

Labor Trafficking in Construction and Hospitality

Survey Findings Chicago

Authors:

Kelle Barrick and Rebecca Pfeffer, RTI International
Meredith Dank, New York University
Amy Farrell, Northeastern University

Study Rationale and Objective

Although law enforcement and community interest in human trafficking has increased tremendously since passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000, most anti-trafficking efforts by law enforcement and community-based organizations have focused on sex trafficking. Labor trafficking, when prioritized at all, is often conceptualized as a single phenomenon; the variation in industries in which labor trafficking occurs and the variation in victim experiences within these industries are sorely overlooked. The lack of sector-specific knowledge about labor trafficking victimization limits the extent to which law enforcement, regulatory agencies, health officials, and community-based advocates can identify and respond to this crime.

The objective of this study was to explore how the recruitment, control, concealment, and needs of labor trafficking victims vary across industries in two sectors: construction and hospitality (i.e., restaurants, bars, hotels, and resorts). The study included primary data collection activities in four communities: Chicago Metro Area, CO; Summit County, CO; Chicago Metro Area, IL; and New York Metro Area, NY.¹ This brief provides an overview of key findings from a survey of workers, with a focus on findings specific to Chicago.

¹ We originally planned to focus only on Suffolk County; however, because we were unable to recruit a sufficient number of workers, we expanded the focus to all of the New York Metro area.

Research Questions

- 1 Does labor trafficking victimization manifest itself differently in distinct industries?
- 2 What is the underlying supply chain structure of labor trafficking in the construction and hospitality industries? Who are the actors and agencies involved?
- 3 Are there points throughout the stages of recruitment, control, and concealment of labor trafficking in these industries that could present opportunities for identification and intervention?

Study Design

Data collection activities included interviews with key informants (e.g., victim service providers, worker justice organizations, and immigration advocates), surveys of individuals who have experienced labor exploitation in these industries, and in-depth follow-up interviews with a subsample of survey respondents whose survey responses indicated that they had experienced relatively high levels of abuse. Key informant interviews focused on professional history, community context (e.g., vulnerable populations, prioritization of labor trafficking, industry-specific information), and collaboration. Individuals who had worked in construction or hospitality and experienced at least one form of labor mistreatment, abuse, or exploitation were eligible to participate. Survey topics included respondent characteristics, family and occupation, experiences that may contribute to labor abuse and exploitation, help-seeking, and a series of questions about experiences with different types of labor abuse and exploitation (see **Exhibit 1**). These data were supplemented with a review of federally prosecuted construction and hospitality labor trafficking cases to provide further insight into the networks and supply chains involved in these activities. The findings reported in this brief are focused on the worker survey.



EXHIBIT 1 Types of Labor Abuse and Exploitation



Restrictions of physical
and communicative
freedom



Threats and abuses of
a physical nature



Deception and lies



Threats and abuses of
a sexual nature



Exploitative labor
practices



Debt bondage



Intimidation, threats,
and fear

Study Participants

From January 2023 through March 2024, we administered surveys to 476 workers who had experienced at least one form of labor abuse or exploitation in the construction or hospitality industries in the past 2 years. Because there is little research on labor trafficking among construction and hospitality workers and this study is exploratory, we used a variety of non-probability-based methods to identify workers who have experienced some form of labor exploitation. We sent teams of field interviewers to recruit potential respondents at various public places where local experts suggested industry workers in their community may congregate (e.g., food pantries, places day laborers look for work, and community events). We also asked local experts to share the survey opportunity with their clients by handing out business cards or posting flyers with information about the survey, posting a graphic with information about the survey on their social media platforms, or allowing the research team to introduce the survey at events they were already hosting (e.g., group meetings and community dinners).

In Chicago, 171 workers completed the survey. Characteristics of survey participants in Chicago and the total sample are presented in **Exhibits 2 and 3**, respectively.

Chicago survey respondents were similar to the total sample in most respects. However, the Chicago sample was slightly older (41 and 37 years, respectively) and had greater representation from U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents (36%, compared with 29% in the total sample) and refugees and asylees (30%, compared with 23% in the total sample). These differences may explain, at least in part, differences in their experiences with labor abuse and exploitation.

