



Labor Trafficking in Construction During the Recovery and Reconstruction from a Natural Disaster

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Introduction

As part of the Human Trafficking Policy and Research Analyses Project, funded by the Administration for Children and Families' (ACF's) Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) and the Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP), RTI International measured the prevalence of labor trafficking among construction workers in Houston, Texas. The overarching goal of this project was to advance knowledge of promising methods for estimating human trafficking prevalence in the United States by field testing at least two methods of prevalence estimation within one industry in one geographic location. In addition to advancing knowledge of promising methods for estimating prevalence, we also sought to explore substantive issues around the labor trafficking of construction workers, including the nature of the exploitation as well as risk and protective factors for victimization.

For more detailed information about the background, methods, and findings of this study, see [Measuring Human Trafficking Prevalence in Construction: A Field Test of Multiple Estimation Methods, Final Report.](#)

This brief describes the relationship between working in construction post-disaster and the prevalence of labor trafficking. This association was identified through surveys of 903 construction workers in Houston between August 2022 and August 2023. The surveys captured information about whether respondents experienced a range of abusive and exploitative experiences while working in construction and about whether they had worked in construction during the recovery and reconstruction after a natural disaster.

Background

Although labor trafficking can occur in any labor sector, some industries are more conducive to abusive practices than others. Construction is consistently among the top industries for identified labor trafficking cases. For example, the most common industries for situations involving labor trafficking reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline in 2021 were domestic servitude, agriculture, and construction (NHTH, 2022). A study of labor trafficking among undocumented migrant workers in San Diego also found that abuses were most common in construction and janitorial services (Zhang, Spiller, Finch, & Qin, 2014). There is also growing anecdotal evidence that workers engaged in post-disaster construction may encounter fatal or injurious working conditions, unsafe living conditions, stolen wages, assaults, and labor trafficking (Stillman, 2021). As climate change increases the severity and frequency of natural disasters, the segment of the construction workforce needed to engage in the clean-up, recovery, and reconstruction efforts will also need to increase. It is critical to better understand the nature of labor trafficking in this subset of the construction industry to inform the development of prevention and intervention strategies.

In this brief, we describe the prevalence of labor trafficking in construction overall and how it differs between individuals who have worked in construction during the cleanup and recovery efforts of a natural disaster and those who have not. We also describe similarities and differences in the nature of abuse and exploitation experienced by workers who have worked in construction post-disaster and those who have not.

Labor Trafficking, Defined

The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, or debt bondage



Methods

This study relied on a time-location sampling methodology, which involves developing a sampling frame of venues, days, and times where the population of interest congregates and using a random selection procedure (e.g., every fifth person) to select a representative sample of the population. For this study, we requested a list of current permitted construction sites within the city of Houston and randomly selected sites to visit during certain time windows. In total, 903 construction workers were recruited to participate in the study at construction sites using the time-location sampling method. To participate in the survey, workers needed to confirm they had worked in construction in Houston within the past 2 years, were at least 18 years old, and were able to take the survey in either English or Spanish. Bilingual field interviewers approached workers, screened them for eligibility, and administered a web-based survey on a tablet. Most of the survey questions solicited information on a series of work experiences that serve as indicators of human trafficking.¹ These indicators cover multiple categories and severity levels (see examples in **Exhibit 1**). Study participants were asked whether they had ever experienced each of the trafficking indicators. The responses to these questions were used to determine whether they had experienced labor trafficking.

Trafficking was distinguished from other forms of labor exploitation by accounting for both the severity and the number of types of exploitation that an individual experienced. An individual was coded as having experienced trafficking if they met any one of the following criteria:

- They indicated experiencing a lack of freedom of movement or communication.
- They indicated experiencing two or more strong trafficking indicators from different categories.
- They indicated experiencing one strong indicator and at least three medium indicators in any category.

This information was used to determine which respondents had experienced labor trafficking as well as the nature and type of exploitation they had experienced. Respondents were also asked whether they had worked in construction during the recovery and reconstruction from a hurricane or other natural disaster. Combined with the trafficking indicator data, this allowed us to compare the types of exploitation and abuse that are experienced by individuals who have and have not worked in construction post-disaster.

