



Advancing the field: Human trafficking and natural disasters

Recommendations for the Louisiana Human Trafficking Prevention Commission and Advisory Board

Prepared for

**Louisiana Human Trafficking Prevention
Commission and Advisory Board**

C/O Louisiana Governor's Office of Human
Trafficking Prevention
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Overview

Natural disasters can cause long-lasting, catastrophic damage and trauma to people and their families, homes, and communities. Flooded roads, downed powerlines and trees, evacuations, and reduced access to crucial resources can leave survivors isolated and/or homeless as responders attempt to restore safe conditions and provide aid. These unstable environments may incentivize predatory behavior as those impacted by disasters may engage in risky survival strategies, increasing the pool of potential human trafficking victims.

There's increasing discussion and understanding of the risks of both human trafficking and of natural disasters in the United States, but very little discussion of the intersection. What little research does exist focuses on response in the international space in developing countries. To address this gap, RTI International conducted a study aiming to fill this gap through an exploration of disaster relief and human trafficking response personnel experiences within the context of disaster-prone areas like Louisiana. From this study, RTI developed this report to share recommendations for Louisiana-based responders to improve response to trafficking after natural disasters.

Research project

To better understand the nexus between human trafficking and disasters, researchers from RTI International conducted a series of interviews with disaster responders and social service providers. These interviews explored local experiences and knowledge about the intersection of human trafficking and hurricanes. RTI conducted 31 semi-structured qualitative group and individual interviews with key stakeholder organizations responding to human trafficking cases and/or natural disasters in Louisiana. There were 46 individuals who participated in interviews for this study.

Data collection consisted of interviews with both anti-trafficking and disaster preparation and response professionals who work in or near areas that were impacted by these hurricanes. The interviews focused on the participant's professional background, community context, collaboration with other agencies and organizations, disaster-specific preparation and response, and how major hurricanes may have impacted the level and type of exploitation that is occurring in the community.



Learn more

Learn more about this research project at www.rti.org/impact/human-trafficking-wake-natural-disasters

From this research, RTI has produced the following:

- Human trafficking and natural disasters scoping (literature) review (*publication in a peer-reviewed journal forthcoming*)

- Human trafficking and natural disasters case study paper (*publication in a peer-reviewed journal forthcoming*)
- Human trafficking of resilience workers paper (*forthcoming*)
- Presentation on preliminary findings to the Louisiana Human Trafficking Prevention Commission and Advisory Board on August 17th, 2023
- Human Trafficking & Natural Disasters: Louisiana Findings: Prevention (see Appendix A)
- Human Trafficking & Natural Disasters: Louisiana Findings: Response (see Appendix B)
- Human Trafficking & Natural Disasters: Louisiana Findings: Resources (*forthcoming*)

The final product is this report, which outlines recommendations for Louisiana-based responders to improve response to trafficking after natural disasters.

Intended application of these recommendations

This document is a compilation of research findings and recommendations for Louisiana anti-trafficking and disaster response professionals. These recommendations represent the key findings from this research that can be broadly applied in Louisiana to improve anti-trafficking response after natural disasters. Though not strictly legislative in nature, all these recommendations have potential legislative implications and opportunities. The authors of this report encourage committee chairs and members of the Human Trafficking Prevention Commission and Advisory Board to review this report to consider legislative changes or recommendations that could be made to advance anti-trafficking work in post-disaster settings.

Summary of findings

The following are the five key recommendations outlined in this report:

1. Build partnerships between disaster response and human trafficking response organizations.
2. Increase protections for workers rebuilding after the disaster.
3. Bolster disaster resilience and disaster preparedness capacity of human trafficking responders.
4. Expand outreach and programming for children in post-disaster settings.
5. Mitigate community vulnerabilities related to homelessness and housing instability.

Though there is limited research in the peer-reviewed literature about human trafficking and natural disasters in the United States, there are experts in the field who hold knowledge that could positively impacted the field. The recommendations outlined in this report represent opportunities for growth and development that could advance anti-trafficking work in disaster contexts. Louisiana is uniquely positioned to lead on this topic because of its geography on the edge of climate change, sea rise, and increasing severity of natural disasters, and also because of the advanced worked experts responding to human trafficking in the state.

Recommendations

Each recommendation includes background information, a quote from a respondent in the case study, and potential activities for the future to address that recommendation.

1. Build partnerships between disaster response and human trafficking response agencies.

Multi-disciplinary collaboration to respond to trafficking is especially important in post-disaster contexts. However, respondents believed that this collaboration must start before a major event for it to be effective in the aftermath of a storm. Interviewees noted that the rate at which their multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs) reconvened following a disaster had a major impact on their ability to respond to suspected trafficking cases.

Participants also noted how important collaboration between disaster responders and human trafficking responders are. For example, after one disaster response agency identified several cases of labor trafficking, they connected with a state trafficking response office to consider ways to improve services for foreign national victims of human trafficking. This led to important policy changes and an ongoing relationship between the agencies.



"Build those relationships way before any [disasters] happen. Because if that is done, then you can do a lot of work during the difficult times."

—Human trafficking responder

Ideas for the future

Potential activities to address this recommendation include the following:

- Assign dedicated personnel to investigate and respond to trafficking cases in the post storm context.
- Sign and implement Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) for human trafficking multi-disciplinary collaboration.
- Build and strengthen cross-disciplinary partnerships of organizations that may encounter victims of human trafficking.
- Formally integrate anti-trafficking professionals and other violence response professionals (e.g., child abuse, domestic violence, sexual violence) into disaster response cooperative efforts.

2. Increase protections for workers rebuilding after the disaster.

Workers are particularly vulnerable to abuse after disasters because of enforcement challenges, isolation, and limited resources. The workers who help with rebuilding a community after a storm, known as resilience force workers, are particularly vulnerable to labor exploitation after disasters. Wage theft, withholding passports, threatening deportation, violence, and non-payment were just a few examples of the abuse that practitioners saw after Hurricanes Laura and Ida.

In Louisiana, these workers often are from Central America and South America but are generally employed by Louisianians, Texans, and Americans from other states. For example, one case currently in litigation is *Ortiguerra v. Grand Isle Shipyard*.¹ This class action lawsuit alleges that Filipino B-1 guestworker visa holders were brought to Galliano, Louisiana to repair oil rigs in the Gulf. They were not allowed to leave, escorted to do anything offsite, and threatened when they asked for better conditions. During Hurricane Ida, while other workers were evacuated, they were required to stay in the bunkhouse during the storm. They were compelled to do disaster resilience work and lived in unfit conditions in an abandoned bowling alley after the storm. This case represents a type of exploitation that interview participants recognized was commonplace after hurricanes.



"We had several labor trafficking cases [after Ida]... they weren't getting paid, and they didn't have any recourse because they had been threatened that they would get deported."

—Disaster responder

Ideas for the future

Potential activities to address this recommendation include the following:

- Provide language accessible “know-your-rights” and worker rights training campaigns to reach both US citizens and foreign national workers.
- Partner with agencies already engaging with workers, such as worker centers and immigration rights groups, to learn more about worker rights and needs.
- Consider state-level policy changes to that increase workers’ rights, protection, and worker safety in disaster resilience work.
- Establish state guidelines that ban the use of labor trafficking on government contracts.

¹ *Ortiguerra v. Grand Isle Shipyard, LLC*, Civil Action 22-309 (E.D. La. Sep. 23, 2022).

3. Bolster disaster resilience and disaster preparedness capacity of human trafficking responders.

While not directly tied to the mission of anti-trafficking efforts, participants shared that organizational disaster preparedness efforts had a direct correlation with their relative resiliency or challenges after a natural disaster. While flexibility and adaptability were identified as critical components of success, many respondents noted that preparation in terms of formal policies and procedures were necessary to maintain anti-trafficking efforts in disaster contexts.

Participants also noted that the longer agencies took to return to work, the more that potential victims ‘fell through the cracks’ or were susceptible to human trafficking. Several participants reflected on the lack of established processes to get ‘back to work’ after the storm which led to monthslong delays resuming anti-trafficking investigations, MDTs, and outreach efforts.

Ideas for the future

Potential activities to address this recommendation include the following:

- Establish and update disaster preparedness policies and procedures within anti-trafficking organizations.
- Review existing protocols and collaborative agreements to ensure continuity of cross-disciplinary activities after disasters.
- Provide disaster resilience and disruption mitigation training and support to anti-trafficking organizations.



“The longer it takes for agencies to get back together, the more that people can fall through the cracks.”

—Human trafficking responder

4. Expand outreach and programming for children in post-disaster settings.

Children are highly vulnerable to human trafficking after natural disasters. Experts noted that familial trafficking can increase after natural disasters because of a variety of factors. Surprisingly, respondents primarily shared cases of familial trafficking in post-disaster settings. However, children may also be more likely to be enticed by strangers or acquaintances offering them a better living situation.