Eligibility Criteria

18

At least 18 years of age



Able to complete the survey in English, Spanish, or French



Worked in construction or hospitality in the past 24 months



Experienced at least one form of mistreatment, abuse, or exploitation (other than discrimination or harassment based on race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation) while working in construction or hospitality

EXHIBIT 2. Chicago Worker Survey Sample

Note. Participants may have worked in multiple jobs during the survey period, so the percentages do not sum to 100%.



50%

had worked in construction



33%

had worked in resaturants or bars



35%

had worked in hotels, motels, and resorts

41

average age

73%

male

83%

Latinx

EXHIBIT 3.
Characteristics of Survey Participants

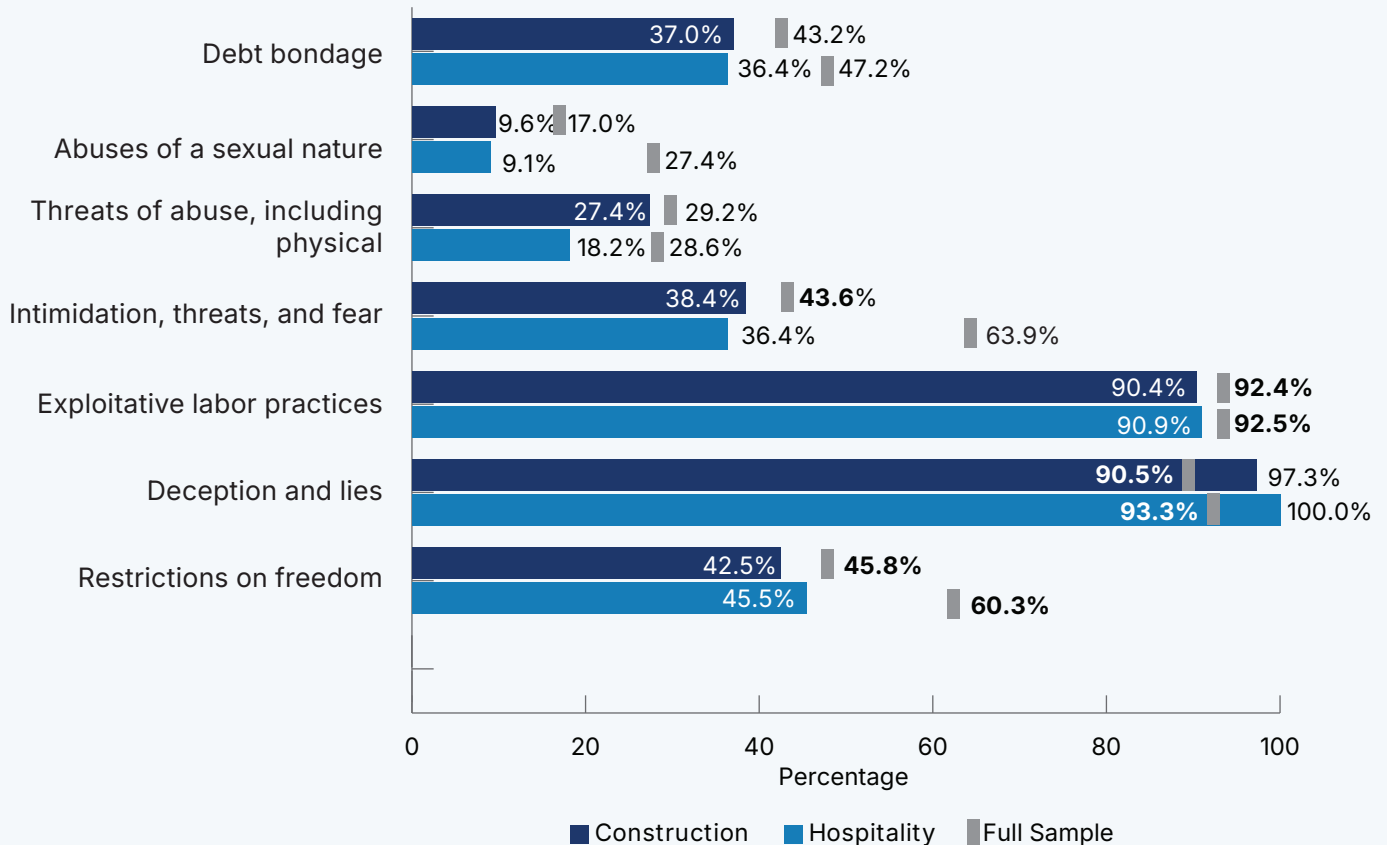
Characteristic	Total Sample		Chicago	
	#	% or mean	#	% or mean
Jobs worked in past 12 months[^]				
Construction	264	55.5%	85	49.7%
Restaurant, bar, and food services	184	38.7%	56	32.7%
Hotels, motels, or resorts	117	24.6%	59	34.5%
Other	88	18.5%	27	15.8%
Mean age	36.9 years		41.2 years	
Gender				
Male	335	70.4%	124	72.5%
Female	127	26.7%	47	27.5%
Transgender, gender non-conforming, or other	14	2.9%	0	0
Race and ethnicity				
Black or African American only	59	12.4%	24	14.0%
Asian/Pacific Islander only	2	0.4%	2	1.2%
Latino/a only	387	81.5%	142	83.0%
Caucasian only	13	2.7%	0	0
Multiple racial/ethnic groups	11	2.3%	2	1.2%
Other	3	0.6%	1	0.6%
Primary language spoken at home				
English	84	17.6%	32	18.7%
Spanish	383	80.5%	137	80.1%
Other	9	1.9%	2	1.2%
Immigration status				
U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident	112	28.7%	44	36.1%
H-2B	2	0.5%	0	0
Other work visa	4	1.0%	2	1.6%
J-1	28	7.2%	0	0
Other non-work visa	6	1.5%	0	0
Refugee or asylee	90	23.1%	37	30.3%
Applied or waiting for any status above	25	6.4%	3	2.5%
None of the above (undocumented)	123	31.5%	36	29.5%

