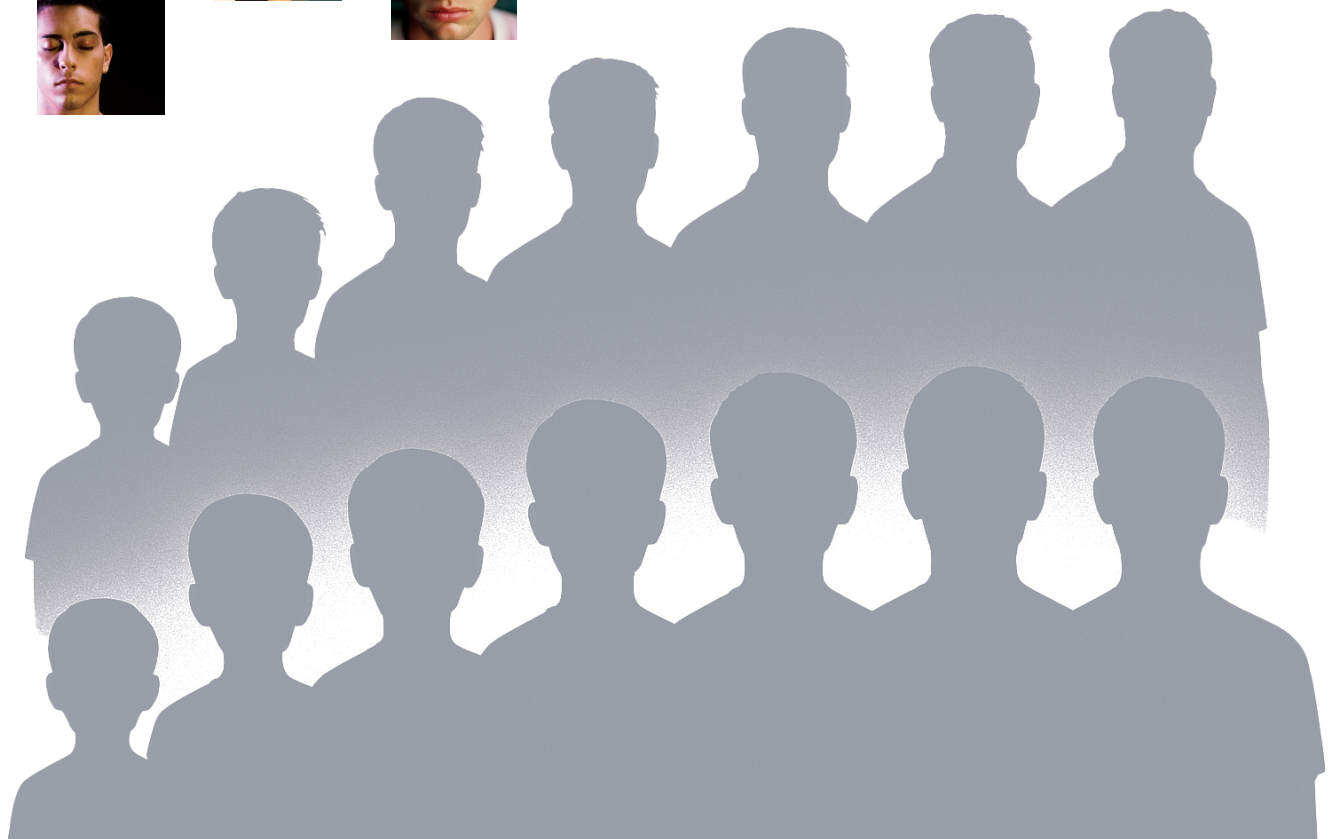
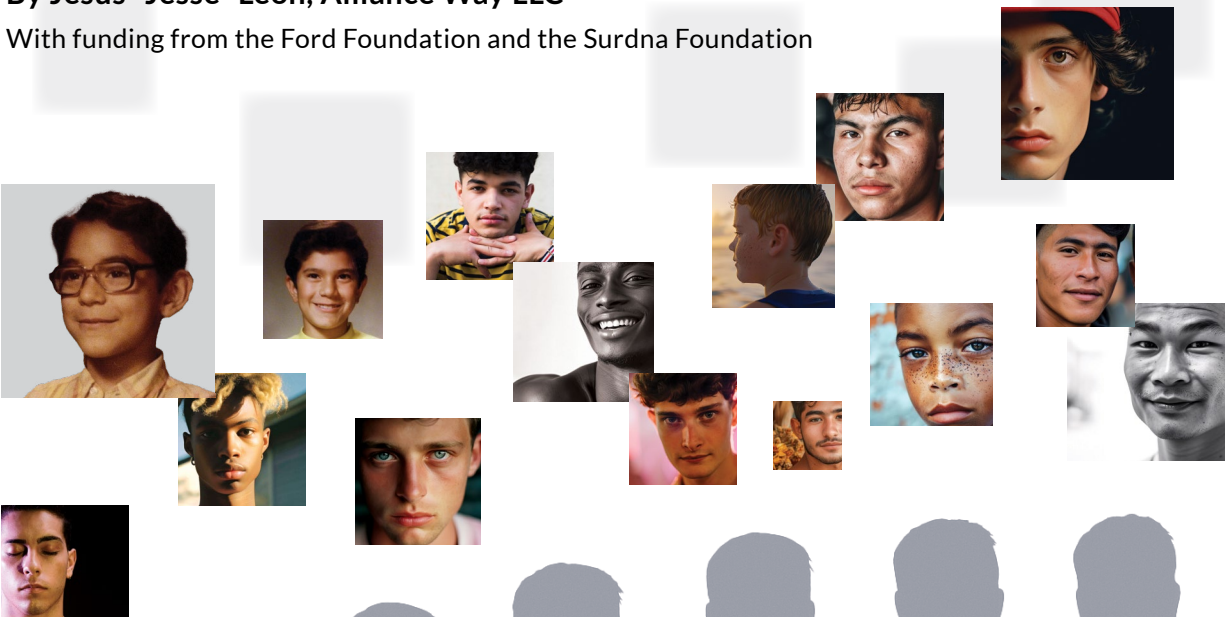


# WE'RE NOT BROKEN

## A FRAMEWORK FOR SUPPORTING MALE SURVIVORS OF SEX TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION

By Jesus "Jesse" Leon, Alliance Way LLC

With funding from the Ford Foundation and the Surdna Foundation





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September 2025

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*We’re Not Broken: A Framework for Supporting Male Survivors of Sex Trafficking and Exploitation*

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# Executive Summary

**This framework offers a groundbreaking response to an often-ignored crisis: the sex trafficking, sexual exploitation, and childhood sexual abuse of boys and men.**

Despite growing awareness of these issues, male survivors remain marginalized by service systems, overlooked in funding priorities, and excluded from policy agendas. Drawing from field research, global survivor interviews, and personal experience, Jesse Leon presents a survivor-centered roadmap to strengthen the systems that too often fail to protect and support male survivors.



# The Core Challenge

A perfect storm of shame, stigma, and systemic neglect has rendered boys and young men who experience trafficking invisible to the very systems meant to protect them:

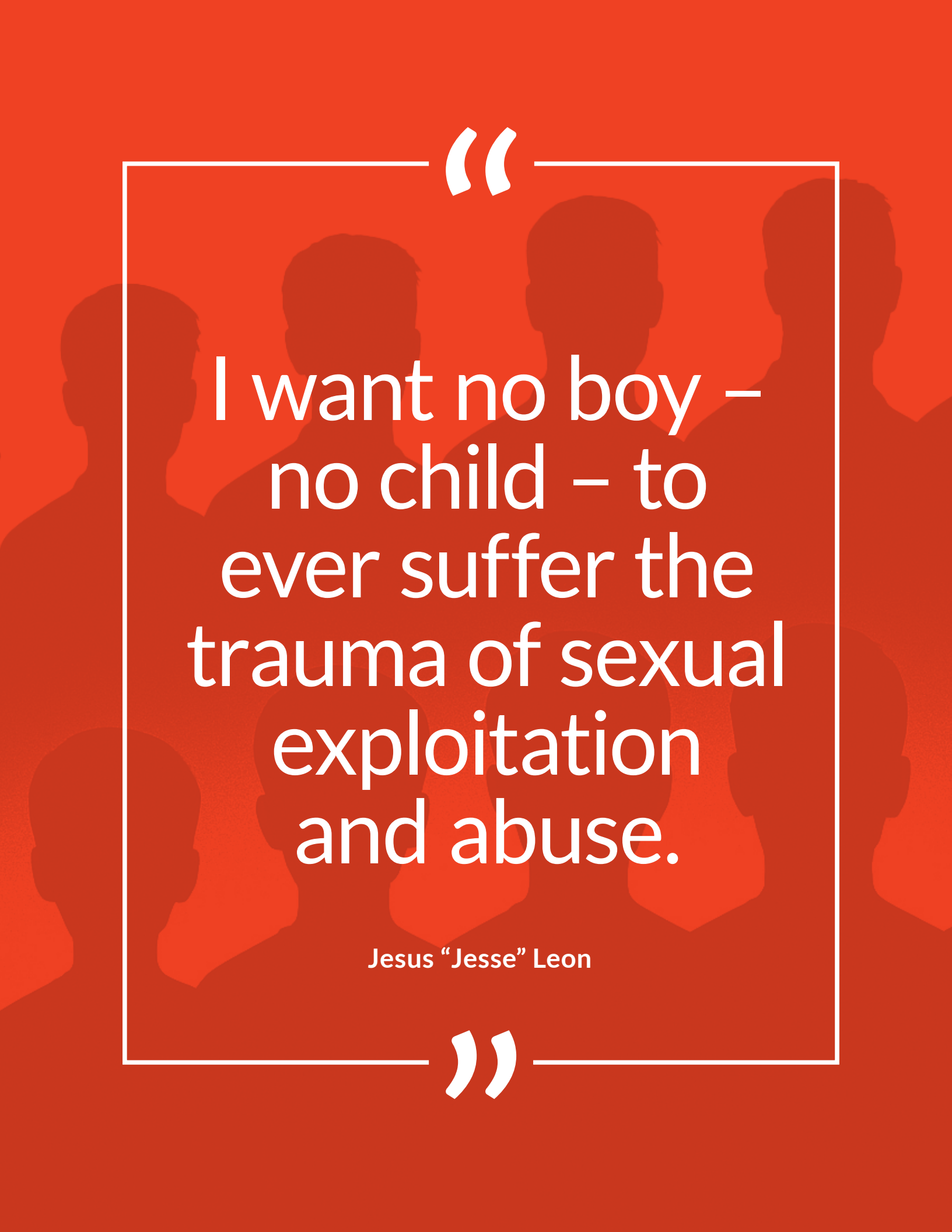
- Boys are less likely than girls to seek help due to shame, fear of judgment, cultural norms, and rigid gender expectations.
- Stigma around male victimhood – rooted in harmful ideas about masculinity – silences survivors and reinforces institutional neglect.
- Data on male survivors is fragmented and often excluded from national and global reporting systems.
- Most anti-trafficking programs are designed for female victims and frequently fail to serve boys and men.
- In some countries, survivors risk incarceration, death, or exile simply for disclosing abuse – especially where same-gender sexual activity is criminalized, even when boys and young men were coerced or forced.

# Five Principles for Taking Action: The RAISE Framework

<b>R</b>	<b>Recognize</b> male survivors and remove systemic barriers to care.
<b>A</b>	<b>Address</b> the need for safe housing as the foundation for healing and long-term stability.
<b>I</b>	<b>Invest</b> in trauma-responsive mental health support and substance-use treatment.
<b>S</b>	<b>Secure</b> private sector innovation and investment to leverage and expand public and philanthropic resources.
<b>E</b>	<b>Establish</b> a global fund and backbone organization to coordinate solutions at the scale this crisis demands.

This framework is more than a policy document – it’s a moral imperative. This framework builds on lived experience, offering funders, governments, and institutions a roadmap to invest in survivor-led solutions that can be scaled across the globe.

The time to act is now.

The background of the entire image is a solid orange-red color. Overlaid on this background are several faint, dark silhouettes of people's heads and shoulders, arranged in a way that suggests a crowd or a group of people. In the center of the image is a white rectangular border. Inside this border, at the top, is a large white opening quotation mark. At the bottom of the border is a large white closing quotation mark. Between these two marks, the text of the quote is written in a white, sans-serif font, centered horizontally and broken into five lines.

I want no boy –  
no child – to  
ever suffer the  
trauma of sexual  
exploitation  
and abuse.