Categories of Trafficking Indicators

- Recruitment
- Employment practices and penalties
- Personal life and properties
- Degrading conditions
- Freedom of movement
- Violence and threats of violence
- Debt or dependency


¹ The survey instrument was designed to align with the trafficking indicators used by the Prevalence Reduction Innovation Forum. For more information see: https://cenhtro.uga.edu/prif/about_prif/ 

Exhibit 1. Example Indicators, by Category and Severity Level

Category	Medium Severity	Strong Severity
Recruitment	Sometimes people pay money to help get a job. Have you or has anyone ever paid a recruitment fee or a broker fee to help you get a job?	Sometimes lies are used to trick people into accepting a job. Have you ever felt cheated or lied to about the nature of your job or specific responsibilities of the work you were supposed to do?
Employment practices and penalties	Have you ever been made to perform additional or specialized services (beyond what was agreed beforehand) without being paid appropriately?	Sometimes people work for employers who do not let them leave their jobs. Has your employer or people who work for your employer ever withheld your pay and/or benefits to prevent you from leaving or told you that you would lose your pay already earned if you decided to quit?
Personal life and property	Sometimes employers may not want workers to use mobile phones or other personal devices outside of working hours. Have you ever had your mobile phone or other device taken by your employer or people who work for your employer outside of working hours?	Sometimes employers want to have control over people's lives outside their job. Has your employer or people who work for your employer ever attempted to control your personal life outside of work in any of these ways?
Degrading conditions	Has your employer or people who work for your employer asked you to do dangerous work without proper protective gear?	Has your employer ever required that you work longer than normal hours, unusually long days, or outside of normal working hours without being properly compensated for overtime?
Freedom of movement	Have you ever experienced any limitations on your movement or communication, such as having employers supervise or listen in on your communication or restrict or monitor your movement during hours when you were not working?	Has your employer or people who work for your employer ever taken/confiscated your identity papers (such as a passport or work permit) or made it so that you were unable to access your identity papers?
Debt or dependency	N/A	Have you ever had a debt imposed on you without your consent? For instance, has your employer decided that you owed them money for reasons you didn't agree with (e.g., to pay for things that were not part of your work agreement)?
Violence or threat of violence	Has your employer ever threatened physical violence against you?	Has your employer ever used physical violence against you?

Key Findings

Labor Trafficking Prevalence

As shown in **Exhibit 2**, 22% of the full sample experienced labor trafficking at some point during their lifetime, 13% experienced labor trafficking in the past 2 years, and 4% experienced labor trafficking in their current job.^{2,3} However, individuals who had worked construction post-disaster exhibited substantially higher rates. For example, lifetime labor trafficking was 16% for workers who did not have experience working in construction post-disaster compared to 32% for those who did. Rates of labor trafficking during the past 2 years and in their current job were also higher among those who worked in the recovery and reconstruction of a natural disaster.

Exhibit 2. Labor Trafficking Prevalence Estimates

Category	Lifetime	Past 2 Years	Current Job
Full sample	22.3%	13.2%	4.2%
Worked in construction post-disaster	32.3%	18.1%	5.2%
Never worked in construction post-disaster	15.8%	9.9%	3.4%

The prevalence of labor trafficking over the lifetime among individuals who worked in the recovery and reconstruction of a natural disaster was two times higher than among those who did not.

Nature and Type of Exploitation Experienced

To explore whether lifetime exploitative experiences are different for individuals who have worked in construction post-disaster compared to those who have not, we examined responses to the individual trafficking indicators for each group of workers (**Exhibits 3–9**). A chi-square test was used to examine the associations between individual characteristics and post-disaster work. A non-significant p-value ($p > 0.05$) indicates that the characteristic is similarly distributed across the workers who worked in post-disaster construction and those who never worked in post-disaster construction, whereas a significant p-value ($p < 0.05$) suggests a statistically significant difference in the distribution of the characteristic among the post-disaster workers groups. The findings are organized by the indicator categories.

As shown in **Exhibit 3**, significantly higher proportions of post-disaster construction workers experienced each type of exploitative recruitment. For example, more than twice as many respondents who worked in construction after a natural disaster were deceived during recruitment about the nature of the job (22% vs. 7%) and about the working and living conditions (47% vs. 19%) compared to those who did not work in construction post-disaster.

² Because individuals have been in their current job for different lengths of time (e.g., 1 week, 10 years), the stock measure captured a few individuals whose exploitation occurred more than 2 years in the past (i.e., they were not included in the flow measure).

³ Percentages reported are weighted to represent the population.