[^]Participants may have worked in multiple jobs during the survey period, so the percentages do not sum to 100%.

Differences in Labor Trafficking Experiences, by Industry, Among Chicago Workers

The survey data were used to compare lifetime experiences of exploitation among individuals with experience working in construction or hospitality. As shown in **Exhibit 4**, two categories of labor abuse were ubiquitous in the total sample and in Chicago, regardless of industry: (1) deception and lies and (2) exploitative labor practices were experienced by nearly all workers. However, some differences by industry also emerged. For example, in the full sample, both (1) restrictions on freedom of communication or movement and (2) intimidation, threats, and fear were more common in hospitality than in construction, and the difference by industries was even larger in Chicago. Fewer construction workers in Chicago (24%) than in the full sample (44%) experienced intimidation, threats, and fear. In Chicago, threats of physical abuse appeared more common in hospitality (18%) than in construction (12%); however, in the full sample, this type of abuse was more common and was experienced at similar rates among construction and hospitality workers (29% each).

EXHIBIT 4.
Lifetime Labor Abuse and Exploitation, by Industry, Chicago



We also explored variation among the individual indicators within each category of labor abuse and exploitation (see detailed table in the **Appendix**). The most common **restrictions on freedom** experienced by Chicago respondents in both industries were being prevented from communicating freely with other workers, restricted where they could go during non-working hours, and forbidden from leaving the workplace. More than 8 in 10 respondents in Chicago with construction experience, and over half of those with hospitality experience, reported receiving pay that was less than promised. Other common forms of **deception and lies** in both industries included that the type and amount of work and the work environment were different from what was promised. In Chicago, the most common form of **exploitative labor practices** among respondents with hospitality experience was working more than 4 hours without a break (87%); among respondents with construction experience, working without workers' compensation insurance (84%) and medical insurance (83%) were the most common. The most common forms of **intimidation, threats, and fear** experienced by Chicago respondents in both industries included threats to behave or bad things would happen and verbal abuse (e.g., belittled, humiliated, or put down by an employer). Although more serious **threats of abuses of a physical nature** were less common, 9% of respondents with hospitality experience and 3% with construction experience received threats of harm, and about 6% in both industries were kept in enclosed environments that they could not leave. **Sexual abuse** was more common among respondents with hospitality experience; about 1 in 10 experienced unwanted touching or physical contact of a sexual nature, unwanted sexual advances, and verbal harassment of a sexual nature. Experiences with **debt bondage** among Chicago respondents varied by industry. For example, more construction workers than hospitality workers were told that the work they did was worth less than its actual worth, so they had to work more hours to pay off a debt (24% and 14%, respectively).