Jesus “Jesse” Leon

# Introduction

**For me, this framework for supporting male survivors<sup>1</sup> of trafficking is more than a professional endeavor; it is a personal mission. And it is more than a guide; it is a moral imperative. A call to action for foundations, governments, nonprofits, and individuals with the power to act. Male survivors – like me – have been unseen, unheard, and dismissed for too long. It is time to build a global community that acknowledges survivors, fully supports them, and ensures they heal.**

---

Growing up in San Diego, I was drugged, trafficked, and exploited for nearly a decade, from age 11 to age 18, in my own neighborhood. During those years, my cries for help often fell on deaf ears. At 14, I was assigned to a therapist through California's victim witness program, now known as the California Victim Compensation Board, or CalVCB. The therapist refused to believe boys could be victims of trafficking and, therefore, failed to understand my trauma or offer any real help. When my mother fought with everything she had to protect her child and begged to speak with the therapist, she was turned away because she didn't speak English. Our pleas were silenced, my trauma and my mother's agency to help me were dismissed, and we were left to navigate the darkness alone.

Despite knowing that I was being exploited and that my perpetrators had used drugs to control me, the therapist never recommended substance-use treatment, family counseling, or trauma-responsive care. Instead, I was labeled an angry, troubled kid and placed in what felt like a mandatory therapy program that ignored my underlying trauma. For four years, from ages 14 to 18, I sat in state-funded therapy, spiraling deeper into addiction and self-destruction, while my mother – a single immigrant parent fighting for her child – was left to search for answers on her own. No one ever informed my mother that she had the right to request a different therapist, and no one ever followed up to see if the therapist was helping us or if our needs as victims of a crime were being met.

The state's system claimed to be addressing my anger, but it did nothing to address the complex trauma, addiction, or relentless cycle of exploitation I was still trapped in.

With over three decades in recovery and countless conversations with survivors across the globe, I now know that our experiences are not unique. Far too many boys and young men – and their families – are left to navigate the darkness on their own, unseen and unsupported, trapped in systems that fail to provide even the most basic elements of care.

This framework provides a roadmap to ensure no boy and no family is abandoned by the very systems that claim to protect them. It calls on foundations, governments, and community partners to build the structures that were missing for me and my mother – structures that could have saved us and can save others.

The isolation I experienced as a victim of trafficking almost led to my death. At times, I saw no path forward. At 18, I found myself homeless, sleeping under a bush in San Diego's Balboa Park, surrounded by other young boys and sexually exploited youth who were also discarded by a system that refused to see us. I survived. But many who were in the park with me are dead now, lost to addiction, violence or suicide.

I was lucky. I got clean and sober at age 18 and found a community of people in recovery who showed me that change was possible. They taught me that I could seek out a different therapist, one who would finally believe me and help me begin to heal. They and others who have supported me in my journey surrounded me with love, believed in me, refused to give up on me, and inspired me to persevere through pain and adversity. I want every boy to have a future in which he's supported, loved, and believed, as I finally was. **I want no boy – no child – to ever suffer the trauma of sexual exploitation and abuse.**

## Survivors' Stories Matter

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I've shared my story before, through my memoir *I'm Not Broken*, which recounts my recovery from trafficking, and in my public speaking. Many survivors who've read my book or heard me speak have told me they thought they were alone in their suffering. And through conversations with survivors and surveying the anti-trafficking landscape for this project, I've come to see that the lack of services and stigma I experienced have not gone away. So, I embarked on a project that goes beyond just telling my story; I created this framework to help ensure that all male survivors can find the resources, support, and healing they need.

Throughout the creation of this framework, I spoke with male survivors in various countries who have survived trafficking, exploitation, and abuse – men whose stories reveal both the depths of their suffering and their resilience in the face of unimaginable hardship.<sup>2</sup> Many of these survivors and the organizations that support them requested anonymity. In countries where being labeled a survivor of trafficking can sever opportunities for employment, education, and community acceptance, the stigma of speaking out is too heavy a burden to bear. Some organizational leaders who uncovered systemic abuses and exploitation through their research had to flee the countries they were working in for fear of retribution.

Others, despite having built entrepreneurial programs that hire and train fellow survivors, fear that going public will forever trap them in the role of “victim” rather than leader, entrepreneur, or community changemaker. And in other countries, where same-gender relations – even if by force – are criminalized and punishable by law, seeking help can mean risking incarceration or even death, as is the case for survivors in Egypt. Their reluctance to be identified underscores how much work remains to be done to destigmatize male survivorhood and create safe pathways for boys and men to seek help, share their stories, and rebuild their lives without fear of retaliation or rejection.

In these pages, I've combined what I learned from research on the realities male survivors face and the solutions that could be put in place, along with everything I've learned from my own journey of being trafficked and sexually exploited as a boy and recovering as an adult. We need a framework specifically focused on boys and men for a number of reasons, most importantly because boys are less likely than girls to seek help due to shame, fear of judgment, cultural norms, biases, stigma, and gender-role expectations. They often fear they won't be believed – like I wasn't – and far too often, the world confirms those fears.

We need a framework specifically focused on boys and men for a number of reasons, most importantly because boys are less likely than girls to seek help due to shame, fear of judgment, cultural norms, biases, stigma, and gender-role expectations.

# The Challenge of Dismantling Stigma

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A broader societal challenge is the dismantling of the persistent stigma male survivors face, often rooted in rigid notions of masculinity. These deeply ingrained beliefs about what it means to be a “real man” silence survivors, invalidate their experiences, and prevent healing. Shame, fear of judgment, and toxic gender norms all contribute to a culture that tells men they can’t be victims. That if they were abused, it was somehow their fault. Or worse – that it didn’t happen at all. These messages are reinforced in our media, our institutions, and sometimes, even in survivor circles that overlook or exclude men. As a result, male survivors are forced to carry their trauma in isolation.

Actor Terrence Howard, in a widely circulated interview, expressed a controversial belief tied to this stigma: “*Once you give up your manhood, it’s gone.*”<sup>3</sup> Such views reinforce damaging stereotypes, suggesting that being victimized strips men of their identity, and silences countless survivors, who fear judgment, ostracism, or being seen as “less than a man.”<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, figures like Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson have sought to redefine masculinity, emphasizing

that strength lies in vulnerability. Mr. Johnson stated, “*Powerful masculinity, is having the confidence to look inside and say, ‘This is what I’m feeling, and it’s okay.’*”<sup>5</sup>

These conflicting perspectives mirror the internal conflict many male survivors endure. The fear of not being believed or of losing their perceived manhood continues to prevent disclosure.

**To create meaningful change, this framework seeks to dismantle stigmas and build a world where vulnerability is not a liability, but a courageous act of healing.**

This framework is both a call to action and a challenge to all of us to recognize the unseen, to stand with the silenced, and to dismantle the barriers that keep survivors in the shadows. I’ve created this framework to help foundations, corporations, and governments identify opportunities to create much-needed resources for male survivors, and to expand and adapt existing ones to ensure they are truly accessible. By addressing systemic failures, we can end the cycle of invisibility and neglect, ensuring that all survivors have the opportunity to heal, reclaim dignity, and rebuild their lives.

**To create meaningful change, this framework seeks to dismantle stigmas and build a world where vulnerability is not a liability, but a courageous act of healing.**

## Language Note

Throughout this framework, the terms victim and survivor are used with intention. **Victim** refers to individuals during the period of their exploitation, particularly in legal, medical, or emergency response contexts. **Survivor** reflects a strengths-based lens that acknowledges an individual’s journey toward healing and resilience. Both terms are used respectfully, in alignment with context and sector standards.

# Five Principles for Taking Action: The RAISE Framework

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**Targeted, survivor-centered strategies for boys and men impacted by trafficking are urgently needed and long overdue.** While data on male survivors remains fragmented, the evidence we do have reveals a hidden global crisis that requires immediate action. This framework leverages existing research, survivor insights, and proven models to propose five actionable principles that address the systemic gaps, elevate survivor voices, and build a global response network capable of breaking the cycle of exploitation and neglect.

**To transform how the world responds to male survivors, we must RAISE the level of global commitment. Each principle represents a practical step for governments, philanthropy, and the private sector:**

## **Principle 1: Recognize male survivors and remove systemic barriers to care.**

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The trafficking and sexual exploitation of boys is deeply stigmatized, underreported, and often denied – leaving data scarce, contradictory, or nonexistent in many regions. Anti-trafficking programs have largely focused on females. As a result, male victims face systemic neglect in the U.S. and globally. Program design and services must expand to ensure all survivors receive the care they need. Data gaps must not delay action. Immediate investment is needed to raise awareness and destigmatize seeking help among boys and men.

## **Principle 2: Address the need for safe housing as the foundation for healing and long-term stability.**

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Without safe, supportive housing, boys cannot escape trafficking or begin to heal. Yet, there are currently no “beds”, defined as designated placements in safe shelters or long-term housing, available for boys under 18 in the U.S. Globally, only limited options exist, in countries such as Cambodia, Colombia, and Thailand. Most housing programs are designed for women and girls fleeing their traffickers, leaving boys with little to no access to shelter or care. With strategic investment, we can adapt proven female-serving models and expand international efforts to build housing specifically for boys who have been harmed, hidden, and too often left to heal alone.

## **Principle 3: Invest in trauma-responsive mental health support and substance-use treatment tailored to survivors’ realities.**

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Traffickers often use substances to control, manipulate, and entrap boys and young men. Survivors also turn to substances to cope and survive. These realities make substance use treatment and

recovery essential – not only to break free from exploitation, but to reclaim independence and live a thriving life. Survivors need access to treatment that recognizes how substance use, and sex trafficking and exploitation are interconnected.

## **Principle 4: Secure private sector innovation and investment to leverage and expand public and philanthropic resources.**

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Unlike government, the private sector can move quickly, especially through tools like artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and digital platforms. With philanthropic partnerships, the private sector can pilot survivor-focused initiatives: multilingual VR therapy, AI-powered outreach, and collaboration with international and country-specific hotlines for those urgently seeking help. Some airlines, hotels, and financial institutions already help prevent trafficking and can expand their role by offering support at key industry touchpoints where trafficking is often facilitated. Strategic collaborations can scale these innovations globally, bridging gaps in care and opening new pathways to healing for survivors worldwide.

## **Principle 5: Establish a global fund and backbone organization to coordinate solutions at the scale this crisis demands.**

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By consolidating resources across public, private, and philanthropic sectors, we can build a comprehensive, survivor-centered network that leverages impact investments, matching grants, and multi-year funding contributions. This approach not only streamlines access to essential services but also fosters a sustainable infrastructure for housing, substance use recovery, mental health care, and economic empowerment – ensuring that no survivor falls through the cracks.

The following chapters expand on these principles. If we put them into practice in the U.S. and across the world, we can address survivors' immediate needs, build systems for long-term healing, and work toward a future in which all male survivors are safe and thriving.

## A Story of Hope and a Call to Action

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As you can see, I'm still here. Instead of dying from addiction or despair, I went on to graduate from UC Berkeley and Harvard University and build a successful career that has spanned the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. When I was a child, lost in suffering, I never imagined that a day would come when I could be a voice for others. My hope is simple: that no child, whether boy or girl, ever feels invisible or unheard. While other partners work diligently to end human trafficking, my goal is to ensure that every survivor who steps forward is met with the resources, support, and opportunities they need to heal, rebuild, and thrive.

I invite you to join the effort to put this framework in place – not just as an ally, but as strategic partners in a mission that demands urgency, innovation, and global collaboration. **Learn. Engage. Invest.** Funders, policymakers, and leaders: You have the resources and influence to drive real change.

The power to shift this narrative is in our hands. Let's use it.

**We are all worthy. We are not broken.  
We do matter. We are not alone.  
Why are you here on this earth?  
What is your purpose?  
What impact will you have?**



# Five Principles for Taking Action: The RAISE Framework

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## **Principle 1:**

Recognize male survivors and remove systemic barriers to care.

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## **Principle 2:**

Address the need for safe housing as the foundation for healing and long-term stability.

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## **Principle 3:**

Invest in trauma-responsive mental health support and substance-use treatment.

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## **Principle 4:**

Secure private sector innovation and investment to leverage and expand public and philanthropic resources.

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## **Principle 5:**

Establish a global fund and backbone organization to coordinate solutions at the scale this crisis demands.

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# Principle 1: Recognize male survivors and remove systemic barriers to care.

