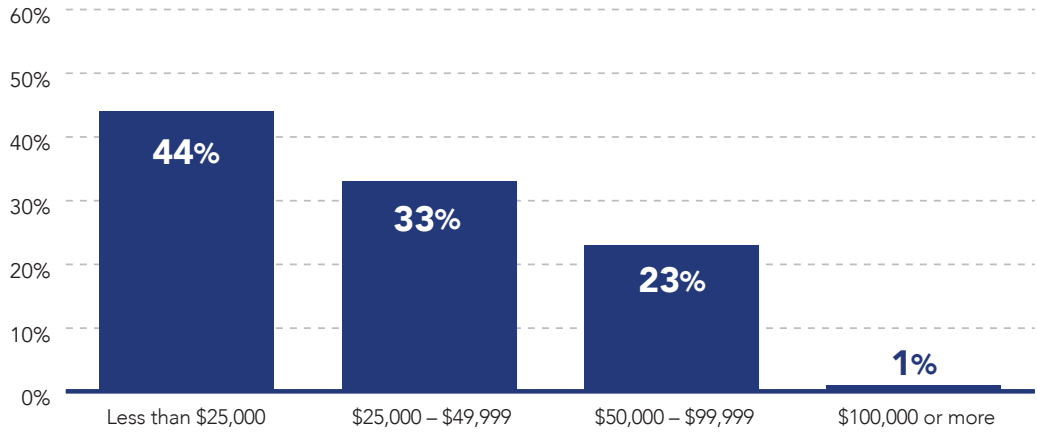


Employment of Respondents With Disabilities (N=235)

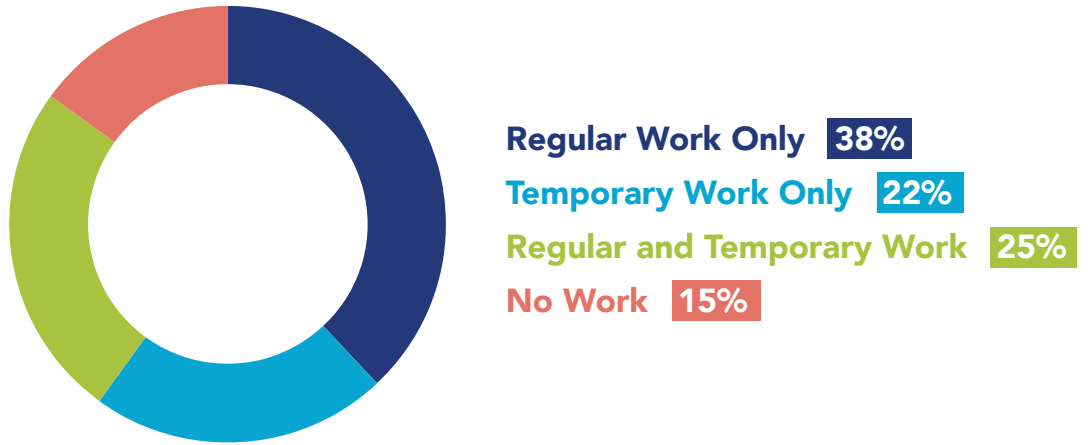


Respondents Living in Rural Locations

Annual Household Income – Rural Respondents (N=80)



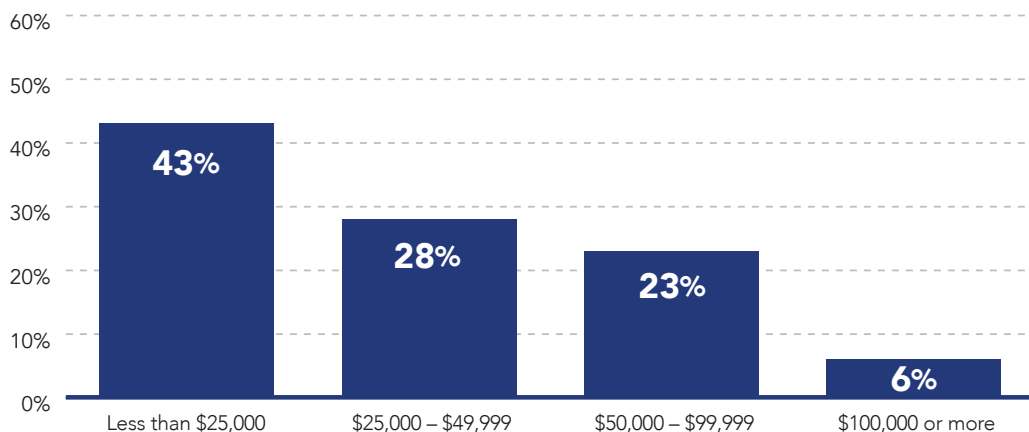
Employment of Rural Respondents (N=81)



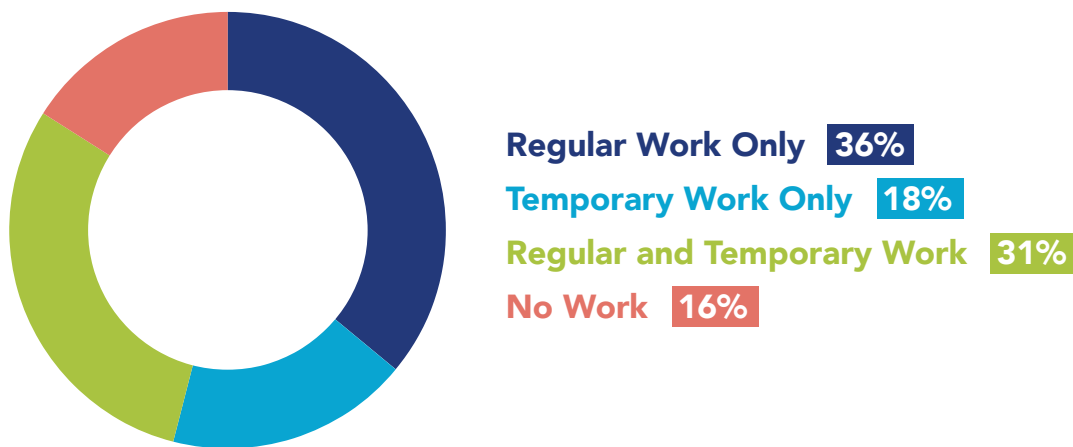


Respondents With Dependents

Annual Household Income – Respondents with Dependents (N=211)



Employment of Respondents With Dependents (N=216)



Acknowledgement of Study Contributors

Other Study Contributors

In addition to the team working on the NSS over the long term, others contributed to the study in numerous ways, including helping shape the study and the survey by sharing their expert feedback and/or lived experiences:

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Autumn Smith-Amy, Owner amy_ consulting and Alaska Relative and Kinship Providers
Autumn Vinton
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Brittany Elizabeth Parish
Brittany Mercedes Rodriguez
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Cheri Crider
Cherry Harrel
Chong Kim, Survivor & Author of Broken Silence
Chris Bates, overcomeexploitation.com
Christine Cesa, MAICS
Christopher Mullally
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Debbie Hickson
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Elizabeth (Lisa) Christo
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