Having been paid less than promised at some time

57% hospitality respondents experienced	82% construction respondents experienced
---	--



Worked more than 4 hours without a break and worked without workers' compensation and medical insurance

8 in 10
construction
respondents
experienced



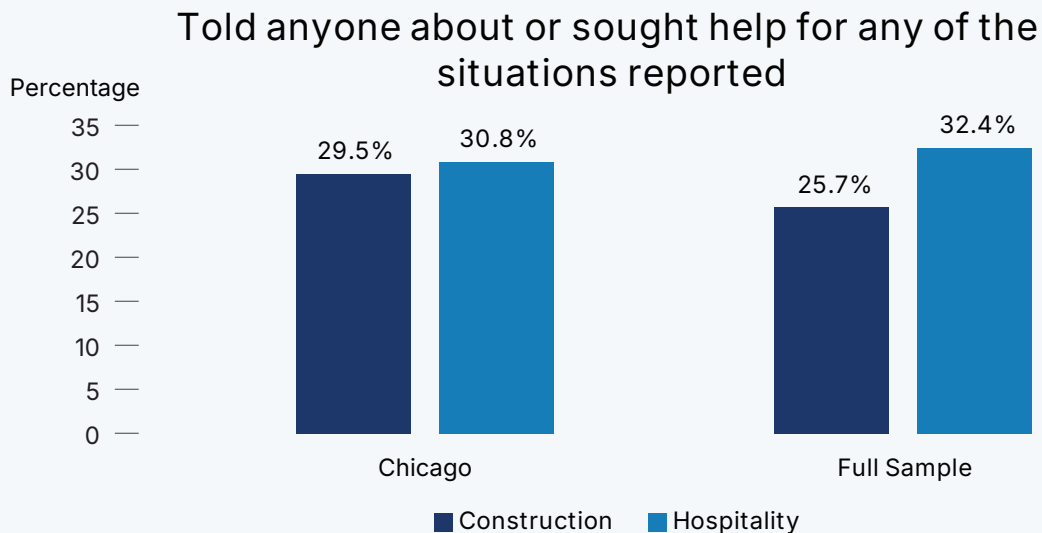
Help-Seeking Among Surveyed Chicago Workers

A survey question asked whether respondents had ever told anyone about or sought help for any of the situations they reported in the survey (see **Exhibit 5**). In Chicago, about 30% of construction and hospitality workers either reported experiences with exploitation or sought help. The reporting rates were similar to those of the full sample.



Chicago respondents reported similar levels of help-seeking, regardless of whether they had worked in construction or hospitality.

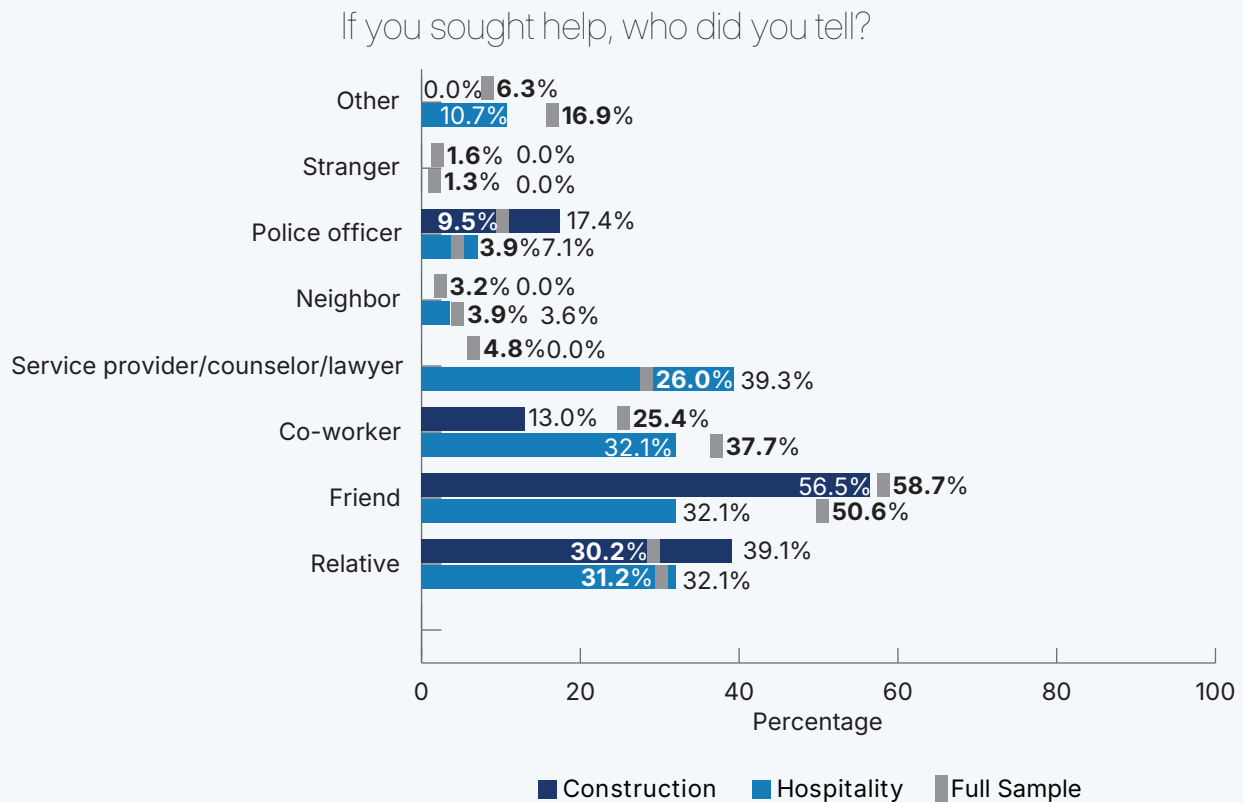
EXHIBIT 5. Help-Seeking, by Industry, Chicago



