



MEDIA BEST PRACTICES

Ask most people where their information about human trafficking comes from, and the answer is often “I heard about it on the news.” Unsurprisingly, the media play an enormous role shaping perceptions and guiding the public conversation about this crime. **How** the media reports on human trafficking is just as important as **what** is being reported, and the overall impact of these stories is reflected in the way the public, politicians, law enforcement, and even other media outlets understand the issue.

In recent years, a number of reports about human trafficking have included misinformation and outdated statistics, blamed or exploited survivors, and conflated terminology. Instead of shining a brighter light on this problem, such reports add confusion to a crime that is already underreported and often misunderstood by the public. As the issue of human trafficking continues to capture the public consciousness, members of the media have a responsibility to report thoroughly and responsibly, and to protect those who have been exploited.

A few promising practices can keep journalists on the right track:

- **Language matters.** Is there a difference between survivor and victim? Prostitution and sex trafficking? Human smuggling and human trafficking? The conflation of terms, as well as the failure to use the correct definition to describe human trafficking, can confuse and mislead audiences. Human trafficking is a complex crime that many communities are still trying to understand, and using outdated terms or incorrect definitions only weakens understanding of the issue. *Become familiar with the trafficking definitions of international law, found in the Palermo Protocol to the United Nations Transnational Organized Crime Convention, as well as other related terms that are commonly used.*
- **Dangers of re-victimization.** Photos or names of human trafficking victims should not be published without their consent, and journalists should not speak with a minor without a victim specialist, parent, or guardian present. Human trafficking cases often involve complex safety concerns that could be exacerbated by a published story, or if a victim or survivor has not fully healed, a published story may reactivate trauma or shame years later. *Ensure that, before a victim of human trafficking agrees to share his or her story, he or she understands that once the story is published, it will be available to the public at large.*
- **Survivor stories.** Although interviewing survivors may be the key to understanding human trafficking—and the underpinning of a good story—there are optimal ways to approach survivors and learn about their experiences. Reporters should invest time engaging service providers and NGOs that work with survivors to learn and understand the best possible approaches. *Be flexible, do not make demands, and do not expect the survivor to tell you his or her story in one sitting. Spend time with survivors, get to know them as people, and follow up even after the story is complete.*
- **Half the story.** When media report on only one type of human trafficking, the public is left with only part of the story. Human trafficking includes sex trafficking, child sex trafficking, forced labor, bonded labor, involuntary domestic servitude, and debt bondage. *Strengthen the public's understanding of human trafficking and the full scope of the crime.*
- **Numbers game.** Reporters often lead with numbers, but reliable statistics related to human trafficking are difficult to find. Human trafficking is a clandestine crime and few victims and survivors come forward for fear of retaliation, shame, or lack of understanding of what is happening to them. Numbers are not always the story. *Pursue individual stories of survival, new government initiatives, or innovative research efforts until better data are available.*
- **Human trafficking happens.** Simply reporting that human trafficking occurs is not a story. Human trafficking happens in every country in the world. *Go deeper and find out who are the most vulnerable to victimization, what kind of help is offered for survivors, and what your community is doing to eradicate this problem.*
- **Report responsibly.** Human trafficking is a popular topic for journalists hoping to make a social impact. Journalists may befriend survivors, earn their trust, and in some cases help remove them from a harmful situation. This is typically not appropriate. Journalists should not blur the line between journalism and activism. Everyone should do their part to help eradicate this crime by educating themselves about human trafficking and engaging in their communities, but victim assistance should be handled by accredited service providers. *Instead of intervening inappropriately, connect a survivor to a reputable service provider to ensure they are safe and their needs are met.*

Related topic: Learn more about the critical role and impact of media at [Media Reporting on Human Trafficking](#).