Additionally, respondents noted that children are isolated from safe places to disclose abuse in the disaster aftermath. Many shared that it was difficult for children to get support after disasters because normal outlets like schools and extracurricular activities, where they might be able to tell a safe adult what is happening to them, were no longer available.



“It was a difficult time, you know, trying to ensure kids could talk about what was happening and then reassuring them that they would be safe knowing that sometimes the abuser was in the home with them.”

—Human trafficking responder

Ideas for the future

Potential activities to address this recommendation include the following:

- Increase outreach and engagement with children living in disaster-impacted communities.
- Design age-appropriate, developmentally appropriate human trafficking prevention curricula for children impacted by disasters.
- Integrate home visits and in-person engagement with children into post-disaster programming and services.
- Establish policies and procedures for locating and engaging with system-involved youth expeditiously in post-disaster settings.

5. Mitigate community vulnerabilities related to homelessness and housing instability in post-disaster settings.

Louisiana's natural disasters often impact housing resources after a storm. Damage and destruction of existing structures, coupled with a high number of resilience force workers entering the housing market, housing instability becomes a critical vulnerability for community members.

Traffickers may try to take advantage of impacted community members seeking shelter. Several respondents discussed cases of human trafficking that stemmed from victims being homeless and unsuspectingly turning to traffickers for help.

Additionally, employers who are abusing or trafficking workers may use employer-managed housing as a means of controlling their victims. Respondents described cases of workers living in sub-standard and unsafe living conditions and being threatened if they asked for decent living conditions.



"All of the hotels are damaged. All of the apartment complexes are heavily damaged. So those are no longer housing options."

—Disaster responder

Ideas for the future

Potential activities to address this recommendation include the following:

- Consider policy changes to regulate rent prices and housing access for displaced residents after a natural disaster.
- Regulate and inspect employer-operated housing for workers, particularly those on guestworker visa programs.
- Train congregate shelter and emergency shelter staff to spot the signs of human trafficking.
- Establish a human trafficking prevention outreach campaign targeted at impacted residents and resilience workers seeking housing after natural disasters.

Implications

One of the key findings from this research project was the incredible wealth of knowledge that Louisiana practitioners held about this disaster response. The lessons from the past, from major storms like Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita, to more recent events like the 2016 floods in Baton Rouge or the ice storm in 2021, were present in all our interviews with responders. Though there is limited research in the peer-reviewed literature about human trafficking and natural disasters in the United States, there are experts in the field who hold knowledge that could positively impact the field.

The recommendations outlined in this report represent opportunities for growth and development that could advance anti-trafficking work in disaster contexts. Louisiana is uniquely positioned to lead on the topic of natural disaster response because of its geography on the edge of climate change, sea rise, and increasing severity of natural disasters. Additionally, Louisiana can lead the country in this disaster-trafficking intersection because of its robust anti-trafficking response and advanced disaster response and resilience field. Resources like the “Human Trafficking and Natural Disasters Outreach Toolkit”² are examples of the ingenuity of responders in Louisiana.

Contact information

To learn more about this report or the broader RTI human trafficking and natural disaster project, visit the project webpage or contact the project leads, Dr. Kelle Barrick.



“The lesson learned is, to beforehand, do my homework. Study the data. Study the community... it can help you out a lot as far as with the problem solving and in helping assist those communities.”

—human trafficking responder



“I’ve been with this agency for almost 17 years now. And my goodness, even with emergency preparedness we’ve grown so much... but each year it feels like there’s something new. Right now [sic] we’re being educated and on human trafficking and that intersection between natural disasters... We need to grow and make changes so we can better keep these families safe.”

—Disaster responder

² Human Trafficking Prevention Resource Center of Louisiana, “Louisiana Natural Disasters and Human Trafficking Outreach Toolkit”, September 2022, <https://humantrafficking.la.gov/resources/disasters/>

Appendix A: Human Trafficking & Natural Disasters: Louisiana findings. Prevention

HUMAN TRAFFICKING & NATURAL DISASTERS: LOUISIANA FINDINGS

PREVENTION



To better understand the nexus between human trafficking and disasters, researchers from RTI International conducted a series of interviews with disaster responders and social service providers. These interviews explored local experiences and knowledge about the intersection of human trafficking and hurricanes.

This document is a compilation of findings, interview quotes, emergent practices from Louisiana respondents and promising practices identified in the literature at large. This sheet focuses on key takeaways about human trafficking prevention in the wake of natural disasters.