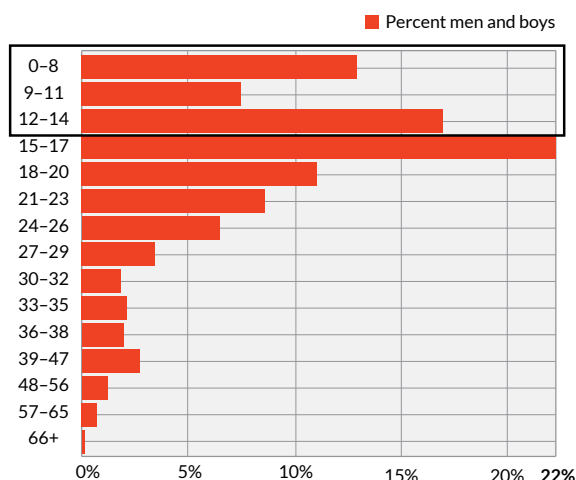
Public perceptions of human trafficking are often shaped by Hollywood narratives: scenes of young women abducted into windowless vans, smuggled across borders, and trapped in cycles of abuse. Survivors and advocates have long emphasized that trafficking is far more complex than movies would have us believe. Sex trafficking and exploitation often occurs in plain sight through manipulation, coercion, and betrayal by trusted individuals. Trafficking can involve familial betrayal and abuse, economic desperation, and systemic failures. And although the dominant image of a trafficking victim is female, boys comprise a significant but often invisible percentage of sexually exploited children. **Available research suggests boys represent between 34 percent and 50 percent of identified cases – figures that experts believe severely undercount the reality.**<sup>6</sup>

For decades, female survivors have led the way in advancing awareness, victim services, and policy reform – setting a powerful example of progress, resilience, and advocacy that male survivors can build upon. This progress offers valuable insights

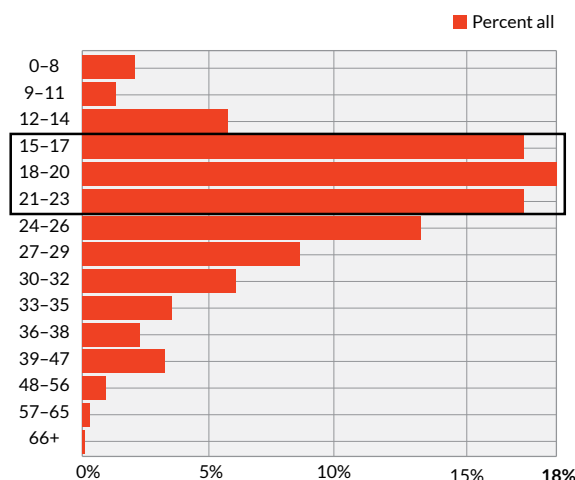
into how we can expand and adapt resources for men and boys, amplifying the collective mission to end exploitation without competing for funding but rather increasing overall impact. Despite these strides, systemic gaps persist. Societal and institutional responses to human trafficking remain inadequate, leaving many victims unprotected. Law enforcement agencies often lack the training they need to be able to identify male victimization,<sup>7</sup> and rapid response teams remain scarce. Survivor-led education and emergency response systems are urgently needed.

Male and female survivors both face significant barriers to disclosing their experiences, including fear, shame, and a lack of culturally responsive services. But the two groups differ. Male survivors often take longer to disclose their experiences compared to female survivors.<sup>8</sup> Research indicates boys are targeted, abused, and trafficked at younger ages than girls.<sup>9</sup> By integrating survivor-led insights, we can work to ensure that we understand victims' realities, and no survivor is left without the care they need.

Age of men and boys trafficked into sexual exploitation



Age of all victims trafficked into sexual exploitation



Addressing sexual exploitation requires acknowledging the stigma male survivors face and encouraging open conversations to build safer environments. Programs historically designed for women and girls often fail to address the distinct needs of boys and men, for whom seeking help and disclosing abuse is challenging in different ways. According to independent researcher Ena Lucia Mariaca Pacheco, male survivors often go through an extended “Era of Silence” during which males internalize stigma and refrain from disclosing their exploitation out of fear of being perceived as complicit or weak.<sup>10</sup> Mariaca Pacheco’s research finds that male survivors often wait years, even decades, to disclose their experiences due to fear, shame, and societal expectations around masculinity.<sup>11</sup> One study cited by Mariaca Pacheco found that the average time to disclose childhood sexual abuse among male survivors was 15.4 years; however, disclosure may take several decades, and in some cases it may never occur.<sup>12</sup> Programs that fail to acknowledge this prolonged period of nondisclosure may inadvertently reinforce the very shame that keeps survivors silent.

One underacknowledged setting for abuse is youth sports, which is often seen as a haven for discipline and growth. The hierarchical structure of sports coupled with the culture that often emphasizes toughness and silence, can create an environment where abuse goes unreported. Former competitive diver and Olympic hopeful John-Michael Lander provides poignant examples, through his public speaking and advocacy, of how male athletes can be exploited under the guise of mentorship and support.<sup>13</sup> At 14, Lander was approached by individuals who promised to support his diving career, but who instead subjected him to years of sexual abuse and trafficking. These were people he had trusted. Lander notes that many male survivors are taught to view abuse as hazing or initiation rites, further complicating their ability to recognize and report exploitation. Stigma, fear of being perceived as weak, and concern over career repercussions often keep male survivors in sports silent.

Programs must actively work to dismantle misconceptions through survivor-centered, trauma-responsive approaches that acknowledge the ways male survivors cope, including substance use, dissociation, and aggression. For individuals whose experiences or identities place them at higher risk of stigma, violence, fear of judgement, discrimination or criminalization can deter them from seeking help – especially in settings where same-gender relations, even when coerced or by force, are still penalized. Many programs lack the

training or flexibility to offer affirming, culturally responsive care, creating additional barriers to safety and healing.<sup>14</sup>

To address these gaps, a multi-tiered approach is essential and should include the following steps:

- **Destigmatize male victimhood:**

Launch multilingual, culturally responsive, and affirming public awareness campaigns that feature male survivors, breaking taboos and fostering open dialogue to dismantle misconceptions about male victimization. Survivor-led public awareness initiatives can serve as powerful tools to change narratives and encourage more survivors to come forward. The Global Boys Summit organized by ECPAT, the global network of organizations working to end child sexual exploitation, emphasized the need for survivor-led campaigns that platform male survivors’ voices while protecting them from secondary trauma.<sup>15</sup> Recommendations included creating media guidelines to prevent misrepresentation and re-traumatization while promoting inclusive, trauma-responsive messaging.<sup>16</sup>

- **Create safe spaces:**

Establish trauma-responsive programs where male survivors can seek help without fear of judgment, ostracism, or criminalization. This includes tailored interventions that acknowledge how difficult it can be for men and boys to disclose their experiences of exploitation. Mariaca Pacheco’s research emphasizes the need for peer-led support groups where survivors can share their stories without fear of reprisal, building community while reducing stigma.<sup>17</sup>

- **Engage survivors as experts:**

Male survivors must be at the table as paid experts, informing program development by foundations, government agencies, universities, the criminal justice system, and mental health providers. Survivors’ lived experiences are critical to designing long-term, sustainable solutions that work. The And Boys Too report highlights the value of survivor-led initiatives that provide employment, mentorship, and advocacy training to those willing to share their stories as experts and leaders.<sup>18</sup>

- **Support deeper healing within violence prevention programs:**

Many men who perpetrate domestic or gender-based violence have histories of unaddressed trauma – including experiences

of sexual abuse, violence, and exploitation. Yet most violence prevention programs fail to integrate these deeper root causes into their models.

Programs aimed at disrupting cycles of harm, reducing incarceration, or promoting the wellbeing of men and boys can significantly increase their long-term impact by adopting trauma-responsive and culturally grounded approaches. These approaches must confront the often-unspoken histories that fuel shame, distorted notions of masculinity, and challenges with emotional regulation. Embedding healing into these efforts is essential – not only to help men build healthier relationships, but also to interrupt intergenerational trauma and foster lasting community safety.

- **Conduct ongoing check-ins:**

Establish survivor-centered protocols led by service providers, case managers, and peer support staff to ensure follow-up and feedback loops in multiple languages, assessing services' effectiveness and adapting to survivors' evolving needs. This is especially critical for male survivors, who may be grappling with untreated substance-use disorders and/or co-occurring mental health conditions.

Addressing male survivors' needs requires more than simply expanding existing programs for women and girls. Despite inconsistent and fragmented data collection, what we do know makes one thing clear: Boys and young men are significantly impacted by trafficking and exploitation, yet their experiences remain largely overlooked.

Globally and in the U.S., we find systemic failures to acknowledge male victimization, leaving survivors undercounted, underserved, and excluded from most anti-trafficking responses. This invisibility has created dangerous blind spots in funding, policy, and program design. The following data points illustrate the scope of this overlooked crisis.

- A study by John Jay College of Criminal Justice found that nearly half of minors arrested for prostitution-related offenses in Manhattan were boys.<sup>19</sup>
- The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has reported a rise in the number of boys identified as trafficking victims since 2019.<sup>20</sup>
- A 2016 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services study found that 34.4 percent of

homeless males aged 14–21 reported exchanging sex for a place to stay, money, food, protection, or drugs.<sup>21</sup>

- The U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking has categorized men and boys as an underserved population due to the lack of resources and programs tailored to their unique needs.<sup>22</sup>
- Polaris Project recorded a 45 percent surge in online trafficking cases during the COVID-19 pandemic; 15 percent of those cases involved male victims.<sup>23</sup>

According to the U.S. Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, *"Around the world, the sex trafficking of boys and men continues to be hidden and underreported, and there is a severe shortage of programs to meet their needs."*<sup>24</sup> Only 0.2 percent of global anti-trafficking funding is allocated to male survivors, according to a 2022 report by the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery, a staggering gap that leaves many without access to essential care, protection, or justice.<sup>25</sup>

One of the most glaring examples of commercial sexual exploitation of children involving boys and gender-diverse youth comes from the state of Minnesota. In 2019 and 2022, researchers from the University of Minnesota's MYST Project, in partnership with the Minnesota Department of Health, analyzed statewide census-style student surveys (the Minnesota Student Survey, or MSS) administered in schools using passive parental consent (opt-out).<sup>26</sup> This means all students were surveyed unless a parent actively declined. The findings were striking. In 2019, 1.4 percent of high school students, **representing over 5,000 young people statewide**, reported having traded sex, including 3.1 percent of Native youth. By 2022, the overall rate remained at 1.3 percent, **still thousands of students**, but among Native 2SLGBTQ+ youth, the rate surged to 8.9 percent.<sup>27</sup> Native students were nearly seven times more likely to report trading sex than their peers.<sup>28</sup> These alarming figures underscore the disproportionate burden borne by Native two-spirit students, especially boys, who remain almost invisible in the design of services.

If we don't create systems and resources to support male victims and survivors, alongside resources dedicated to women and girls, men and boys will continue to be victimized. And we will fail to address child sexual exploitation and abuse in its full scope.

# Removing Barriers Male Survivors Face

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Reports from organizations such as ECPAT and Mariaca Pacheco's independent research reveal consistent challenges faced by male survivors, whether they are in the U.S., Brazil, Cambodia, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, the Republic of Korea, or South Africa.<sup>29</sup> These include:

## **Entrenched gender bias:**

Professionals and policymakers often do not recognize boys as victims and, therefore, often don't believe them. In addition, international organizations have historically framed child sexual exploitation and abuse as a women and girls' issue, and international declarations and resolutions, including key U.N. frameworks, have emphasized protection for women and girls while rarely acknowledging male victimization.<sup>30</sup> As a result, male survivors are undercounted, underserved, and left without tailored support structures.

Service providers must receive comprehensive training to understand the distinct challenges male survivors face, ensuring they are properly identified, supported, and given pathways to healing. Adopting precise, gender-informed survivor-centered language in policy documents, funding priorities, and awareness initiatives ensures that all survivors – regardless of gender – are seen, supported, and provided with the resources they need to heal.

## **Societal stigma:**

Stigma keeps male victims and survivors locked in silence, unable to seek help or break free from their trauma, which makes healing more difficult even when they can access treatment. Generally, across the globe, boys are taught that vulnerability equals weakness, and that admitting victimization threatens their masculinity, making them feel less worthy of protection or support than girls. In countries like the U.S., Mexico, Egypt, and South Africa, as well as throughout Central and Latin America, boys who disclose abuse risk ridicule, disbelief, or even violence. Shame and stigma about being perceived as gay by family or community further discourages boys to reveal their sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>31</sup> Disclosure is further discouraged when the abusers or traffickers are family members.<sup>32</sup> In certain countries in the Middle East and Africa, boys

who report sexual abuse by another man may face imprisonment or death, due to the association of rape with same-gender sexual behavior.<sup>33</sup>

We must increase broader societal understanding, including among service providers, policymakers, and families, of the stigma and pressures that prevent boys from disclosing their abuse. And we must equip professionals with the tools to respond effectively when survivors come forward.

## **Lack of appropriate systems:**

When male survivors do come forward, they often encounter service systems that are not designed to meet their needs. In Egypt, refugee boys from Sudan, Palestine, and Syria struggle to access trauma-responsive services, facing bureaucratic hurdles and a lack of male-specific care. In Brazil, male survivors are frequently placed in general care programs that fail to address the depth and complexity of their experiences. Without male-focused, culturally informed support systems, not only are individual survivors left adrift, but entire populations are left vulnerable and underserved.

## **Lack of data:**

We know boys and young men are victimized, but we know very little about who is trafficked, how, and why. The lack of comprehensive demographic data on male survivors is more than just a technical shortfall; it is a fundamental barrier to effectively addressing the experiences of male survivors. Existing frameworks fail to capture the full scope of their realities, leading to underreporting, misrepresentation of survivor needs, and services that fall short of delivering holistic care. A critical example of this gap is familial trafficking, one of the least discussed but most prevalent forms of trafficking. According to Polaris Project, 42 percent of trafficking victims are recruited by a family member and 39 percent are recruited by an intimate partner.<sup>34</sup> Identifying victims of familial trafficking and intervening to remove them to safety is exceptionally difficult when they are being psychologically manipulated by someone they trust and love.<sup>35</sup>

In certain regions, especially parts of Southeast Asia and the Middle East, even the act of gathering data on male trafficking survivors

can be dangerous. Individuals interviewed for this research requested anonymity due to fear of retaliation. In several cases, advocates and researchers who uncovered trafficking networks involving individuals tied to powerful systems have faced threats so severe they were forced to flee for their safety. The absence of data is not always an oversight – in some countries, it stems from deliberate silencing. When data reveals uncomfortable truths, it is often suppressed, distorted, or never collected at all.

To effectively combat trafficking globally, countries must address the disconnect between data collection and real-world implementation.

While comprehensive, accessible data is essential for developing targeted responses for male survivors, waiting for interagency data alignment only delays critical action. Funding must be allocated immediately to ensure that male survivors are reflected in current data collection efforts and that services expand to meet their specific needs. The persistent lack of data, and in some cases the existence of inconsistent or contradictory data, is itself a barrier that perpetuates inadequate resource allocation. Strengthening interagency coordination can support more accurate data-sharing, but urgent funding is crucial to close existing service gaps.

## A Global Issue Requiring a Global Response

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Beyond the work of international networks such as ECPAT and researchers studying trafficking across nations, such as Mariaca Pacheco, most country-level efforts to address the trafficking of boys operate in isolation and are underfunded, underrecognized, and often lack institutional support. Despite this, many organizations serve male survivors with courage and resilience.

Sustaining and expanding these efforts requires unrestricted funding for wraparound services including relocation assistance, safe housing, trauma-responsive mental health care, job training, and long-term healing. Survivors cannot afford to wait for global consensus on interagency data systems. Action must be taken immediately to fund programs that respond to the realities male survivors face, especially in countries where legal systems, stigma, and violence render them invisible.

The sexual trafficking and exploitation of boys is a global issue shaped by intersecting forces that include poverty, displacement, organized crime, weak legal protection, lack of access to services, and stigma. Where government institutions are fragile or corrupt, and where displaced populations lack protection, traffickers thrive. Boys and young men are particularly vulnerable in these contexts – yet remain largely invisible in data and policy responses. The country-specific examples on the following pages demonstrate how these forces intersect and manifest in different regions to heighten the risk for boys. The absence of male-specific services and survivor centered responses not only compounds

the initial harm but also deepens long-term vulnerability and re-exploitation.

Displacement, for example, is a major driver of vulnerability. In **Venezuela**, economic collapse has forced mass migration, leaving males especially vulnerable to exploitation by transnational crime syndicates that prey on desperation. In **Colombia**, the arrival of over 2.5 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants has created a population that organized crime networks exploit, taking advantage of significant gaps in legal protections.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, in **Peru**, over 1.8 million displaced Venezuelans face widespread exploitation with limited support services available.<sup>37</sup>

This pattern also appears along the U.S.–Mexico border, where displaced populations and unaccompanied minors are especially vulnerable. Fear of deportation often keeps young people from reporting abuse, leaving them invisible to authorities. In schools across the country, advocates report growing concerns about newly arrived middle school and high school students – both boys and girls – who stay with significantly older “friends” under the guise of shelter and safety. Parents, reassured that their children are safe and avoiding immigration enforcement, may be unaware of the risks, which include grooming and sexual exploitation. This is an increasingly common scenario, signaled by students who begin missing school or stop attending altogether. Out of fear that speaking up could lead to deportation, many students stay silent, leaving them invisible to school systems and unprotected from further exploitation.

In **Mexico**, corruption and ineffective law enforcement allow traffickers to operate with impunity. Weak legal enforcement undermines protection efforts, creating a high-risk environment.

**Brazil** reveals another dimension: Trafficking disproportionately affects boys, feminine presenting adolescents, and LGBTQ+ youth, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. Organized crime networks lure them with false promises of opportunities abroad in the modeling, fashion, and entertainment industries, only to coerce them into commercial sexual exploitation in countries like Italy and Spain.<sup>38</sup> Some are forcibly subjected to gender-contouring surgeries against their will. Domestically, trafficking routes move victims from rural communities to urban centers, exposing them to further harm. Weak legal protections, minimal oversight, and social exclusion compound their vulnerability at every step.

**Egypt**<sup>39</sup> illustrates how legal frameworks create serious barriers for male survivors of sex trafficking, sexual exploitation, and abuse. Laws criminalizing gender-affirming care, non-heteronormative identities, and same-gender sexual acts deter survivors from seeking help – and, at times, discourage providers from offering support due to fear of legal repercussions. As a result, data on male survivors is virtually nonexistent, as even being perceived as homosexual, regardless of consent, including cases of forced acts of same gender sex, can carry severe consequences. Despite these risks, some therapists continue to offer trauma-responsive and culturally specific care, often at great personal and professional cost. Their work remains vital, not only for Egyptian men and boys, but also for displaced survivors from Sudan, Syria, Palestine, Libya, and other countries seeking refuge. Advocates continue to raise awareness of how predators often prey on boys and young male refugees under the guise of work and opportunity, particularly targeting those desperate for safety and employment.

In **Cambodia**'s Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh, studies found that 38 percent of street-involved boys reported experiencing sexual abuse. This is significantly higher than the UNICEF regional average of 5 percent for child sexual abuse, which largely reflects data on girls.<sup>40</sup>

In northern **Thailand**, research has uncovered troubling patterns of sexual exploitation affecting

boys, including high rates of live-streamed abuse, often facilitated by family members.<sup>41</sup> This form of exploitation remains underrecognized due to pervasive stigma surrounding male victimization. Respondents described widespread involvement in both online and in-person exploitation, with many reporting experiences of physical and sexual violence. Deep-rooted gender norms further complicate access to support, particularly for cisgender boys and youth who identify outside traditional gender categories. These overlapping vulnerabilities demand a response that accounts for cultural context, digital harm, and gender-specific barriers to care.

In the **Philippines**, research in Metropolitan Manila revealed significant rates of boys engaging in survival sex, often driven by extreme poverty and family obligations. Survivors described the internal conflict they face, balancing their role as providers with the shame imposed by societal norms. Many spoke of the stigma and discrimination endured while being exploited on the streets, underscoring how cultural expectations around masculinity silence disclosure and delay recovery. Understanding these layered realities of past trauma, economic pressure, and hope for the future is essential to designing interventions that genuinely meet their needs.<sup>42</sup>

In **South Africa**, entrenched cultural taboos and limited male-specific services prevent survivors from seeking help, even as the country remains both a transit and destination point for human trafficking.<sup>43</sup>

While few examples exist globally of systems that fully meet the needs of male survivors, some organizations are quietly leading the way. **Fundación Renacer**<sup>44</sup> in Colombia offers one such model, a survivor-centered, trauma-responsive approach rooted in community action. Though operating with limited resources, Fundación Renacer demonstrates what is possible when care is grounded in dignity and long-term healing. With a holistic, rights-based approach, it provides comprehensive support and advocates for systemic change at both local and national levels. Key components of the model include:

- **Specialized therapeutic care** delivered through foster homes, which serve as central spaces for the long-term recovery and reintegration of girls, boys, and adolescents who are survivors of sexual violence. These homes offer trauma-responsive, culturally responsive services as part of an integrated therapeutic model.

- **Legal advocacy and assistance** for minors and their families navigating justice processes related to the commercial sexual exploitation of children.
- **Support for migrant populations**, including those impacted by forced displacement and exploitation.
- **Training for public officials** (judges, prosecutors, police, and local government staff) to enhance institutional responses to sexual exploitation cases using a child- and gender-sensitive lens that includes both girls and boys.
- **Prevention education and outreach**, with peer-led models that engage children, adolescents, and community leaders, including boys and male youth.
- **Community mobilization strategies** to increase local accountability and rejection of commercial sexual exploitation of children while building networks of protection and resilience.
- **Technical assistance for civil society and the private sector**, helping implement protective policies and codes of conduct that center on child welfare and human rights.
- **Cross-sector collaboration** aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, positioning child protection as a shared societal responsibility.

The Fundación Renacer model operates within the Latin American context. Similar principles are embodied in other parts of the world through different structural frameworks. In Europe, the Barnahus model offers another example of how child protection systems can be designed to prioritize the best interests of the child while ensuring coordinated, trauma-responsive responses across multiple sectors.<sup>45</sup> First developed in Iceland in 1998, this model is now a foundational example of trauma-responsive child protection and is now implemented in several European countries.

The ‘Barnahus’, or “Children’s House”, model brings together all relevant services for children who are victims, ensuring that the investigative, legal, medical and therapeutic processes are coordinated and child friendly. This model seeks to prevent further trauma by reducing the number of times a child recounts their experiences, avoids unnecessary exposure to courtrooms, and ensures that interviews are conducted by specially trained professionals in a safe age-appropriate setting. The multi-disciplinary team typically includes, police investigators, prosecutors, child protection workers, medical professionals, and a therapeutic specialist, all working collaboratively while respecting the best interest and rights of the child.

The Barnahus model aligns with both the Council of Europe Lanzarote Convention<sup>46</sup> and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,<sup>47</sup> focusing on the principles of child protection, dignity, and protection from secondary victimization in every stage of the process. This model has shown through evaluations that it has improved conviction rates, shortened investigative timelines, and increased child and family satisfaction with the judicial process.<sup>48</sup>

Examining the Fundación Renacer and Barnahus approaches highlights the potential for diverse cultural and legal systems to achieve the same core objective of protecting children, and to include boys through integrated rights-based and survivor-centered services. While the Barnahus approach has been widely recognized for its effectiveness, its adaptation to the need of male survivors, particularly adolescent boys, remains limited. Integrating explicit strategies to identify, support, and protect boys within any framework or model would strengthen the inclusivity of male victims and ensure that ‘child protection’ applies equally to all children, regardless of gender. In the context where male victimization is under-recognized, both approaches can be adapted for gender inclusivity and could serve as crucial prototypes for both safeguarding and justice.

Even the strongest models cannot succeed without political will, institutional accountability, and sustained funding.

## Principle 2: Address the need for safe housing as the foundation for healing and long-term stability.

Housing insecurity, when combined with other socio-economic vulnerabilities highlighted throughout this framework, increases the risk of trafficking and hinders recovery for survivors. Emerging research, including findings from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and survivor-informed studies, affirms that homelessness can function as both a cause and consequence of trafficking.<sup>49</sup> This makes access to safe, welcoming, trauma-responsive housing essential. Without it, male survivors often remain in unstable or unsafe environments that increase their risk of continued exploitation. Safe, stable housing is not just a basic need; it is the foundation for recovery. It reduces the likelihood of revictimization and opens pathways to healing by supporting access to mental health care, substance-use treatment, education, job training, and community-based support systems. When housing is paired with wraparound services, it becomes a vital stepping stone toward long-term stability, dignity, and reintegration.

Yet the housing infrastructure for sex trafficking survivors remains alarmingly inadequate – a core failure of the U.S. and global antitrafficking responses, which too often overlook long-term recovery. Across the U.S., fewer than 600 beds are designated for survivors of sex trafficking, and the vast majority

of those are for female-identifying individuals.<sup>50</sup> Fewer than 20 are designated for adult male survivors, and there are zero beds available for male survivors younger than 18.<sup>51</sup> This stems from the widespread but false assumption that men and boys are not trafficked.

Around the world, most shelter systems have been built around the needs of women and girls, with little to no infrastructure designed to meet the specific needs of male survivors. The result is a dangerous gap in care – one that leaves many survivors without access to trauma-responsive housing, critical services, or safe environments in which to begin healing. Without inclusive housing systems, meaningful recovery remains out of reach for far too many.

Traditional homeless shelters and transitional housing programs are often ill-equipped to meet the needs of survivors, particularly boys and men. Survivors of sex trafficking frequently endure profound trauma that affects their mental, emotional, and physical well-being, rooted in repeated violations of their bodily autonomy and safety. The complexity requires housing responses that are trauma responsive and tailored to the unique needs of male survivors. When these elements are in place, they not only break through stigma, but also create the conditions for true healing and long-term recovery.<sup>52</sup>

Around the world, most shelter systems have been built around the needs of women and girls, with little to no infrastructure designed to meet the specific needs of male survivors.

# What Trauma-Responsive Housing Services Look Like

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Trauma-responsive care follows principles of safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural responsiveness.<sup>53</sup> In housing services, these principles create environments where survivors feel safe, empowered, and respected—where their voices are heard, their worth is recognized, and their healing journey becomes not only possible but sustainable.<sup>54</sup> Trauma-responsive housing needs to offer the following:

- **Safety:** Physical and emotional safety within housing facilities is crucial for survivors to feel secure and supported as they begin addressing trauma, engage in treatment (for mental health, substance use, and other issues, if needed), and rebuild a sense of control over their lives.
- **Trust and transparency:** Survivors must be informed about the services they are receiving, with clear communication that fosters trust. When survivors understand what to expect from a program, they are more likely to participate fully and begin healing.
- **Peer support:** Connecting with others who've had similar experiences reduces isolation and breaks down stigma—especially for male survivors who may have been taught not to speak about their trauma. Peer support spaces are often the first step toward restoring a sense of belonging and hope, offering connection, trust, and a foundation for healing.
- **Collaboration:** Effective trauma-responsive housing models rely on collaboration across service providers, mental health professionals, legal advocates, and survivors themselves. Cross-sector partnerships increase impact, reduce duplication, and ensure that care is coordinated, comprehensive, and survivor-driven. Funders play a vital role in supporting collaborative networks that sustain holistic, long-term healing pathways.

- **Empowerment:** Programs should encourage autonomy and self-determination. Giving survivors a voice in their housing and recovery plans restores dignity and supports long-term resilience.
- **Cultural responsiveness:** Culturally responsive and gender-responsive care recognizes that survivors come from a wide range of lived experiences. Tailoring services to meet individual needs, particularly for those who may face additional barriers due to bias, stigma, or systemic challenges, is critical to fostering trust and supporting long-term healing.

Housing programs that do not incorporate trauma-responsive practices risk retraumatizing survivors and making them less likely to remain engaged in care, more vulnerable to instability and exploitation, and more likely to return to unsafe environments. However, even when housing providers recognize the need for trauma-responsive care, they often struggle to find funding for it. Public and private funding streams often fail to account for the full spectrum of survivor needs. The lack of targeted funding for male survivors means that, even where shelters exist, they often lack the specialized programming and support necessary to address male survivors' unique challenges, such as longer delays in disclosure compared to female survivors, high rates of untreated substance use tied to coping, the stigma of being seen as weak or complicit, the fear of being perceived as gay or unmasculine, and the absence of peer groups or counselors trained to support male-identifying survivors of sexual trauma. Without significant investment, housing programs will remain inaccessible or ineffective for many survivors who need them most, leaving male survivors, especially young people, without access to the stability and healing required to move forward, rebuild their lives, and move on to a better future.

## Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care

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Youth aging out of foster care, often referred to as transition-age youth, are among the most vulnerable to trafficking and housing insecurity. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1 in 7 runaway youth have reported being trafficked.<sup>55</sup> Shared Hope International reports that 20,000 older youth exiting foster care each year are at heightened risk for commercial sexual exploitation compared to their peers.<sup>56</sup> The instability and trauma many young people experience in foster care can leave them especially

vulnerable to manipulation and coercion by traffickers. This risk is compounded by the fact that, upon exiting care, many lack stable housing, supportive networks, or financial security – conditions that create a perfect storm for exploitation.

Trauma-responsive care is critical for this population, addressing not only housing insecurity and the long-term effects of foster-care-related trauma<sup>57</sup> but also the stigma and systemic barriers that often follow transitioning youth into adulthood.

According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1 in 7 runaway youth have reported being trafficked.

## LGBTQ+ Youth

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LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented within the trafficking survivor population and the homeless and foster-care systems.<sup>58</sup> Their risk is heightened not only by housing instability but also by the ways in which their gender identity or sexual orientation intersect with histories of sexual exploitation and trauma. Most shelters and housing programs lack staff trained to meet the specific needs of LGBTQ+ youth.<sup>59</sup> These gaps leave LGBTQ+ survivors particularly vulnerable and often cause them to be retraumatized by the very systems meant to support them. Programs that do offer LGBTQ+-inclusive, trauma-responsive housing play a critical role in reducing isolation, building trust, and supporting long-term recovery, especially for young people transitioning out of systems like foster care, where rejection and instability have been a defining part of their experience.<sup>60</sup>

These overlapping vulnerabilities point to an urgent need for investment in housing models that reflect the realities of transition-age youth and all male

survivors including those who identify as LGBTQ+. Without targeted, trauma-responsive support, these young people are left navigating adulthood with little more than survival strategies.

Philanthropic investors have an opportunity to invest in trauma-responsive housing and support programs tailored to transition-age youth who have experienced trafficking, particularly those exiting foster care, facing housing instability, or disconnected from family support. These investments should prioritize wraparound services including mental health care, peer mentorship, education and job training, and pathways to stable housing that meet the complex needs of young survivors once they are identified, regardless of identity. Flexible funding models that support individualized care with relocation assistance, extended transitional housing, and peer-led programming can reduce the risk of re-exploitation and help establish a foundation for long-term healing and stability.

## Adapting What Works: Housing Models with Opportunities for Expansion

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Programs like Bob's House of Hope have set a standard in trauma-responsive housing services. Bob's House of Hope, founded in 2021 by Ranch Hands Rescue, is one of the only programs in the U.S. designed for male survivors of sex trafficking.<sup>61</sup> Recognizing a glaring gap in care for boys and men, Ranch Hands Rescue created a long-term residential program tailored to adult male survivors' trauma, which is often compounded by years of silence, stigma, and lack of recognition. Bob's House of Hope integrates safe housing with trauma-responsive therapy, individualized recovery planning, mentorship, and access to education and employment support. The organization has become a national leader in redefining how healing-centered services can look for male-identified survivors. Bob's House of Hope expects to expand and open a safe home for male survivors under 18 by the end of 2025, to begin closing this service gap.<sup>62</sup>

Other notable U.S. initiatives include Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking, or CAST, in Los Angeles, which offers multilingual housing support alongside legal advocacy, mental health services, and job training.<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile, Covenant House, with locations across the U.S., Canada, and Latin America, provides emergency and long-term housing for youth experiencing homelessness, many of whom have survived trafficking.<sup>64</sup> While not exclusively designed for male survivors, these programs offer essential insights into integrated service delivery and scalable, trauma-responsive housing approaches.

At the same time, well-established residential programs for women and girls provide a vital

blueprint. These organizations have pioneered best practices in wraparound care, legal navigation, clinical support, and reintegration services. With strategic investment, their models could be adapted and expanded to meet the distinct needs of male survivors – not by simply duplicating what exists, but by building on it through partnership and innovation.

Other things we can learn from existing programs:

- **Healing-centered, wraparound care:** Programs like Kristi House's Project GOLD<sup>65</sup> (Miami) and Pearl Haven by Ho'ōla Nā Pua<sup>66</sup> (Honolulu) provide long-term, trauma-responsive environments that combine housing with therapeutic care, educational access, and mentorship. These comprehensive approaches could be tailored to male survivors who currently have few if any equivalent options.
- **Re-entry and life skills development:** Reflection Ministries<sup>67</sup> (Midland, Texas) offers transitional housing with a strong emphasis on life skills, health services, and vocational readiness. Its focus on long-term reintegration provides a roadmap for preparing male survivors for independence and stability.
- **Culturally responsive support:** The Pathfinder Center<sup>68</sup> (South Dakota) exemplifies culturally grounded care for Indigenous survivors. Expanding its scope to include Native American boys and men would fill a critical gap while affirming the importance of culture in healing practices.

These organizations have pioneered best practices in wraparound care, legal navigation, clinical support, and reintegration services.

## Global Models

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Just as U.S. programs offer foundational insights into trauma-responsive housing, international initiatives provide additional strategies that can inform a more inclusive, global response to the needs of male survivors. While no single model is universally applicable, programs in Colombia, Brazil, South Africa, the Philippines, Thailand, and beyond use adaptable frameworks that prioritize safety, healing, and cultural integration. These examples offer valuable lessons for policymakers, practitioners, and funders, especially in contexts where male survivors remain underserved or invisible. Key lessons include:

- **Holistic support services:** Programs that combine housing with psychological care, legal aid, education, and reintegration foster long-term stability. Colombia's Fundación Renacer offers a compelling model that addresses the layered trauma of boys through safe housing, therapy, and legal advocacy – creating a full continuum of care.<sup>69</sup>
- **Community and cultural integration:** The Preda Foundation (People's Recovery Empowerment Development Assistance) in the Philippines provides housing and comprehensive care for child survivors of trafficking while incorporating art therapy, play-based healing, and culturally rooted mental health practices in their community-based shelters.<sup>70</sup>
- **Survivor-centered approach:** Models like Fundación Renacer and Thailand's HUG Project place survivor's autonomy, safety, and empowerment at the core of their program design. HUG's successful integrated model of prevention, intervention, and long-term recovery, which includes short and long-term housing, underscores how consistent, survivor-led care can support sustained healing. Taking such an approach could help close service gaps in the U.S.<sup>71</sup>

## Challenges and Considerations

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While these global models offer promising strategies, adapting and scaling them to the U.S. context requires navigating key challenges including funding disparities and societal attitudes that continue to obscure the realities of male survivors. Housing programs struggle to secure resources to expand services, and many lack staff trained in trauma-responsive practices. In addition, many of the international programs cited here as potential models operate in relative isolation,

often without structured opportunities to share best practices or scale impact through coordinated funding. A global convening that brings together these programs, alongside U.S.-based providers, policymakers, and philanthropic leaders, could foster meaningful collaboration. Such a platform could enhance service delivery beyond emergency shelter, encouraging shared strategies for integrating mental health care, legal advocacy, peer support, and life and job skills training into survivor-centered housing.

**Housing programs struggle to secure resources to expand services, and many lack staff trained in trauma-responsive practices.**

## Recommendations for Expanding Trauma-Responsive Housing

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- **Create targeted housing investments:** Federal and state governments, in collaboration with philanthropic and private partners, must fund and develop safe houses and long-term housing programs designed specifically for male survivors, providing access to tailored, trauma-responsive support services.
- **Integrate holistic services:** Housing should be part of a comprehensive support network, connecting survivors with mental health professionals, job training programs, legal advocates, healthcare providers, and peer support services.
- **Advocate for policy reform:** Ensure housing policies are inclusive of male survivors through targeted legislative changes.
- **Ensure shelters are trauma-responsive and culturally responsive:** Safe houses and long-term housing programs for male

survivors must be staffed by professionals trained in trauma-responsive and culturally responsive care, ensuring environments that offer healing, dignity, and effective support.

According to a report by the National Human Trafficking Hotline, only a small fraction of U.S. housing programs offer services tailored to the needs of male survivors.<sup>72</sup> Coupled with the fact that only 0.2 percent of global anti-trafficking funding is allocated to male survivors,<sup>73</sup> makes clear the urgent need for a comprehensive, global response— one that includes cross-sector collaboration and sustained funding. Housing must be prioritized not just as an emergency intervention, but as a foundation for long-term recovery and community reintegration. Strengthening funding streams, developing inclusive policies, and investing in survivor-centered solutions can ensure stability, autonomy, and healing. Every investment in housing is an investment in a survivor's future.

## Peer-Led Community-Based Healing Models

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While housing is foundational for most survivors, it is not the only path to stability. For some, peer-led healing models can offer a comparable sense of safety, connection, and support, especially when grounded in stable environments that nurture their healing. Peer-led, community-based models offer low-barrier, scalable, and survivor-directed pathways to healing. These programs are often built on mutual support, lived experience, and shared identity, which provide an essential complement to institutional and shelter-based approaches.

One leading model of trauma-responsive healing services for male survivors is MenHealing, a nonprofit organization providing accessible, specialized programming for men who have experienced sexual victimization. Their work stands out for its survivor-centered design, peer support infrastructure, and commitment to healing.

The MenHealing's Weekend of Recovery is a flagship, three-day retreat designed to create a safe, supportive environment where survivors can engage in transformative healing work. These weekends offer a blend of large and small group sessions, expressive arts, body-based healing practices, and trauma-responsive facilitation. Since 2001, MenHealing has conducted over 103 Weekend of Recovery and Day of Recovery events, serving more than 2,000 men to date.<sup>74</sup> MenHealing continues to expand its impact by collaborating with individuals and agencies to bring Weekend of Recovery and Day of Recovery events to local communities across different regions. With additional financial support, they aim to increase access to these healing opportunities nationwide and beyond.

