



## Acknowledging Historical and Ongoing Harm: The Connections between Systemic Racism and Human Trafficking

In many ways, the United States and other governments face human trafficking challenges and trends today that reflect the living legacy of the systemic racism and colonization globalized during the transatlantic slave trade through chattel slavery and regional practices of indigenous dispossession. U.S. and global data show human traffickers disproportionately target those in positions of socioeconomic or political vulnerability due to discriminatory policies, who are often people of color or part of a racial minority. While U.S. efforts to combat human trafficking have grown in magnitude and sophistication over the years, the United States still struggles with how to address the disparate effects of human trafficking on racial minority communities. To be truly effective, a comprehensive approach to prosecution, protection, and—most of all—prevention must embed racial justice and equity across its policies and programs. The U.S. Department of State leads the U.S. government's global engagement to combat human trafficking and chairs the federal interagency anti-trafficking task force. As part of this work, it commits to engaging with its interagency, civil society, private sector, multilateral, and survivor leader partners to better understand systemic racism's effects on the human trafficking field and to integrate racial equity more intentionally into the U.S. anti-trafficking response.

Years of studies, data, and the direct knowledge of those with lived experience of human trafficking demonstrate that systemic racism undercuts the intended goals of prosecuting traffickers, protecting those victimized, and preventing human trafficking in significant ways. This body of information provides a strong foundation from which to learn. For instance, advocates, survivors, and other experts have found that ingrained racial biases and stereotypes, which were created as a way to dehumanize certain racial communities to justify their exploitation and exclusion, hinder progress in anti-trafficking efforts because they lead to racially disparate assumptions about who is a trafficker and who should have access to victim protection and services. These stereotypes may affect, for example, which communities law enforcement target for anti-trafficking operations, which victim witnesses the criminal justice system deems credible, and which individuals process their experiences as exploitation and seek help. Traffickers, in turn, factor these racial biases and stereotypes into schemes and strategies aimed at reducing their own risk of getting caught while increasing the risk of law enforcement improperly penalizing victims.

Another powerful way systemic racism has perpetuated human trafficking and hindered anti-trafficking efforts is through discriminatory government policies and private practices that create disparities in access to economic means or opportunities, which traffickers exploit to compel victims in sex trafficking or forced labor. Predatory and exclusionary practices that keep certain racial communities from attaining financial stability and building generational wealth provide traffickers ample opportunity to offer tempting alternatives. These harmful practices include redlining, lending discrimination, unequal distribution of government subsidies and services, restricted entry into white collar or higher paying jobs, and intentional exclusions of certain professions from worker protections.

The inequities created by systemic racism have survived in part because of the intentional destruction of certain racial groups' social support networks. Traffickers often seek out individuals with weaker community or family connections, knowing they have fewer safeguards. The chattel slavery system relied on the separation of family units during auctions and trading of enslaved people. It restricted where and how enslaved people could gather or socialize to weaken communal bonds to avoid a unified rebellion for freedom. This pattern of fracturing families and communities has led to an unjust overrepresentation of Black individuals in other systems, like prisons, runaway and homeless youth services,



and foster or institutional care, that exacerbate the social isolation and vulnerability on which traffickers prey. Similar family separation policies were used to weaken or destroy indigenous families and communities, including forcibly removing Native children from their families and tribes to send them to “boarding schools” with the intention of forcing them to assimilate and no longer identify with their culture. Such policies have resulted in an ongoing disproportionate number of Native children in the child welfare system, increasing their vulnerability to human trafficking.

These are only a few of the many manifestations of systemic racism that inhibit an effective anti-trafficking response. The following excerpts highlight the reflections of some who have directly experienced the ways in which systemic racism intersects with human trafficking in the United States and provide insight and guidance on how best to move forward.

*“It was only when I decided to escape my trafficker that I realized how pronounced racial injustice was in my community, particularly against human trafficking survivors with previous arrest records.... Human trafficking continues to be a critical threat to Black communities. We need better support that doesn’t criminalize survivors but protects our rights instead. Standing in solidarity with Black lives also means speaking up for the injustices plaguing Black communities that are overwhelmed with trafficking victims. First, we must understand the disparities that disproportionately affect Black trafficking survivors. Then, we must do a better job supporting survivors when they escape. Many victims struggle with a long list of criminal offenses that follow them for the rest of their lives.”*

**- Lyresh Magee,**

*Entrepreneur, Cosmotologist, Graduate from the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking (Cast), Los Angeles*

*“Racism has made Black trafficking survivors and other survivors of color feel invisible. It has exacerbated our isolation, increased our stress, and undermined our efforts to recover from trauma.... Survivors have known that the justice system is flawed: just ask the victims arrested and prosecuted for their traffickers’ crimes.”*

**- Fainess Lipenga,**

*Training Advisor to The Human Trafficking Legal Center*

*“We were sold for a certain amount of money for 30 minutes or an hour. Allow me to repeat myself: we were SOLD. In my case, being a person of color sold by a white person to other white people was painful on multiple levels. It wasn’t until my adult years that I was able to process how closely this aligned with racial oppression. I can’t compare one victim’s experience to another’s, but I will say that race can add an additional layer of oppression.”*

**- A survivor’s account,**

*as featured by Yvette Young, Bree’Ana Johnson, Christopher Bidorini, and Erin Williamson*

*“There are many jurisdictions that are predominantly White yet the most being exploited, arrested and children taken into custody are women of color. There is a big problem of Black and Brown bodies being treated differently from White bodies. It’s not that people of color do more drugs, are more engaged in criminal behavior, it’s that they are more vulnerable, more targeted by the police for prostitution and other crimes. There is a connection and a disparity from police profiling, arrest, incarceration rates, sentencing, and recidivism. When a White person goes missing, you hear about it every five minutes. In contrast, when Black and Brown bodies go missing you don’t hear about their disappearance anywhere near as often, if at all.”*

**- Autumn Burris,**

*Founding CEO, Survivors for Solutions, featured in ECPAT-USA’s “Survivor Perspective” blog series*

Building a just world, where traffickers can no longer capitalize on and abuse systemic inequities, requires addressing the underlying causes of those inequities by first acknowledging the structures of power and historical context behind unequal distribution of privilege and protection, including the government’s role. While the racial dimensions of human trafficking manifest in different ways in each country, human trafficking still mirrors—and thrives because of—widespread inequities between racial groups. This is seen, for example, in the overrepresentation of human trafficking victims among Black populations in some parts of South America, the lack of protections afforded to migrant workers in the Gulf that creates a dependence on others that traffickers can exploit, and the intentional targeting of Roma communities through law enforcement anti-trafficking operations in Eastern Europe. For the United States, this means confronting its history of chattel slavery, indigenous dispossession, and the centuries-long racial campaigns of violence, fear, and trauma that followed. As the United States strives to grapple with its past and increasingly root its anti-trafficking work in racial equity, it must also draw from the courage, expertise, and leadership of communities harmed by the interlocking cruelties of systemic racism and human trafficking. We invite other governments and global partners to join in this effort and hold each other accountable.