Of those who did disclose their experience or seek help after experiencing workplace exploitation, respondents in the full sample overwhelmingly sought informal help from relatives, friends, or co-workers rather than formal help through service providers or law enforcement (**Exhibit 6**). Seeking formal help from law enforcement appears more common among construction workers in Chicago than in the full sample, and seeking formal help from service providers appears more common among hospitality workers in Chicago than in the full sample. Among respondents in Chicago with construction experience who reported exploitation, over half (57%) disclosed to a friend and 39% disclosed to a relative, whereas 17% shared with law enforcement. Chicago respondents with hospitality experience who sought help reached out to a service provider, counselor, or lawyer (39%) and nearly one-third told a relative, friend, or co-worker.

For detailed findings and additional information on the full study, visit <https://www.rti.org/impact/labor-trafficking-construction-hospitality>.

EXHIBIT 6.
Types of Help-Seeking, by Industry, Chicago



Appendix

Detailed Lifetime Experiences of Labor Abuse and Exploitation, by Industry

Categories and Examples	Full Sample		Chicago	
	Construction N (%)	Hospitality N (%)	Construction N (%)	Hospitality N (%)
Total	264 (100.0)	252 (100.0)	85 (100.0)	96 (100.0)
Restrictions on freedom (any)	121 (45.8)	152 (60.3)	29 (34.1)	62 (64.6)
You were forbidden from leaving the workplace	41 (15.9)	69 (28.0)	10 (11.9)	30 (31.9)
You were restricted where you could go during non-working hours	36 (14.6)	46 (18.6)	10 (12.2)	22 (23.2)
Your identification papers (such as passport, visa, or birth certification) were taken away	20 (8.1)	10 (4.0)	9 (11.0)	4 (4.2)
You were not allowed adequate food, water, or sleep for more than TWO days	35 (14.3)	15 (6.1)	11 (13.4)	6 (6.5)
You were prevented or restricted from communicating freely with other workers	57 (23.1)	88 (35.6)	15 (18.3)	48 (51.1)
You were prevented or restricted from communicating freely with your family	24 (9.8)	26 (10.6)	8 (9.8)	9 (9.7)
You were prevented or restricted from communicating freely with others outside the workplace	23 (9.5)	31 (12.7)	4 (4.9)	10 (10.8)
You were not allowed to seek or receive medical services, including medication	32 (13.1)	20 (8.1)	14 (17.1)	9 (9.6)
You were not allowed to have visitors	24 (10.0)	43 (17.6)	4 (5.0)	9 (9.6)
Deception and lies (any)	239 (90.5)	235 (93.3)	75 (88.2)	93 (96.9)
Pay was less than you were promised	204 (79.4)	158 (64.2)	68 (81.9)	54 (56.8)
The type of work was different from what you were promised	155 (63.8)	145 (59.4)	63 (76.8)	67 (70.5)
The work environment was different from what you were promised	137 (56.6)	146 (59.3)	54 (65.9)	71 (74.7)
The amount of work was different from what you were promised	175 (72.3)	168 (68.3)	62 (76.5)	71 (74.7)
You were told that you will not be believed if you try to seek help from the police or other authorities	73 (30.4)	50 (20.4)	26 (32.1)	15 (15.8)
You were instructed to lie about your identity	35 (14.6)	25 (10.2)	15 (18.5)	13 (13.7)