In addition to retreats, MenHealing supports a robust peer support network that includes:

- Alumni peer support groups for those who have attended a Weekend of Recovery or Day of Recovery.
- Community peer support groups open to all male survivors, regardless of prior engagement.
- Partner peer support groups provide for loved ones of survivors to process their own experiences, strengthening relational resilience, which enriches the path forward for all involved while fostering stronger, more resilient relationships.<sup>75</sup> Because peer support groups are conducted virtually, they are accessible to participants outside the U.S., expanding MenHealing's reach.

MenHealing's work also provides trauma-responsive support for incarcerated survivors through the Healing Outreach for Men Everywhere (H.O.M.E.) project.<sup>76</sup> This program includes a 154-page interactive e-book available on tablets in 1,225 correctional facilities across 46 U.S. states, reaching over 1,000,000 men behind bars.<sup>77</sup> This H.O.M.E. resource includes written narratives with video and audio content offering trauma-responsive guidance to men who are often the most marginalized and unseen. The H.O.M.E. curriculum is now also available in print, and an e-book version is forthcoming for public use. MenHealing is seeking funding to support a Spanish-language translation of the H.O.M.E. resource.

In addition, MenHealing offers digital resources like the "Just Healing" podcast, "Skills for Healing" educational videos, and "Beyond Survival: Voices of Healing," a video storytelling series.<sup>78</sup>

These resources work to reduce stigma, normalize healing, and provide critical tools for survivors, practitioners, and communities.

Another example of a male-centered, trauma-responsive, peer-led model is the **Circle Keeper process and "La Cultura Cura" (Culture is Medicine) philosophy**, developed by the National Compadres Network (NCN). This culturally rooted approach draws from Indigenous knowledge, ceremony, and values. It honors physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual balance, creating space for healing that affirms each person's purpose and connection to community. At the heart of this process is el Círculo (the Circle), a space where individuals gather to share stories, build trust, and engage in mutual healing. Rather than approaching trauma through a clinical lens, el Círculo offers a relational, values-based experience rooted in Indigenous teachings where circle dialogue and culturally relevant mentorship support participants as they address intergenerational trauma. As a model for culturally responsive care, La Cultura Cura demonstrates how healing frameworks that honor Indigenous worldviews can produce powerful outcomes – particularly if adapted for male survivors, who are often overlooked within existing systems of care.

Whether in the form of a shelter bed, a healing circle, or a retreat in the woods, **what matters most is that support exists when a survivor is ready to step forward.** Housing provides critical safety and stability. Peer-led models offer connection, purpose, and belonging. Both housing and peer-led models are essential. We must build systems that are flexible enough to meet all survivors where they are – and strong enough to ensure that no boy, no young man, no survivor who reaches for help is left behind.

| **What matters most is that support exists when a survivor is ready to step forward.**

# Principle 3: Invest in trauma-responsive mental health support and substance-use treatment tailored to survivors' realities.

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Providing a healing environment for survivors of trafficking is impossible without addressing substance-use disorder. Nearly 84 percent of human trafficking survivors of all genders in the U.S. reported substance use during or after their exploitation, with the percentage often higher among male survivors.<sup>79</sup> Anyone planning and delivering comprehensive recovery services must understand the complex role substance use plays in victims' and survivors' lives as a method of control during victimization and a coping mechanism in the aftermath of the trauma.

Traffickers frequently, and deliberately, introduce or exploit substance use to coerce and maintain control over victims, impair their judgment, and deepen their reliance on the trafficker, creating cycles of dependency that make escape difficult. Often, traffickers exacerbate a pre-existing substance-use disorder or foster new dependencies.<sup>80</sup> By controlling access to drugs, traffickers trap victims under the guise of providing safety and stability. Emergency room doctors treating trafficking victims have noted that traffickers use substances to manipulate victims, worsening trauma and obstructing recovery.<sup>81</sup>

At the same, survivors often rely on substances to cope with the overwhelming psychological and physical trauma they endure. As a survivor who has spent over 30 years in recovery from substance use, I've witnessed this firsthand in my own life and the lives of other survivors. The repeated violation of bodily autonomy we experienced often leaves deep scars that show up as constant battles with complex-PTSD, depression, and anxiety.<sup>82</sup> Substance use can be a way to self-medicate, especially in the face of stigma or rejection – whether due to expectations tied to masculinity or manhood, or a lack of support from family and community. What begins as a way to numb the pain can quickly evolve into a cycle of dependency, further isolating survivors from the support they desperately need.

Male survivors who turn to drugs as a way to cope also carry the weight of stigma tied to addiction and masculinity. Societal beliefs that a “real man” should control his substance use and that asking for help is a sign of weakness can silence survivors and deepen their isolation. These harmful narratives make it harder for men to come forward or access the care they need. Breaking this double bind requires trauma-responsive substance-use treatment that is survivor-centered and responsive to the specific experiences of male survivors.

## A Challenge to Access Treatment

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Traditional substance-use programs often fail trafficking survivors by neglecting the underlying trauma that fuels addiction.<sup>83</sup> Many treatment models overlook the complex relationship between substance use and exploitation. Without trauma-responsive approaches, survivors risk re-traumatization during recovery, increasing the likelihood that they will disengage from recovery programs and services or relapse into substance use. Effective programs center survivors in their own healing and offer safe, respectful, and culturally attuned care. Research by Mariaca Pacheco shows that survivors are more likely to engage with services that acknowledge the

cultural, familial, and emotional complexities of their relationships.<sup>84</sup> Trauma does not exist in isolation. It affects every aspect of a survivor's life. To truly support male survivors, treatment must be embedded within a broader ecosystem of care – one that addresses substance dependency alongside stable housing, accessible mental health services, economic opportunity, and continuity of care. Until these systems are linked and resourced to work together, too many survivors will continue to struggle in silence, fall through the cracks, and remain trapped in responses that were never designed with them in mind.

## Urgent Need for Regulation

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While expanding access to treatment is critical, so is ensuring that recovery environments are safe and accountable. Disturbingly, federal task force investigations have uncovered alarming cases where individuals were lured into sober living programs under the guise of recovery, only to be sexually exploited by those in power.<sup>85</sup>

Without oversight, programs meant to heal can become exploitative and retraumatize rather than rehabilitate, preying on individuals at their most vulnerable. Survivors deserve more than just a bed; they need safe spaces that prioritize healing over profit and systems that prevent exploitation from masquerading as care.

## The Case for Investment in Survivor-Centered Recovery

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Survivors of trafficking often face overlapping struggles with substance use and mental health, but too often, the services they need aren't connected. Instead of finding coordinated support, survivors are bounced between disconnected systems that don't understand their trauma, don't speak to each other, and don't provide care that fits their lived realities. The result? Opportunities for long-term healing are lost.

**Philanthropic investors have a chance to lead – not just in funding treatment beds, but in supporting a complete shift in how we approach recovery for survivors of trafficking.** This means investing in trauma-responsive substance-use programs that are embedded within broader anti-trafficking care networks, grounded in cultural relevance, and led by those with lived experience.

## Priority Actions for Survivor-Centered Substance-Use Treatment

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To effectively address the intersection of substance use, mental health, and sex trafficking, philanthropists, government agencies, and nonprofit leaders must strengthen recovery systems by supporting efforts to:

- **Scale trauma-responsive treatment:** Expand substance-use programs that recognize the unique trauma associated with trafficking, and ensure providers are trained to foster trust, safety, and long-term recovery.
- **Invest in community-guided care:** Collaborate with trusted, on-the-ground organizations to develop treatment models that are accessible, culturally grounded, and informed by the needs of the populations they serve.
- **Integrate services across housing, legal aid, and workforce support:** Embed substance-use treatment within coordinated, wraparound service networks to address the full scope of survivor needs.
- **Ensure oversight and accountability:** Strengthen regulatory standards and monitoring for sober living environments and treatment programs to prevent exploitation and ensure survivor safety.

- **Leverage cross-sector partnerships:** Align public, private, and philanthropic resources to expand sustainable, survivor-specific recovery programs that can be scaled and adapted across regions.
- **Convene to share place-based best practices:** Support regional and international convenings that bring together practitioners, survivors, funders, and researchers to exchange lessons learned and advance context-specific, survivor-centered strategies. These gatherings can serve as catalysts for innovation, capacity building, and coordinated investment in high-need regions.

By aligning systems and investing in coordinated care, we can turn fragmented responses into real pathways forward. **Tailoring substance-use treatment to survivors' needs is about more than service delivery; it's a chance to rebuild trust, restore stability, and ensure every survivor has the opportunity to move beyond survival toward a life of purpose and possibility.**

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# Principle 4: Private sector innovations must bolster government and philanthropic supports.

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Addressing human trafficking and meeting the full needs of survivors require more than the muscle of government funding or philanthropic programs. The private sector must also play a role. It has powerful, underutilized tools to accelerate impact: data, infrastructure, capital, platforms, and creativity. From airlines to real estate developers, hospitality companies to immersive tech firms, industries across the globe are beginning to engage – but their **contributions remain fragmented, often focused on awareness campaigns rather than sustainable, survivor-centered solutions.**

Banks, real estate developers, airlines, hotel chains, and technology companies must now take the next step: moving beyond visibility campaigns toward direct, survivor-centered investment. When these business sectors collaborate meaningfully with survivor-led organizations and government agencies, they have the

power to reshape recovery ecosystems and drive long-term, sustainable change. Impact investing, corporate philanthropy, and corporate social responsibility programs must be aligned with the real needs of survivors: housing, economic opportunity, and trauma-responsive substance-use and mental health care.

This section explores how private-sector engagement can truly and effectively invest in survivor recovery. It highlights both the innovations already underway and the critical gaps still unfilled – particularly for male survivors and those overlooked by traditional systems. **Now is the time for bold cross-sector collaboration.** The private sector has the capacity to help scale what works, incubate what's next, and partner with survivors to build the future they deserve. Through a globally coordinated approach, the private sector can redefine its role in combating trafficking, ensuring survivors are truly empowered to thrive.

Industries across the globe are beginning to engage – but their contributions remain fragmented, often focused on awareness campaigns rather than sustainable, survivor-centered solutions.

# Travel and Hospitality Industry

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One of the most visible and high-potential sectors in this work is travel and hospitality, where infrastructure, mobility, and human interaction intersect with both exploitation and opportunity.

## Aviation

The travel and aviation industries have become key players in the fight against human trafficking due to their direct access to transit hubs frequently exploited by traffickers. Airlines have increasingly adopted proactive measures to prevent trafficking, identify potential victims, and support law enforcement in real-time interventions. However, the scope of their involvement can and should extend beyond anti-trafficking interventions to include survivor support, ensuring a holistic approach to combating exploitation and fostering recovery.

A standout example of private-sector leadership in trafficking prevention is Volaris, a Mexican airline that has partnered with ECPAT through its global initiative The Code, short for “The Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism.”<sup>86</sup> The first airline in Latin America to adopt these measures, Volaris has set a precedent for the region. Their approach includes training over half of their workforce to recognize and report trafficking indicators, implementing zero-tolerance policies within contracts, and engaging in internal and public communication campaigns to raise awareness about trafficking.<sup>87</sup> Other airlines, such as Delta Air Lines, American Airlines, and British Airways have similarly adopted training programs and anti-trafficking protocols in partnership with ECPAT’s Down to Zero program, which is a multicountry alliance committed to ending the commercial sexual exploitation of children through partnerships with civil society, governments, communities, and the private sector.<sup>88</sup> Active in Latin America and Southeast Asia, the program works with industries such as travel, tourism, information and communication technology (ICT), and transportation to implement child protection measures, build staff capacity, and foster systemic accountability across sectors.

Blue Lightning Initiative, a collaboration between the U.S. Departments of Transportation and Homeland Security and part of DHS’s Blue Campaign to end human trafficking, has trained over 350,000 aviation personnel to identify and report trafficking cases, providing a critical link between the aviation industry and federal law enforcement.

Airlines have shown that proactive measures, such as diverting flights, training employees, and reporting suspicious activity can save children from being trafficked. For instance, frontline staff trained to identify red flags provide critical information to law enforcement, enabling swift intervention. These tangible actions not only disrupt trafficking operations but also raise awareness among travelers and employees.

Expanding on these initiatives to include survivor services, such as transportation vouchers for survivors to reach safe housing, mental health facilities, and retreats hosted by peer-led support groups would demonstrate an even greater commitment to holistic care. By partnering with survivor-led organizations, airlines could help bridge critical gaps in support systems, ensuring that survivors have the resources they need to rebuild their lives. Airlines can deepen their commitment by:

- **Funding survivor housing initiatives:** Corporate foundations could allocate grant funds and program-related investments to support the acquisition and/or development of survivor housing (including safe houses) in partnership with nonprofit organizations.
- **Creating grants for survivor-led organizations:** Survivor-led groups often face funding challenges despite their critical work in providing culturally responsive, trauma-responsive care. Airlines could establish dedicated grant programs to support these organizations, ensuring that survivors have access to wraparound services.
- **Leveraging loyalty programs for good:** Airlines could explore ways to allow customers to donate unused frequent flyer miles to survivors needing travel for relocation, therapy, or court proceedings.

