

# Labor Trafficking in Construction and Hospitality

## Topical Brief

# Barriers to Help-Seeking

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## Study Rationale and Objective

Although law enforcement and community interest in human trafficking has increased tremendously since passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000, most anti-trafficking efforts by law enforcement and community-based organizations have focused on sex trafficking. Labor trafficking, when prioritized at all, is often conceptualized as a single phenomenon—the variation in industries in which labor trafficking occurs and the variation in victim experiences within these industries are sorely overlooked. The lack of sector-specific knowledge about labor trafficking victimization limits the extent to which law enforcement, regulatory agencies, health officials, and community-based advocates can identify and respond to this crime.

The objective of this study was to explore how the recruitment, control, concealment, and needs of labor trafficking victims vary across industries in two sectors: construction and hospitality (i.e., restaurants/bars and hotels/resorts). The study included primary data collection activities in four communities: Denver Metro Area, CO; Summit County, CO; Chicago Metro Area, IL; and New York Metro Area, NY.<sup>1</sup>

## Research Questions

- 1 Does labor trafficking victimization manifest itself differently in distinct industries?
- 2 What is the underlying supply chain structure of labor trafficking in the construction and hospitality sectors? Who are the actors and agencies involved?
- 3 Are there points throughout the stages of recruitment, control, and concealment of labor trafficking in these industries that could present opportunities for identification and intervention?

<sup>1</sup> We originally planned to focus only on Suffolk County; however, because we were unable to recruit a sufficient number of workers, we expanded the focus to all of the New York Metro area.

This brief provides an overview of key findings related to whether workers in these industries share or report their experiences of labor abuse and exploitation and how they seek help, if at all, as well as what barriers to help-seeking they experience.

## Study Design

This brief draws on three primary sources of data: (1) a survey of 476 workers who had worked in the hospitality and construction industries in the previous 24 months; (2) interviews with 20 workers whose survey responses indicated that they had experienced at least 10 forms of labor abuse or exploitation; and (3) interviews with 22 experts who worked across community or worker organizing, social and legal services, and other organizations engaged in the prevention of or response to labor trafficking in these industries.



For more information on the survey and interview methods used in this study, please see the study's Final Report, available [here](#).



**Overwhelmingly, workers who experienced abuse or exploitation in the workplace did not tell anyone about or seek help after their mistreatment.**

## How often do workers seek help after experiencing abuse or exploitation in the workplace?

Almost all (98%) survey respondents reported having experienced at least one incident of workplace abuse or exploitation in the construction or hospitality industries. On average, workers reported having experienced 12 forms of abuse or exploitation.

Of all construction and hospitality workers who participated in the survey, only 28.5% ever told anyone about or sought help for experiences with workplace abuse or exploitation. Among those who did seek help, there were differences by industry. Hospitality workers were slightly more likely to report, or seek help after experiencing, workplace mistreatment. Almost one-third (32.4%) did so. By contrast, only about one-quarter (25.7%) of construction workers did.