Exhibit 3. Nature and Type of Exploitation Experienced during Recruitment (Lifetime), by Post-Disaster Construction Experience

	Worked in construction post-disaster (weighted proportion)	Never worked in construction post-disaster (weighted proportion)
Coercive recruitment*	7.93%	3.10%
Deceptive recruitment: nature of the job*	22.51%	6.77%
Deceptive recruitment: working and living conditions*	46.83%	19.18%
Paid recruitment fees or paid transportation recruitment fees*	25.20%	14.00%

*Indicates that the finding was significant at the $p < 0.05$ level

As shown in **Exhibit 4**, most exploitative employment practices and penalties were experienced at significantly higher rates by those who worked in construction post-disaster compared to those who did not. For example, more than twice as many respondents with post-disaster construction experience reported having their pay or benefits withheld to prevent them from leaving or quitting their job (13% vs. 5%). Working without a formal contract was the most common exploitative employment practice among both groups, but this was significantly more common among those with post-disaster experience (45%) than those without such experience (33%). Borrowing money as a condition of employment was rare among both groups.

Exhibit 4. Nature and Type of Exploitative Employment Practices and Penalties (Lifetime), by Post-Disaster Construction Experience

	Worked in construction post-disaster (weighted proportion)	Never worked in construction post-disaster (weighted proportion)
Had pay or benefits withheld to prevent you from leaving or quitting*	12.97%	5.19%
High or increasing debt related to an employer*	25.29%	11.07%
Made to perform additional services or responsibilities*	18.94%	9.05%
Pay, benefits or compensation deducted or withheld for no reason*	18.44%	9.71%
Borrowed money as a condition of employment	1.89%	4.12%
Absence of a formal contract*	44.82%	33.35%

*Indicates that the finding was significant at the $p < 0.05$ level

Rates of exploitation involving one's personal life or property were low for both groups (**Exhibit 5**). Rates of mobile phone confiscation were significantly higher among workers with post-disaster experience (3.6%) than those without this experience (0.8%).

Rates of exploitation involving recruitment and employment practices and penalties were significantly higher among individuals who worked in the recovery and reconstruction of a natural disaster compared to those who did not.

Exhibit 5. Nature and Type Exploitation Involving Personal Life or Property (Lifetime), by Post-Disaster Construction Experience

	Worked in construction post-disaster (weighted proportion)	Never worked in construction post-disaster (weighted proportion)
Another individual has control over a meaningful part of your personal life	5.08%	2.86%
Mobile phone or communication device confiscated*	3.59%	0.77%

*Indicates that the finding was significant at the $p < 0.05$ level

For the most part, degrading conditions were experienced at similar rates by workers with and without post-disaster construction experience (**Exhibit 6**). For example, both groups were made to be available day and night without adequate compensation at similar rates (19% and 16%). One notable statistically significant difference is being made to work in hazardous conditions without proper protective gear, which was reported by nearly twice as many individuals who worked in construction after a disaster compared to those who did not (19.6% vs. 10.4%).

Individuals who worked in construction post-disaster were nearly twice as likely to have been made to complete hazardous work without proper protective gear compared to those who did not work in construction post-disaster.

Exhibit 6. Nature and Type Exploitation Involving Degrading Conditions (Lifetime), by Post-Disaster Construction Experience

	Worked in construction post-disaster (weighted proportion)	Never worked in construction post-disaster (weighted proportion)
Made to be available day and night without adequate compensation outside contract	18.99%	16.43%
Made to complete hazardous services without proper protective gear*	19.64%	10.44%
Made to engage in illicit activities*	4.86%	1.74%
Made to live in degrading conditions	2.43%	0.85%

*Indicates that the finding was significant at the $p < 0.05$ level

Restrictions to an individual's freedom of movement or communication were experienced at similar rates by workers with and without post-disaster construction experience, and most examples of this were rare (**Exhibit 7**). The most common restriction reported by both populations was constant surveillance at work; however, this was twice as common among workers with post-disaster construction experience (20.5%) compared to workers without it (10.2%) (statistically significant). Although a total lack of freedom of movement and communication was rare, it was significantly more common among those with post-disaster experience (5.2%) compared to their counterparts (1.7%). Few respondents in either population reported having a debt imposed on them without their consent (**Exhibit 8**).