- **Leveraging loyalty programs for good:** Airlines could explore ways to allow customers to donate unused frequent flyer miles to survivors needing travel for relocation, therapy, or court proceedings.
- **Enhancing survivor assistance protocols:** Establishing partnerships with survivor advocacy and peer support groups could enable airlines to develop protocols for providing direct assistance for transportation.
- **Establish a survivor speaker support program:** Many survivors are called upon to share their experiences at conferences, panels, and advocacy events, yet are often unable to afford travel expenses. Airline companies could offer loyalty points to fund hotel stays for survivor advocates when they travel for professional speaking engagements, training, or advocacy work.

## Hotels

Hotels are frequently used as venues for both short- and long-term exploitation, including commercial sex trafficking and child sexual abuse. Traffickers often rely on the anonymity and accessibility of hotels to facilitate exploitation while avoiding detection, making the hospitality industry a frontline space for both harm and intervention. The hospitality industry plays a crucial role in combating human trafficking, yet many hotels focus on female victims and overlook the exploitation of men and boys. Hotel chains can step up their commitments by partnering with airlines, other private sector entities and technology companies, and survivor-led organizations to implement innovative, survivor-centered solutions that specifically address the needs of male survivors. For example, they could:

- **Learn from survivor expertise:** One critical area for improvement is in employee training and survivor engagement. While most major hotel brands mandate anti-trafficking training for employees, these trainings often rely on generic videos rather than real-world insights from experts with lived experience. Hotels should prioritize in-person survivor-led training sessions, particularly with the participation of male survivors, to shift perceptions and expand staff awareness. Annual board meetings, industry conferences, and employee gatherings offer prime opportunities for survivor advocates to provide firsthand perspectives on the realities

of trafficking in hotels. Survivor engagement should not be volunteer or unpaid; hotels must compensate survivors for their expertise, recognizing the value they bring to the industry's anti-trafficking strategies.

- **Donate short-term emergency housing:** Wyndham Hotels has donated Wyndham Rewards points to provide safe short-term accommodations for survivors awaiting shelter placement.<sup>89</sup> Other hotels could do the same at a much larger scale, offering an alternative to shelters that are often at full capacity or unequipped to handle male survivors.
- **Establish a survivor speaker support program:** Many survivors are called upon to share their experiences at conferences, panels, and advocacy events, yet are often unable to afford lodging expenses. Hotel chains could offer loyalty points to fund hotel stays for survivor advocates when they travel for professional speaking engagements, training, or advocacy work.
- **Expand hotel foundation funding to address male survivor needs:** Foundations affiliated with hotel corporations have already contributed significantly to the fight against trafficking, supporting programs related to homelessness, transition-age youth, and female survivors. For instance, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation has funded the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking, or CAST, which provides direct services to survivors and supports advocates working to make systemic change.<sup>90</sup> Through its Catholic Sisters initiative, the foundation also supports congregations of Catholic sisters globally in their work to combat human trafficking as part of broader social justice missions.<sup>91</sup> Other hotel-aligned foundations have also stepped up. The J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation, Marriott International, and Hyatt Hotels Foundation have all contributed to the American Hotel & Lodging Association Foundation's No Room for Trafficking Survivors Fund.<sup>92</sup> Wyndham Hotels & Resorts has shown leadership by partnering with organizations like Polaris to train hotel staff in human trafficking identification and prevention, while funding programs for disadvantaged youth.<sup>93</sup> Despite meaningful progress, few of these philanthropic efforts explicitly focus on male survivors of trafficking or transition-age youth populations who have experienced exploitation.

To close this gap, hotel foundations can expand their grantmaking to fund safe housing tailored to male survivors, multilingual awareness campaigns that destigmatize male victimhood, and survivor-led initiatives that provide peer support and professional development. With small yet intentional adjustments to their giving strategies, the hospitality sector can build a more inclusive, effective response to help ensure that all survivors, regardless of gender, have access to the care and resources they need.

- **Donate conference space and resources for anti-trafficking convenings:** Hotels could donate conference space, meals, and accommodations for anti-trafficking summits, survivor convenings, and professional development conferences and offer lodging packages for speakers and attendees, ensuring that survivors and organizations, often with limited funding, can fully participate. Hotels could also develop “Survivor Scholarship” programs to fully fund travel, lodging, and participation fees for trafficking survivors who want to attend global human rights or anti-trafficking conferences.

- **Implement smart technology for trafficking detection:** Because traffickers frequently use hotels as sites of exploitation, AI-driven smart technology may improve prevention and detection efforts. Some technology companies and hospitality brands have implemented smart building solutions for energy efficiency and security; these same smart thermostats, occupancy sensors, and AI-powered surveillance systems could identify irregular room usage patterns that could indicate illicit activity. Several anti-trafficking organizations, such as Polaris, Thorn, and ECPAT, collaborate with corporate partners to explore innovative uses of technology to catch traffickers. These collaborations have potential; however, privacy protections and ethical considerations need to be in place.

The hospitality and travel industries have a unique opportunity to go beyond awareness campaigns and training by investing in survivor-centered, long-term solutions that create meaningful pathways to safety, healing, and empowerment for all survivors, including men and boys.

## Impact Investing

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One of the most powerful yet underleveraged tools for advancing survivor recovery is impact investing. It channels private and philanthropic capital into housing and can be used to fund survivor housing, healing, and long-term support projects – areas that, as outlined throughout this report, are too often excluded from traditional funding streams. Family foundations, corporate philanthropies, hospital conversion foundations, community foundations, donor-advised funds, and mission-aligned investment firms must look beyond conventional grantmaking to scale survivor-centered solutions. **When funding sources align capital with impact, they can close critical gaps and build the infrastructure survivors need to heal and thrive.**

By blending philanthropic dollars with investments from high-net-worth individuals, flexible financing can be mobilized to acquire and rehabilitate housing or construct new units more rapidly. Program-Related Investments (PRIs) – strategic

investments made by private foundations to support charitable activities – are one such tool. PRIs can take the form of low-interest loans, loan guarantees, or equity investments. They must serve a charitable purpose, not have profit as the primary motive, and count toward a foundation’s 5 percent annual payout requirement.

Unlike traditional grants, PRIs can be recycled and reinvested, making them a sustainable vehicle for long-term solutions. When paired with public-private partnerships, these tools can fund land acquisition, housing development, property rehabilitation, and the creation of healing and retreat spaces tailored for survivors.

Returns for investors are tied to both financial sustainability and community impact. For example, Bob’s House of Hope reports that survivors in long term trauma-responsive housing are significantly less likely to be re-exploited, with 80 percent transitioning into employment or education within one year.<sup>94</sup>

Outcomes such as housing stability, economic participation, and improved mental health are key performance indicators that build investor confidence and create a replicable model for survivor recovery.

The severe lack of housing for male survivors remains a critical gap in the anti-trafficking response. Bob's House of Hope's model demonstrates what is possible when survivors are provided with secure environments, therapeutic services, and mentorship. Scaling such efforts through impact investing could mobilize private-sector resources to fund survivor-centered housing, ensuring stability and long-term recovery for this underserved population.

The LA4LA Fund, a housing-focused impact investment initiative in Los Angeles, offers a compelling example of how this model can address critical housing shortages.<sup>95</sup> By blending philanthropic capital with investments from high net-worth individuals, LA4LA deploys flexible financing to acquire and rehabilitate existing housing and construct new units to rapidly house people facing homelessness.<sup>96</sup> This model holds powerful potential for adaptation: a similar fund tailored to the needs of male trafficking survivors could deliver stable housing paired with critical wraparound supports. While male survivors face unique systemic barriers, this approach, rooted in impact investing, offers a path forward that can scale quickly and sustainably.

To realize this vision, underutilized actors must step in. Real estate developers, real estate

investment trusts (REITs), and corporate foundations remain largely untapped sources of funding for survivor housing. Partnering with survivor-led organizations like Bob's House of Hope (U.S.) and Fundación Renacer (Colombia) would enable these stakeholders to scale housing initiatives and extend their reach to those most often excluded from traditional systems. The real estate sector, particularly large-scale multifamily developers and REITs, has immense potential to contribute directly. These industry leaders could:

- **Donate existing properties:** Allocate vacant or underutilized units to survivor-led housing programs.
- **Build free or low-cost housing:** Integrate trauma-responsive design into philanthropic and CSR initiatives that prioritize survivor safety and healing.
- **Establish survivor housing investment funds:** Create dedicated funds to finance survivor housing.

To scale effectively, survivor housing must go beyond traditional nonprofit models and embrace broader corporate partnerships. Sectors already engaged in anti-trafficking awareness, such as airlines and hotel chains, can deepen their impact by funding housing through CSR initiatives, donating loyalty points for emergency stays, or offering in-kind resources including meeting spaces for survivor-led convenings.

**The severe lack of housing for male survivors remains a critical gap in the anti-trafficking response.**

## Expanding the Private Sector's Role in Mental Health Innovation

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Beyond frontline industries like hospitality and travel, the tech sector is developing tools with enormous potential for trauma recovery. Mental health innovations, particularly in virtual reality, are emerging as scalable, culturally adaptable solutions that can be deployed in safe houses, shelters, and community recovery centers. With philanthropic investment and cross-sector collaboration, these tools could revolutionize how male survivors access care.

The private sector's advancements in VR technology have opened new opportunities in mental health and trauma recovery. Private sector companies such as TRIPP have developed immersive therapeutic tools that support mindfulness, reduce anxiety, and address mental health challenges.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, other companies have been partnering with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs as immersive technology has been identified as critical for the future of health care.<sup>99</sup> VA Immersive, part of the VA's Office of Healthcare Innovation and Learning, has been expanding its community of practice and implementing immersive technology in clinical settings across the nation. For example, Mynd Immersive partnered with VA Immersive to develop "Virtual Vietnam: A Path to Peace," a VR therapy program that aims to help Vietnam War veterans confront and process trauma in a controlled environment.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, Innerworld partnered with the Veterans Health Administration to develop a VR therapy program aimed at improving veterans' overall well-being and sense of community.<sup>101</sup> These partnerships highlight the potential of VR therapy to provide effective, trauma-responsive care for individuals suffering from complex PTSD and other mental health conditions. VR exposure therapy has been effective in reducing PTSD symptoms by 34 percent among veterans.<sup>102</sup> With appropriate oversight and funding, similar VR therapy programs could be developed in partnership with government agencies and philanthropy to

support survivors of human trafficking, helping them process trauma and rebuild their lives.

While these innovations from TRIPP, Mynd Immersive, and Innerworld hold immense promise, they remain inaccessible to many due to the lack of multilingual and culturally relevant programming. For example, survivors in transitional shelters in Mexico, Brazil, Cambodia, or Thailand may not benefit from VR programs in English. Therefore, piloting multilingual and culturally relevant programming is essential. Addressing this gap requires collaboration with philanthropic, public, and private sector leaders to develop culturally and linguistically inclusive VR applications. While VR's application in trauma therapy is expanding, as of this writing, there are no documented partnerships between VR companies and organizations that focus on male survivors of human trafficking. Partnerships among survivor leaders, trauma specialists, translation experts, and private VR developers could expand access and ensure these tools meet the diverse needs of survivors. Working together, VR technology companies and organizations like Bob's House of Hope and Fundación Renacer could pioneer and pilot the use of VR in therapeutic settings to enhance trauma recovery of human trafficking survivors. Such partnerships would enable the development of tailored VR therapeutic content that addresses the unique cultural and psychological needs of varied survivor groups.

Integrating VR therapy into housing programs and counseling centers can provide survivors with accessible, immersive therapeutic experiences. By offering VR sessions within the safety of transitional housing or support facilities, survivors can engage in trauma processing without the barriers that traditional therapy settings might present. This enhances mental health support, contributes to a holistic recovery environment, and empowers survivors to rebuild their lives.

# Principle 5: Establish a global fund and backbone organization to coordinate solutions at the scale this crisis demands.

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To achieve lasting impact and transformative change, we must move beyond temporary fixes, siloed responses, and one-off investments. A centralized, survivor-informed backbone organization is critically needed to unify global efforts, align funding, and scale what works. This backbone organization will serve as the strategic anchor connecting global leaders, spurring innovation, and ensuring that frontline programs are well-resourced, coordinated, and equipped to respond so that male survivors of sex trafficking, sexual exploitation, and abuse receive the care they deserve.