(continued)

Labor Trafficking in Construction and Hospitality
Survey Findings Chicago

Categories and Examples	Full Sample		Chicago	
	Construction N (%)	Hospitality N (%)	Construction N (%)	Hospitality N (%)
You were instructed to lie about the identity of your employer	23 (9.7)	17 (6.9)	6 (7.4)	7 (7.4)
Housing was different than what was described to you at recruitment	19 (8.0)	29 (11.9)	3 (3.8)	7 (7.4)
You have been instructed to lie to any other official	15 (6.3)	15 (6.2)	4 (4.9)	4 (4.3)
Exploitative labor practices (any)	244 (92.4)	233 (92.5)	76 (89.4)	92 (95.8)
You were denied pay for work you performed in the United States	139 (54.7)	69 (28.4)	48 (57.1)	14 (14.9)
You received a bad check (bounced) from your employer	51 (21.3)	34 (14.1)	23 (27.7)	17 (18.1)
Your employer disappeared before paying you	128 (53.3)	42 (17.5)	50 (60.2)	17 (18.3)
You were paid less than minimum wage	166 (69.5)	111 (46.3)	67 (80.7)	36 (38.3)
You worked longer than 4 hours without a break	177 (74.4)	185 (76.4)	65 (79.3)	82 (87.2)
You worked longer than 8 hours a day without overtime pay (hourly employees only)	169 (70.7)	111 (45.9)	59 (72.0)	40 (42.6)
You worked on holidays without extra pay	153 (63.8)	116 (48.1)	54 (65.1)	40 (42.6)
You were told to work in hazardous environments (with unknown chemicals) without proper protection	90 (37.2)	52 (21.6)	37 (44.6)	26 (28.0)
You worked without medical insurance	185 (77.1)	112 (46.5)	69 (83.1)	40 (42.6)
You worked without workers comp insurance	184 (76.7)	114 (47.3)	70 (84.3)	41 (44.1)
You have been paid with things other than money, such as gift cards, tickets for goods, food, alcohol/drugs, housing/hotel room as a substitute to your wage	29 (12.1)	17 (7.1)	7 (8.4)	5 (5.4)
You have had any other work experience you consider abusive or exploitative	57 (24.1)	60 (25.0)	18 (22.0)	28 (30.4)
Intimidation, threats, and fear (any)	115 (43.6)	161 (63.9)	20 (23.5)	64 (66.7)
You have been threatened by your employer or people who help your employer to behave or follow their orders or bad things would happen to you	49 (18.9)	83 (33.6)	10 (11.9)	41 (44.1)

(continued)

Labor Trafficking in Construction and Hospitality
Survey Findings Chicago

Categories and Examples	Full Sample		Chicago	
	Construction N (%)	Hospitality N (%)	Construction N (%)	Hospitality N (%)
Your employer or people who help your employer have ever told you "stories" of how bad things had happened to others who did not follow orders	49 (20.1)	70 (28.3)	6 (7.4)	34 (36.2)
You have been threatened by your employer or people who help your employer to behave or follow their orders or you would not be able to work anymore in this industry (blacklisted)	45 (18.5)	60 (24.4)	4 (4.9)	17 (18.3)
You have been belittled, humiliated, or put down by your employer or people who help your employer for not doing exactly what you were told	68 (28.0)	84 (34.1)	13 (16.0)	25 (26.9)
You have suffered "consequences" (e.g. docked pay or hours; verbal abuse; physical abuse) because you failed to follow an order from your employer or someone who helps your employer	58 (23.8)	68 (27.8)	9 (11.1)	21 (22.6)
You have been forbidden (or prevented from / or told not to) to socialize with outsiders (such as health workers, outreach workers, government inspectors, or union representatives)	37 (15.4)	35 (14.3)	5 (6.2)	10 (10.9)
Threats of abuses of a physical nature (any)	77 (29.2)	72 (28.6)	10 (11.8)	17 (17.7)
Physical abuse (including beating, kicking, slapping, etc.)	29 (11.4)	18 (7.3)	5 (6.1)	3 (3.2)
Threats of physical abuse (including beating, kicking, slapping, etc.)	22 (9.2)	15 (6.2)	2 (2.5)	4 (4.3)
Kept in an enclosed environment where you could not leave (including physically restrained)	15 (6.3)	12 (5.0)	5 (6.3)	6 (6.6)
Threats of harm to you in any other form	22 (9.2)	21 (8.7)	2 (2.5)	8 (8.7)
Threats of harm to your family or pet in any form	8 (3.3)	6 (2.5)	2 (2.5)	2 (2.2)
Threats to call the police on you	32 (13.4)	25 (10.4)	5 (6.3)	4 (4.3)
Threats to your family	8 (3.4)	3 (1.2)	2 (2.5)	2 (2.2)
Threats to deny you food	19 (7.9)	15 (6.2)	2 (2.5)	4 (4.4)
Threats to harm your co-workers	14 (5.9)	11 (4.5)	3 (3.8)	1 (1.1)