Exhibit 7. Nature and Type Exploitation Involving Restrictions to Freedom of Movement or Communication (Lifetime), by Post-Disaster Construction Experience

	Worked in construction post-disaster (weighted proportion)	Never worked in construction post-disaster (weighted proportion)
Confiscation or loss of access to identity papers or travel documents	0.58%	0.25%
Constant surveillance of personal spaces by employer, recruiter, or other individuals	0.70%	0.83%
No freedom of movement and communication*	5.19%	1.72%
Limited freedom of movement and communication	1.64%	2.40%
Constant surveillance of place of work*	20.45%	10.17%

*Indicates that the finding was significant at the $p < 0.05$ level

Exhibit 8. Nature and Type Exploitation Involving Debt or Dependency (Lifetime), by Post-Disaster Construction Experience

	Worked in construction post-disaster (weighted proportion)	Never worked in construction post-disaster (weighted proportion)
Had a debt imposed on you without your consent	2.02%	1.22%

Note: Nothing in this exhibit was found to be significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.

Rates of violence were low for all respondents (**Exhibit 9**). The most common type for both populations involved emotional or psychological abuse, which was reported by more than twice as many workers with post-disaster construction experience compared to those without (13% vs. 6%) (statistically significant). The rate of threats of physical violence (6% vs. 1%), threats of harm to a personal or professional reputation (5% vs. 1%), and threats of denunciation to authorities (3% vs. 1%) were also significantly higher among individuals who worked in construction post-disaster compared to those who did not.

Although rates of violence were low, more than twice as many respondents who worked in the recovery and reconstruction from a natural disaster experienced emotional or psychological abuse and threats of multiple forms of violence compared to those who had not worked in construction post-disaster.

Exhibit 9. Nature and Type Exploitation Involving Violence or Threats of Violence (Lifetime), by Post-Disaster Construction Experience (Weighted Means)

	Worked in construction post-disaster (weighted proportion)	Never worked in construction post-disaster (weighted proportion)
Physical violence inflicted in front of you on other individuals	2.76%	2.37%
Sexual violence against you or someone you care deeply about	0.00%	0.00%
Threatened sexual violence against you or someone you care about	0.10%	0.14%
Physical violence against you or someone you care about	0.61%	0.50%
Threatened physical violence against you or someone you care about*	5.77%	0.73%
Threat of denunciation to authorities against you or someone you care deeply about*	2.78%	1.04%
Emotional or psychological abuse against you or someone you care deeply about*	12.62%	5.80%
Threat of harm to your personal or professional reputation*	4.60%	1.42%

*Indicates that the finding was significant at the $p < 0.05$ level

Summary

More than one in five Houston construction workers experienced labor trafficking in construction at some point in their lifetime. Individuals who have worked in the recovery and reconstruction from a natural disaster exhibited higher rates of labor trafficking across the lifetime, in the past 2 years, and in their current jobs compared to those who did not have post-disaster construction experience.

The types of exploitation endured by workers with and without post-disaster construction experience also varied. For example, individuals who worked in the recovery and reconstruction of a natural disaster experienced higher rates of exploitation involving recruitment, employment practices and penalties, and emotional and psychological abuse than individuals who had not. Although the most common forms of exploitation were similar in both groups (e.g., working without a contract and experiencing deceptive recruitment around working and living conditions), these types of exploitation were significantly more common among workers with post-disaster construction experience.

One of the largest labor trafficking cases in the United States (*David et al. v. Signal International LLC et al.*) involved individuals recruited to work in the reconstruction and repair of oil rigs and related marine facilities damaged by Hurricane Katrina nearly 20 years ago. However, research seeking to better understand how and why post-disaster construction work is particularly susceptible to exploitation has been lacking. For example, a recent scoping review on the nexus of human trafficking and natural disasters identified only four studies that focused on labor trafficking among this population (Hoogesteyn et al., 2024). The results presented here provide further empirical evidence of the heightened risk faced by construction workers who work in the wake of a natural disasters as well as the need for a more nuanced understanding of the circumstances that give rise to higher rates of labor trafficking and other labor abuses. Workers engaging in dangerous work to provide critical services to communities suffering from the aftermath of natural disasters deserve safe and fair work environments.

For more detailed information about other risk and protective factors for labor trafficking in construction, see [*Risk and Protective Factors for Experiencing Labor Trafficking and Other Labor Abuse in the Construction Industry*](#).



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The labor trafficking prevalence estimation project is part of the [Human Trafficking Policy and Research Analyses Project](#), which aims to advance the scope of knowledge and data around human trafficking by identifying priority areas for learning, and conducting a series of studies that can immediately impact practice. All studies are overseen by the ACF Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in collaboration with OTIP, and conducted by RTI International.

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