People experiencing human trafficking may not self-identify as victims. They will sometimes stay in dangerous or exploitative conditions because it is the best survival mechanism, economic opportunity, or logical option for them, or they may be unaware of their legal and civil rights.

Lack of trust, self-blame, and bad previous experiences with service providers and law enforcement may also contribute to survivors’ choices not to disclose their experiences of trafficking.

The “savior mentality” can be very harmful to people who experience trafficking because it erases their power and autonomy. Individuals who experience trafficking face a variety of circumstances. While some may desire assistance from outside forces, others do not. All survivors must play an active role in their own escape or departure from trafficking conditions.

Though sex trafficking is the type of trafficking that we hear about most often, labor trafficking is just as exploitative and deserving of attention.

According to IOM global counter-trafficking statistics, 17% of trafficking survivors in the world have been trafficked for sexual exploitation, while 74% have been trafficked for forced labor and services.

Forced labor, debt bondage, peonage, forced soldiering, force criminal activity, and domestic servitude are just a few examples of human trafficking. Anywhere that work happens, whether it’s formal or informal, human trafficking can happen.
Unpacking the Numbers
Commonly shared statistics may be problematic, incorrect, or misleading.

**Misconception**
There are 100,000-300,000 sex trafficked children in the United States

This statistic is often cited without a source. There are currently no reliable estimates on the number of people trafficked for sex in the United States, let alone a number for how many of those people are under the age of 18.

The Dept. of Justice funded a study on youth involvement in the sex trade in 2016 and found that the number of youth in the sex trade (any youth under the age of 18 involved in the commercial sex trade are considered trafficking victims per the TVPA trafficking definition) is likely closer to 9,000-10,000. However, the study provides a large population estimate range, and recognizes the limitations of determining a hard number. The study states that by its estimates the number could be as low as 4,457 youth or as high as 20,994 youth, nowhere near the early mistaken estimates that continue to be shared.

**Misconception**
The average age of entry into human trafficking is 12-14 years old

This statistic has been attributed to a number of different sources. However, the original source has never been verified and also the statistic has been disproved in a number of ways. The first problem is that this statistic is based on the average age of entry into commercial sex among youth under age 25 and ignores recent estimates suggesting that older teens are at higher risk. It erases the risks faced by youth aging out of foster care and other vulnerable adults.

Furthermore, the statistic does not include people experiencing labor trafficking or acknowledge that people of any age can be trafficked multiple times in their lifetimes, for various amounts of time during each period of abuse.

People experiencing trafficking are a hidden population, meaning they are not easily identifiable to study or create a prevalence estimate, there is no way to accurately and precisely determine the average age of trafficking victimization.

“Why does all of this matter? The most immediate problem is that poor information, presented as fact, contributes to poor decision making and sometimes highly damaging, unintended outcomes.”

-Anne Gallagher

For more information, visit: nolahumantrafficking.org and healtrafficking.org