**28.5%**

of all surveyed workers  
ever told anyone or  
sought help



**25.7%**

of construction  
workers ever told  
anyone or sought help

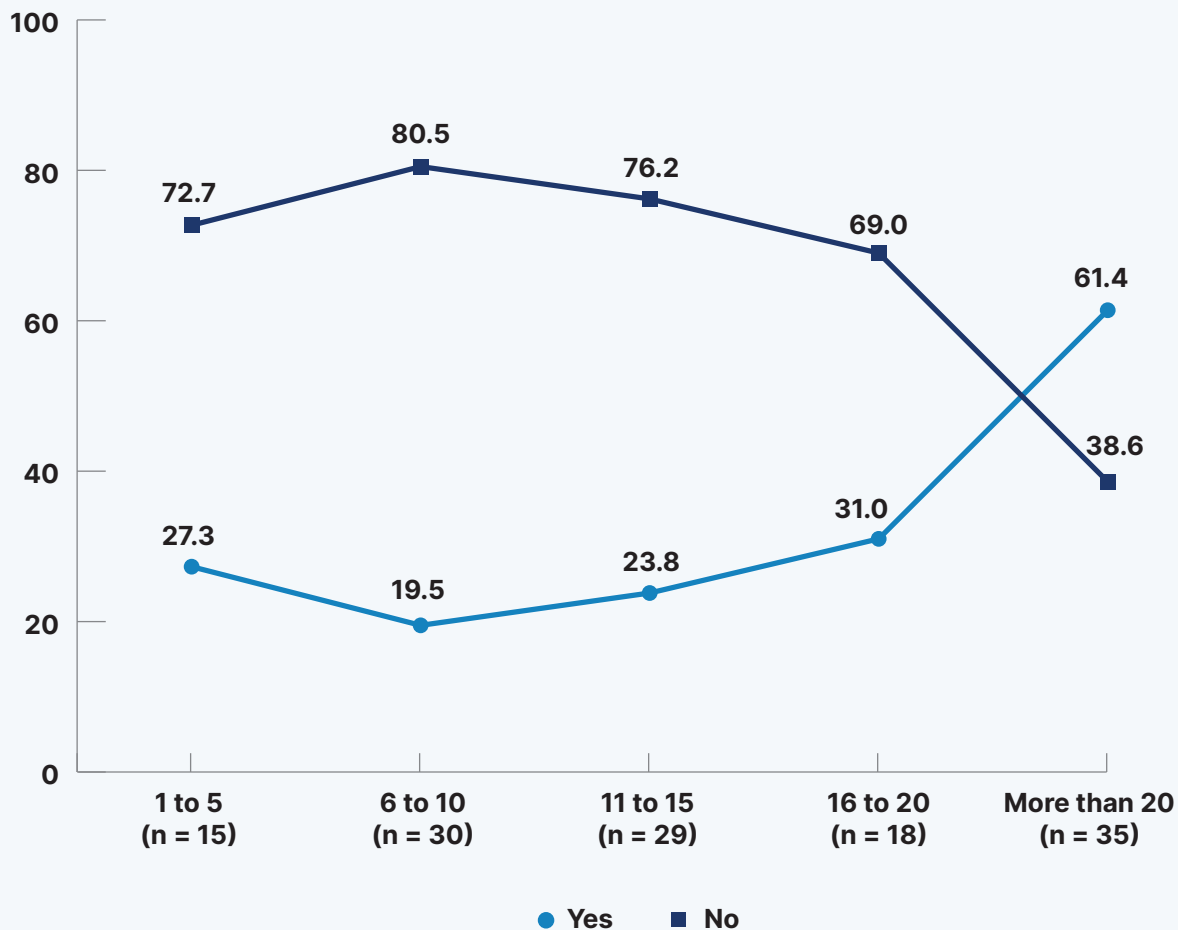


**32.4%**

of hospitality workers  
ever told anyone or  
sought help

Generally, survey respondents who experienced fewer types of abuse or exploitation in the workplace were less likely to tell anyone about their experience or seek help (**Exhibit 1**). Among those who had experienced 1–5 types of abuse or exploitation (n = 15), only 27.3% reported it to anyone or asked for help. However, among respondents who had experienced more than 20 types of abuse or exploitation (n = 35), 61.4% said that they had reported their experience or sought help. Among the survey respondents, there is a high tolerance for experiencing abusive workplace conditions up to a certain extent, at which point individuals seem to want to share their experiences or seek help.

**EXHIBIT 1.**  
**Percentage of Workers Who Disclosed or Sought Help, by Number of Types of Abuse Experienced**



## Seeking help: Whom do workers turn to for help after experiencing workplace abuse or exploitation?

Though workers were more likely not to tell anyone about their experiences with workplace abuses or exploitation, 127 survey respondents (28.5%) indicated that they did tell someone about or seek help for any of the situations they reported on the survey (**Exhibit 2**).

Those who did turn to others for help were more likely to seek informal sources of help, such as relatives, friends, or co-workers. More than half of respondents who did disclose their experience or seek help conferred with friends (52.8%), and almost a third of respondents disclosed to co-workers (30.7%) or relatives (29.1%).

### EXHIBIT 2. Help-Seeking, by Industry Worked

Characteristic	Full Sample (%)	Construction (%)	Hospitality (%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>446 (100.0)</b>	<b>258 (100.0)</b>	<b>249 (100.0)</b>
<b>Ever told anyone about or sought help for any of the situations reported</b>			
Yes	127 (28.5)	63 (25.7)	77 (32.4)
No	319 (71.5)	182 (74.3)	161 (67.6)
<b>If sought help, who did you tell?</b>			
Relative	37 (29.1)	19 (30.2)	24 (31.2)
Friend	67 (52.8)	37 (58.7)	39 (50.6)
Co-worker	39 (30.7)	16 (25.4)	29 (37.7)
Service provider, counselor, or lawyer	21 (16.5)	3 (4.8)	20 (26.0)
Police officer	8 (6.3)	6 (9.5)	3 (3.9)
Neighbor	4 (3.2)	2 (3.2)	3 (3.9)
Stranger	3 (2.4)	1 (1.6)	1 (1.3)
Other	14 (11.0)	4 (6.3)	13 (16.9)

Interviews with workers provide additional context about their rationale for sharing these experiences with informal support systems, especially family members. One worker described discussing his exploitative situation at work with his family members in order to get their support to leave the job:

**Interviewer:** Did you tell a friend or family member or someone else about your situation, or did you not say anything to anyone?