WORKER PROTECTION

"We had several labor trafficking cases [after Ida]... they weren't getting paid, and they didn't have any recourse because they had been threatened that they would get deported."

The workers who help with rebuilding a community after a storm, known as resilience force workers, are highly vulnerable to labor exploitation after disasters. In Louisiana, these workers often are from Central America and South America but are generally employed by Louisianians, Texans, and Americans from other states. Wage theft, withholding passports, threatening deportation, violence, and non-payment were just a few examples of the abuse that practitioners had seen after Hurricanes Laura and Ida.

Ideas for the future: Engage with resilience workers by providing "know-your-rights" training; Partner with agencies already engaging with workers to learn more about worker rights and needs; Consider policy changes to that support workers' rights and worker safety in disaster resilience work.



COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Many people do not realize that human trafficking can happen after a natural disaster. To address this gap, practitioners in this study named **community outreach and awareness activities as a critical step to prevent trafficking**. Although anyone can experience trafficking, vulnerable populations are at a greater risk and may need extra considerations or resources during outreach activities.

Ideas for the future: Integrate language accessibility into any outreach activities; Offer free trainings at churches, community centers, and on social media to reach a variety of audiences; establish outreach programs to engage children in disaster impacted communities.

Promising Practice: Check out the [Louisiana Human Trafficking and Natural Disaster Outreach Toolkit](#) for resources to share with your community members.



LESSONS FROM THE PAST

"The lesson learned is, to beforehand, do my homework. Study the data. Study the community... it can help you out a lot as far as with the problem solving and in helping assist those communities."

Many practitioners shared lessons they had learned from past storms, such as Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Rita, that helped them improve their response during more recent hurricanes. This practice of reflecting on past storms and applying lessons learned to update policies, procedures, practices, and laws is critical to effectively responding to human trafficking following a natural disaster. Being flexible and utilizing survivor-centered approaches were just a few of the lessons practitioners shared that they had incorporated into their response for Laura and Ida.

Ideas for the future: Host a convening to share lessons learned and document the changes that are needed to improve trafficking response following future disasters; Engage with impacted community members and survivors to learn what they believe worked well and needs improvement in the future.



Appendix B: Human Trafficking & Natural Disasters: Louisiana findings. Response

HUMAN TRAFFICKING
& NATURAL DISASTERS:
LOUISIANA FINDINGS

RESPONSE



To better understand the nexus between human trafficking and disasters, researchers from RTI International conducted a series of interviews with disaster responders and social service providers.

This document is a compilation of research findings, interview quotes, emergent practices from Louisiana respondents and promising practices identified in the literature at large. It also infuses promising practices identified in the literature at large. This sheet focuses on key takeaways about human trafficking **response in the wake of natural disasters.**



FOSTER COLLABORATION

"Build those relationships way before any [disasters] happen. Because if that is done, then you can do a lot of work during the difficult times."

Multi-disciplinary collaboration to respond to trafficking is especially important in post-disaster contexts. Interviewees noted that the rate at which their multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs) reconvened following a disaster had a major impact on their ability to respond to suspected trafficking cases.

Ideas for the future: Assign dedicated personnel at your organization to investigate and respond to trafficking cases in the post storm context; Sign and implement Memoranda of Understanding for human trafficking MDTs; Build and strengthen cross-disciplinary partnerships of organizations that may come into contact with victims of human trafficking.



UPDATING POLICIES & PROCEDURES

Policies and procedures are tools to assist organizations to maintain efforts in difficult conditions such as post-disaster settings. While flexibility and adaptability were identified as critical components of success, many respondents noted that preparation in terms of formal policies and procedures were necessary to maintain anti-trafficking efforts in disaster contexts.

Ideas for the future: Review existing policies and protocols; Update disaster policies and procedures to ensure specific anti-trafficking efforts can be resumed immediately following a disaster.



INCREASING HOUSING ACCESSIBILITY

"All of the hotels are damaged. All of the apartment complex are heavily damaged. So those are no longer housing options."

Louisiana's natural disasters often impact housing resources after a storm. Damage and destruction of existing structures, coupled with a high number of resilience force workers entering the housing market, housing instability becomes a critical vulnerability for community members. Traffickers may try to take advantage of impacted community members seeking shelter.

Ideas for the future: Consider policy changes to regulate rent prices after a storm; Regulate and inspect employer-operated housing for resilience workforce members; train congregate shelter staff to spot the signs of human trafficking.