Housed at Hispanics in Philanthropy (HIP), a trusted transnational philanthropic supporting organization with a proven track record in social innovation and gender-based violence prevention and response, this entity will fulfill the following needs:

- **Strategic coordination:** Convene key stakeholders across philanthropy, government, survivor-led groups, and the private sector to align strategies and measurable outcomes.
- **Global Knowledge hub:** Synthesize global research, best practices, survivor-informed training, and policy insights to guide collective action.
- **Funding alignment:** Help funders prioritize long-term investments over short-term projects by identifying high-impact opportunities across the survivor services ecosystem.
- **Capacity building:** Support under-resourced, survivor-led, and community-based organizations with technical assistance, training, and mentorship.
- **Accountability:** Ensure transparency and survivor leadership in governance, decision-making, and grant disbursement.

This infrastructure will offer a long-overdue, coordinated global response – one designed to ensure that no survivor is left behind.

To achieve lasting impact and transformative change, we must move beyond temporary fixes, siloed responses, and one-off investments.

## Kick Things off With a Global Convening

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To kickstart this infrastructure, the next step is clear: a strategic convening to design a backbone organization and pooled global fund. At this convening, we will unite cross-sector leaders including survivors, practitioners, donors, investors, and policymakers to shape the backbone organization's founding vision, set strategic priorities, and align funding commitments around four core goals:

- **Unify global best practices** to close critical gaps in data, standardize definitions, and identify effective, survivor-centered interventions.
- **Scale survivor-led solutions** from Latin America, Southeast Asia, the U.S., the Middle East and elsewhere to ensure promising models are resourced, not lost.
- **Strengthen funding pathways** through matching grants, catalytic capital, and blended finance, mobilizing commitments from philanthropy, impact investors, and financial institutions to

fund trauma-responsive housing, peer support, and mental health services that form pathways to income generation.

- **Advance survivor-centered global policy reforms** that address the unique needs of male survivors by partnering with frontline NGOs and global policymakers.

This convening builds on the momentum of prior global gatherings, including the 2023 Global Boys Summit hosted by ECPAT International in Morocco and the 2024 Violence Against Men and Boys Conference, both of which elevated male survivor issues onto the international stage.<sup>103</sup> This effort will focus on institutional design, bringing together cross-sector leaders to co-create a survivor-informed backbone organization and a pooled global fund, oriented toward long-term infrastructure and coordinated investment to scale survivor-centered solutions.

## Create the Global Survivors Fund to Support a Vision of Systemic Change

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To sustain this strategy, a Global Survivors Fund will be launched in tandem with the backbone organization or as an affiliated vehicle. The current funding landscape is significantly misaligned with the needs of male survivors. As mentioned, only 0.2 percent of global anti-trafficking funding is specifically allocated to male survivors. This is a clear underinvestment and consistent oversight in funding decisions that demands immediate intervention. Historically, the anti-trafficking sector has been fragmented, with philanthropic priorities shifting frequently. As a result, resources tend to be concentrated in particular regions or well-established programs, while promising survivor-led models like Bob's House of Hope, MenHealing, Fundación Renacer, and the National Compadres Network operate with limited support and scale. Funding is both insufficient and not well allocated, which means many of the most vulnerable survivors struggle to access the care they need to heal and rebuild.

To transform the global response to sex trafficking, we must move beyond short-term project funding and build a permanent, scalable financial structure that supports long-term recovery and stability

for all survivors, wherever they are. A Global Survivors Fund, either housed within the backbone organization or structured as an independent vehicle, could pool resources from philanthropic, public, and private partners to regrant funds to frontline programs around the world.

This model would help address persistent service gaps and expand access to stable housing, trauma recovery services, economic mobility, and leadership development, especially for populations and community-based organizations that have been historically overlooked or excluded from traditional funding streams. Core functions of the fund are:

- **Pool capital across sectors:** Combine philanthropic, private, and public investment to create a long-term, stable funding source for survivor services.
- **Establish and manage an endowment:** Ensure predictability and sustainability through a permanent endowment that avoids dependence on fluctuating annual donations.

- **Regrant to underserved organizations:** Prioritize front-line, survivor-led and community-based organizations that are often excluded from direct funding access.
- **Invest in housing and healing spaces:** Fund the acquisition, construction, and rehabilitation of emergency, transitional, and permanent housing with integrated, trauma-responsive support services tailored to men and boys. In addition, acquire and build out retreat and healing spaces where organizations like MenHealing, National Compadres Network, and other organizations that currently lease can conduct essential group therapy and recovery work.
- **Address critical service gaps:** Support underfunded areas such as trauma-responsive mental health and substance-use treatment, workforce development, and survivor-informed policy reform.
- **Engage sectors in which exploitation too often goes unrecognized:** One example is organized sports where boys face unique vulnerabilities due to power imbalances, intense loyalty cultures, and institutional silence. From elite Olympic pipelines to community athletics, systems have too frequently failed to protect male athletes from abuse, as mentioned earlier. High-profile cases – including the convictions of Larry Nassar (USA Gymnastics) and Jerry Sandusky (Penn State football) – revealed systemic neglect and coverups that mirror patterns found in trafficking.<sup>104</sup>

Very few male survivors of commercial sexual exploitation in sports speak out publicly. This silence stems not only from fear and shame but also from the systemic failure of sports organizations to provide safe disclosure pathways, trauma-responsive care, and legal redress. The culture of elite athletics has too often demanded silence in the name of masculinity, performance, and ambition. To address this, the backbone organization and its Global Survivors Fund will prioritize a specialized convening to bring together representatives from FIFA, the NFL, NBA, MLB, international Olympic committees, athlete survivor-advocates, sports psychologists, and survivor-led organizations. This convening will:

- Surface hidden forms of exploitation within youth and elite athletics.
- Develop disclosure and reporting mechanisms that do not retraumatize male athletes.
- Launch industry-wide recommendations and trauma-responsive training for sports organizations globally.
- Fund pilot survivor-led support programs specifically for boys and men in sports.
- Partner with major leagues and athletes to elevate survivor voices and deconstruct harmful gender norms that deter disclosure.

Athletes have tremendous cultural influence. With the right engagement, they can become powerful allies in reshaping masculinity, promoting healing, and breaking the silence surrounding abuse.

## Sustaining the Fund: A Diversified Revenue Model

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To sustain the Global Survivors Fund, the backbone organization will engage a diverse mix of funders, ensuring a resilient, multi-stream revenue model that isn't dependent on short-term philanthropy alone:

- Corporate impact partnerships across technology, travel, finance, real estate, hospitality, and housing can fuel survivor-centered solutions by funding multilingual, trauma-responsive services – such as housing, job training, and mental health and substance use care – for male survivors.
- Multi-year grants and contributions from foundations, high-net-worth individuals, and family offices will help build the fund's endowment and sustain measurable outcomes over time.
- Impact capital that prioritizes social returns.
- Government and international multilateral agency funding to embed male survivor-focused strategies into national and international anti-trafficking efforts.

Fiscal sponsorship through HIP enables immediate activation with minimal barriers. With the right partners and aligned vision, this structure can rapidly move from concept to implementation and finally offer male survivors a coordinated, lasting path to safety and healing.

# Next Steps

Immediate investment in **Phase 1** will establish the backbone infrastructure, activate the Global Survivors Fund, and enable rapid rollout through regional convenings and global partnerships.

**Phase 2** will scale this work, expand housing and healing spaces, and embed data-driven policy and survivor-led solutions worldwide.

Funders can invest in individual components or provide anchor funding for an entire phase.

Goals	Key components	Estimated cost	
		By components	By phase
Phase 1 (18–24 months)			
Launch framework globally	Regional (United States, Latin America, Europe, Africa, Middle East, Southeast Asia) convenings and global partnerships	US\$4 million	US\$6 million
	Strategic communications and funder engagement		
	Data and research partnerships with leading institutions		
	Safe house and healing space pilots (United States and Europe)		
Establish core infrastructure	Staffing and capacity for project management, research, and fundraising		
	Interactive website with global data repository		
Seed the Global Survivors Fund	Seed investment for Global Survivors Fund	US\$2 million	
Phase 2 (24–48 months)			
Scale global survivor infrastructure	Expanded regional and global convenings	US\$6 million	US\$14 million
	Ongoing data collection and research dissemination		
	Global staffing and operational capacity		
Expand safe housing and healing spaces	Sustained communications campaigns		
	Safe housing and healing space pilots in additional regions		
Grow the Global Survivors Fund	Growth of Global Survivors Fund to US\$10 million+ with active fundraising	US\$8 million	
Total estimated costs for Phase 1 and Phase 2		US\$20 million	

# Conclusion

**This framework presents a transformative investment opportunity for those committed to meaningful, long-term impact in the global response to sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. It lays out not just what must be done, but how we can do it, together.**

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## **Investing in this vision means:**

- Expanding trauma-responsive housing solutions to close the severe gap in safe, stable spaces for male survivors through emergency shelters, transitional programs, permanent housing, and retreat-based healing centers.
- Scaling access to substance-use treatment and mental health services, including multilingual therapy, culturally responsive care, and innovative, trauma-responsive tools like VR counseling.
- Elevating survivor leadership by funding community-based and survivor-led organizations through multi-year, unrestricted grants, not only to serve survivors but also to empower them as experts, advisors, and innovators.
- Harnessing private sector innovation to drive scalable impact through corporate partnerships, social impact investment, and new tech tools that connect survivors to safety, support, and opportunity.
- Building a coordinated global backbone and pooled funding infrastructure that aligns frontline programs, funders, and governments to fill service gaps and grow what works.

This is not charity. It is an investment in healing and systems transformation. The time for fragmented efforts is behind us. With a backbone organization and Global Survivors Fund coordinating resources and partnerships across sectors, we have a unique opportunity to unite, innovate, and create lasting change. The future of anti-trafficking work is collaborative, practical, and survivor centered. The vision is achievable: a world where survivors of all backgrounds have access to safety, healing, and the tools to thrive.

Now is the time for bold action. Through sustained collaboration, cross-sector leadership, and intentional investment, we can create a future where trafficking is not just fought but is dismantled. This will create a world where no one is left behind simply because their story didn't fit the narrative, and where survivors rebuild their lives with dignity, purpose, and opportunity.

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## **Will you step up to invest in this bold strategy?**

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# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> For clarity, consistency, and to reduce redundancy, this framework uses “male survivors” as an inclusive term encompassing men, boys, and LGBTQ+ individuals who have experienced sex trafficking, exploitation, or violence. When distinctions are necessary, terms such as men, boys, or LGBTQ+ survivors will be used accordingly.  
  
This framework also recognizes the intersectional experiences of survivors living with disabilities or neurodivergence, though these distinctions may not always be explicitly named in each section.  
  
While the term 2SLGBTQ+ is recognized for its inclusivity of Native and Indigenous LGBTQ+ communities, the term LGBTQ+ will be used throughout for readability unless specifically addressing Indigenous contexts.
- <sup>2</sup> Conversations took place with survivors in the United States, Brazil, Cambodia, Colombia, Egypt, Italy, Mexico, Oman, South Africa, Thailand, and Vietnam, between 2022 and 2025.
- <sup>3</sup> The Root. (2025, May). *Terrence Howard Shares Wild Diddy Story and Hollywood’s Truths*.  
<https://www.theroot.com/uh-oh-terrence-howard-exposes-the-dark-side-of-hollywo-1851774945>
- <sup>4</sup> Howard, T. (2025, May). *You Only Get One Shot at Manhood and Most Never Get It Back* [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jUXLV3FunA>
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Jesse Leon is a celebrated speaker, author, and consultant with over 30 years of experience spanning the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, including philanthropy, affordable housing and impact investing. He brings a unique, trauma-responsive and culturally responsive approach to assisting survivors of sex trafficking and exploitation on their journey to reintegration.

Jesse's professional journey is deeply intertwined with his lived experience as a Latino male survivor of sex trafficking, childhood sexual exploitation, and substance use. A graduate of UC Berkeley and Harvard University, he was also awarded a post-graduate fellowship from the University of Pennsylvania. He has worked for major financial institutions, managed multimillion-dollar grantmaking programs, and overseen the deployment of billions in federal and state funds for affordable housing.

Jesse is the author of *I'm Not Broken* and *No Estoy Roto* published by Penguin Random House. His mission is to support survivors on their path from trauma to triumph by creating systems, partnerships, and spaces that foster healing, empowerment, and long-term change.

As the president of Alliance Way LLC, Jesse advises foundations, governments, and impact investors in crafting strategic grantmaking and capital deployment initiatives focused on housing, education, substance use, mental health, and anti-trafficking. He also delivers specialized trainings for law enforcement, service providers, and policy leaders that are centered on supporting male survivors and fostering cross-sector collaboration and public-private partnerships to prevent exploitation and expand recovery pathways. Jesse is fluent in English, Spanish, and Portuguese.

Jesse's work stands at the intersection of lived experience and systemic change, transforming trauma into a catalyst for global impact. His unwavering commitment continues to shape a more just and compassionate world for survivors everywhere.



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