**Respondent:** No, yes. I told my family. I told them what that lady was like with me. And that, obviously, I wanted to look for another job because I didn't want to stay at that job, where they mistreated me.

**Interviewer:** And what did your family members tell you?

**Respondent:** No, that it's okay for me to quit the job, that if I'm not okay at a job that I get out of there. (Hospitality Worker, New York)



One worker described avoiding talking to his family and co-workers about his experiences with workplace abuse because it would be too burdensome for them to deal with:

**Interviewer:** Do you ever speak to, like, a service provider or professional about your experience?

**Respondent:** I just I talked to, like, certain people in my family about that, you know, and I still talk to a couple of guys. I know they're still... mad and upset about it. You know. They [are] carrying that too, I don't know.... They [are] just carrying that. It's tearing them up. So and I try not to bring it up. (Construction Worker, Chicago)

Only a small number of survey respondents reported seeking support from formal sources of help. Twenty-one respondents (or 16.5% of those who reported seeking any help) indicated that they sought help from a service provider, counselor, or lawyer. Only 8 respondents (or 6.3% of those who reported seeking any help) indicated that they turned to law enforcement for help. Of the 20 workers interviewed for this project, none described seeking help through authorities such as law enforcement, labor inspectors, or government workers.

## Barriers to Help-Seeking

Interview respondents provide helpful insights into the patterns of help-seeking reported through our survey. In particular, interview respondents describe some of the barriers to help-seeking, which fall into two main categories: (1) fear and (2) lack of understanding.

Workers face several types of fears around reporting workplace victimization, particularly to law enforcement or other authorities. One worker described a culture that discouraged talking to anyone about what was happening in the workplace due to threats, saying, “You can’t talk to nobody. You can’t talk to nobody. You know, or you will get threatened. You can’t talk to nobody” (Construction Worker, Chicago). Another worker described their fear of reporting their victimization to law enforcement because of their immigration status:

*No, no, no, I never tried, well, to go and complain anywhere because, well, when you’re here illegal in this country, because you say—no, I can’t go, they won’t believe me, right? No, you don’t dare, then. (Hospitality Worker, Summit)*

Another worker believed that the police would not be able to do anything to respond to workplace victimization.

*I don’t know that the police [can do] anything. Don’t get involved. And I don’t know that they would get involved in something like that. I mean, if there’s violence involved, sure. If somebody gets robbed by gunpoint, of course, but not because I’m getting exploited at work. (Construction Worker, New York)*

In addition to these fears, interviews also described a lack of understanding about how to seek help or recourse for the exploitation they faced at work. One interviewee described the practical challenge of not having enough information about the employer or any proof of their exploitation.

*I didn’t know whether to report.... Remembering their face again is going to be a bit impossible.... I don’t know how to file a complaint against a person.... I don’t know, neither the name nor anything. If we had the name or address..., I could make the complaint..., but without knowing them..., it’s like reporting someone who practically doesn’t exist. (Hospitality Worker, New York)*

Another interviewee described a similar challenge, as they had no documented evidence of their employment agreement or any other details of their work.

*I’ve always thought to do these things, to do those things [report]. But... I no longer have proof, or nobody is willing to give you a email detailing anything like that. So, I was kind of, like, stuck. (Hospitality and Construction Worker, New York)*

Last, some workers explained that they didn’t report because they didn’t understand their rights in this country or their reporting options.

*I didn’t know how I should have reacted. I didn’t have legal advice. A person to tell me, “If you’re treated badly... you can, uh, sue.” Not me.... I didn’t know anything about that. And much more so now that I am an immigrant.... I said, “Well, maybe the police will deport me if I complain.” Then I was a little afraid of... a complaint. (Hospitality Worker, New York)*



## Key Takeaways Related to Worker Help-Seeking

- Among surveyed workers, those who had experienced a significant number of types of abuse and exploitation were more likely to disclose their experiences or seek help. Still, only 28.5% of workers who had experienced any workplace abuses ever disclosed it or sought help.
- Workers are much more likely to disclose their experiences to friends, family, and co-workers than to formal sources of help.
- Barriers to help-seeking include fear of law enforcement, fear of deportation, lack of evidence about the mistreatment they faced at work, and a lack of understanding of worker rights and options for reporting workplace exploitation.