(continued)

Labor Trafficking in Construction and Hospitality
Survey Findings Chicago

Categories and Examples	Full Sample		Chicago	
	Construction N (%)	Hospitality N (%)	Construction N (%)	Hospitality N (%)
Physical harm in any form when you tried to leave, complain, report, or seek help for your situation	15 (6.3)	12 (4.9)	2 (2.5)	2 (2.2)
Your employer, or someone working with your employer, has ever threatened you in any manner (such as verbal threats) when you tried to leave, complain, report, or seek help for your situation	28 (11.7)	31 (12.8)	3 (3.8)	8 (8.7)
Abuses of a sexual nature (any)	45 (17.0)	69 (27.4)	5 (5.9)	17 (17.7)
Unwanted touching or physical contact of a sexual nature	24 (9.4)	41 (16.9)	3 (3.7)	11 (11.8)
Verbal harassment of a sexual nature	26 (10.4)	38 (15.8)	3 (3.8)	9 (9.9)
Any unwanted sexual advances	12 (4.8)	36 (15.0)	2 (2.5)	9 (10.0)
You were encouraged or pressured to do sexual acts or have sex, including taking sexual photos or videos	6 (2.4)	7 (2.9)	3 (3.8)	3 (3.3)
Someone threatened to show explicit photos or videos to others or post on social media	6 (2.4)	4 (1.7)	3 (3.8)	1 (1.1)
Sexist work environment (sexist jokes, derogatory comments about people based on gender, calendars or photos of nude women or men)	10 (4.0)	19 (7.9)	2 (2.5)	7 (7.7)
You were forced to do something sexually you did not feel comfortable doing	9 (3.7)	8 (3.3)	3 (3.8)	2 (2.2)
You were forced to engage in sexual acts with family, friends, or business associates for money or favors	8 (3.3)	3 (1.2)	2 (2.5)	1 (1.1)
You were forced to trade sex for money, shelter, food or anything else through online websites, escort services, street prostitution, informal arrangements, brothels, fake massage businesses or strip clubs	6 (2.5)	9 (3.8)	2 (2.5)	2 (2.2)
Debt bondage (any)	114 (43.2)	119 (47.2)	25 (29.4)	33 (34.4)
You were charged fees or overcharged for goods/services you purchased from your employer (i.e., it would have been cheaper to purchase the good/services somewhere else)	36 (14.0)	38 (15.5)	7 (8.4)	11 (11.8)

(continued)

Labor Trafficking in Construction and Hospitality
Survey Findings Chicago

Categories and Examples	Full Sample		Chicago	
	Construction N (%)	Hospitality N (%)	Construction N (%)	Hospitality N (%)
You were told that the work you did is worth less than it is actually worth, which means you have to work more hours than you should in order to pay off a debt	72 (28.9)	46 (18.9)	19 (23.5)	13 (14.1)
You were charged excessive interest on a loan to repay your employer for pay advances or goods/services they previously purchased for you	17 (6.8)	13 (5.3)	6 (7.4)	7 (7.6)
Someone tried to reduce your pay by charging you excessive fees or overcharging you for things such as rent, food, broken items, or other items	24 (9.6)	24 (9.8)	5 (6.2)	6 (6.5)
Someone tried to reduce your pay by cutting down the hours you could work	52 (21.3)	80 (33.3)	7 (8.8)	22 (24.2)