



# Public Service Announcement

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION



March 16, 2020

## Human Traffickers Continue to Use Popular Online Platforms to Recruit Victims

The FBI warns the public to remain vigilant of the threat posed by criminals who seek to traffic individuals through force, fraud, or coercion through popular social media and dating platforms. Offenders often exploit dating apps and websites to recruit—and later advertise—sex trafficking victims. In addition, offenders are increasingly recruiting labor trafficking victims through what appear to be legitimate job offers.

### Definition

*The FBI defines human trafficking as compelling someone to engage in labor, services, or a commercial sex act through the use of force, fraud, or coercion.*

### Methodology

Human trafficking is believed to be the third most prevalent criminal activity in the world. In the United States, people are bought, sold, and smuggled like modern-day slaves. Human trafficking victims are beaten, starved, deceived, and forced into sex work or agricultural, domestic, restaurant, or factory jobs with little to no pay. Many Americans unknowingly encounter trafficking victims through their daily activities.

Traffickers and victims alike come from all different backgrounds: Human trafficking victims have been recovered in rural areas, small towns, the suburbs, and large cities.

FBI investigations show that human traffickers continue to use online platforms to recruit individuals to engage in forced labor or sex work. The Internet lets human traffickers contact virtually anyone in the world, giving them an opportunity to communicate with and recruit victims domestically and internationally. Human traffickers may pose as legitimate job recruiters or agents for modeling companies or employment agencies misrepresenting their true intentions to victims. Traffickers groom victims online by offering opportunities for a better life and providing fake employment opportunities.

Human traffickers target vulnerable individuals by preying on their personal situations. Online platforms make it easier for traffickers to find potential victims, especially those who post personal information, such as their financial hardships, their struggles with low self-esteem, or their family problems. Human traffickers target and recruit their victims by appearing to offer help, or pretending to be a friend or potential romantic partner. They leverage their victims' vulnerabilities and coerce them to meet in person. After establishing a false sense of trust, traffickers may force victims into sex work or forced labor.

### Examples

The FBI has identified many examples of traffickers' recruiting individuals using popular online platforms. The following are just a few:



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- In July 2019, a Baltimore, Maryland, man was convicted on two counts of sex trafficking of a minor and one count of using the Internet to promote a business enterprise involving prostitution. The perpetrator targeted two girls after they posted information online about their difficult living and financial situation. After meeting them in person, the man forced the two girls into sex work.
- In March 2019, a married couple was found guilty of conspiracy to obtain forced labor and two counts of obtaining forced labor. The couple employed foreign workers to perform domestic labor in their home in Stockton, California. The defendants used the Internet and an India-based newspaper to post false advertisements about the wages and nature of the employment at their home. Upon arrival, the workers were forced to work 18-hour days with little to no wages.
- In October 2017, a sex trafficker was convicted on 17 counts of trafficking adults and minors. Additional charges included child pornography and obstruction of justice. The perpetrator received a 33-year sentence. A victim from the Seattle area met the sex trafficker's accomplice on a dating website. The trafficker and his accomplice later promised to help the victim with her acting career. After a few months, the victim was abused and forced into prostitution.

## Victim Reporting

If you believe you or someone you know is the victim of human trafficking of any kind:

- Contact your local law enforcement agency, your local FBI field office (contact information can be found at [www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov)), or:
  - the National Human Trafficking Hotline—Call 1-888-373-7888 (TTY: 711) or text 233733;
  - file a complaint online with the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center at [www.IC3.gov](http://www.IC3.gov); or
  - contact the FBI's National Threat Operations Center at 1-800-CALL-FBI or [tips.fbi.gov](http://tips.fbi.gov).
  - To report possible trafficking involving minors, contact the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) or at [Cybertipline.org](http://Cybertipline.org).

Victims are encouraged to keep all original documentation, emails, text messages, and logs of communication with the subject. Do not delete anything before law enforcement is able to review it.

Tell law enforcement everything about the online encounters—it may be uncomfortable, but it is necessary to find the offender. When reporting online scams, be as descriptive as possible in the complaint form by providing:

- name and/or user name of the subject;
- email addresses and phone numbers used by the subject;



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- websites used by the subject; and
- descriptions of all interactions with the subject.

It is helpful for law enforcement to have as much information as possible to investigate these incidents; however, it is not necessary to provide all of this information to submit a complaint.

The FBI produced this public service announcement to alert Internet users of the continuing threat posed by human traffickers online and what you should do if you or someone you know suspects human trafficking.

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**I-031620-PSA**

Questions regarding this PSA should be directed to your local **FBI Field Office**.

Local Field Office Locations: [www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices](http://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices)