



## Tips for Reporting on Latinx Community and Sex Trafficking

Paul Cuadros, Investigative Reporter/Author, Associate Professor, UNC-Chapel Hill,  
Hussman School of Journalism and Media  
[cuadros@email.unc.edu](mailto:cuadros@email.unc.edu)

These tips and best practices come from my experience reporting in the Latino immigrant community. Sensitivity, empathy and caution are essential qualities in reporting on the issue of sex trafficking. An understanding of the language and how the immigrant community functions is also valuable. Reporting on sex trafficking can pose significant dangers for the journalist and for the trafficking victims.

1. **HOMEWORK.** Reporters need to prepare background and understanding of how sex trafficking operates in the Latinx community through sources and other media, and gain deep knowledge of how the system works. Trafficking exploits individuals in their home countries seeking to reunite with families in the U.S., looking to improve their economic prospects, and those who are in fear for their lives from drug cartels and other criminal elements. Often they are seeking to leave their circumstances and fall victim to smugglers who promise them transport to the U.S. for jobs, and then exploit them through intimidation of violence, demands to repay their smuggling fees, or threats to their family members both in their home countries and in the U.S. Context of how the system works to capture individuals—often young women—for sex trafficking is important in understanding how migration and exploitation work hand in hand.
2. **ROUTES.** A trafficking “highway” exists from Texas through the Southeast and into the Northeast following the established patterns of migration for jobs and family reunification that have developed over the past 25 years. Individuals are trafficked from location to location, from state to state, up the Southeast and into the Northeast increasingly. To avoid detection, traffickers move victims between brothel and bar, never keeping them in a single location for long.
3. **LOCATIONS**
  - 3A. **TRAILER PARKS.** My experience has taught me that traffickers set up brothels in trailer parks where there is a large presence of Latinx workers. These trailer parks are in

isolated, rural locations near farms or food-processing plants where workers are overwhelmingly men. Community members of these parks are aware of these brothels and the women who come through, but they will not report these activities to the police. This is because generally members of trafficking gangs are also located in the parks, and people are fearful of crossing them. Both migrant farm workers and factory workers live and work in rural areas often times separated from their families and support networks. Covering communities where there are many male food processing workers will also mean there are women who are being trafficked for sex.

**3B. BARS AND DISCOS.** Cantinas or bars are also a prime location for sex trafficking. Located in rural areas, these cantinas also serve the workers on farms or in food-processing factories. These local businesses are owned by families that are cooperating or in business with the traffickers. There are also large, popular discotheques, outside of larger cities, that cater to a growing Latinx population for entertainment. Some of these establishments have ties to sex traffickers. Reporting in these establishments is also important despite their size and reputation.

4. **LANGUAGE.** Reporters should have an understanding or some fluency with Spanish and an understanding of Mexican colloquial speech and idioms. This is important for interviewing survivors, perpetrators, other foreign nationals in the U.S., and for communicating with sources in victims' home countries, and their families. Relying on fixers can help, but it would be more efficient if reporters learned the language to some degree.
5. **FIXERS.** Fixers are insiders who can help to provide journalists make contacts with sources in this world. It is important to find the right person who can serve as a guide, much in the way a reporter relies on a fixer when traveling abroad. Be aware that the role of the fixer is a perilous one, and thus fixers may be very hard to find for these assignments and reporting. Traffickers are dangerous people often aligned with drug gangs and willing to kill informers.
6. **INSIDE.** Understandably, reporters want to be on the inside, but trying to get inside a brothel or cantina is dangerous work that is better left to law enforcement. My recommendation is to avoid this. Latinx reporters, in particular, should avoid trying to go undercover to interview or talk to individuals being trafficked. While they may have more facility with the language and look unassuming, their ethnicity puts them at higher risk for retaliation from drug cartels and sex trafficking gangs. It is my sense that traffickers feel emboldened to retaliate against a Latino reporter in comparison to a journalist who is not Latinx. Reporting should be limited to sources who are in custody in the law enforcement system, women who have escaped trafficking and are being assisted, advocacy agencies, activists, attorneys or other representatives in the legal system. Seeking sources who are currently in trafficking locations can be extremely dangerous for victims, the journalist and others.

7. **ABROAD.** The same cautions apply when reporting abroad. Tracking sex trafficking back to home bases in home countries can also be very dangerous. In this case, a fixer is a requirement to understanding where danger does and does not lie in reporting.
8. **SOURCES.** Individuals who have escaped trafficking should be treated using the best practices for trauma reporting. [Interviewing survivors](#) may require a different approach than is typical for other kinds of coverage. The [Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma](#) is a helpful resource for specific practices in interviewing sources, dealing with authorities, and understanding the trauma behind many experiences with sex trafficking. When speaking to survivors, sensitivity and empathy are needed, language ability is needed and, importantly, an understanding that while a person might be physically removed from trafficking, they may be or perceive they are still trapped due to the threats family members may be under from their traffickers.
9. **ANONYMITY.** Reporters may have to provide anonymity to their sources given the danger involved in trafficking. Reporters working in this area should already know their rules for providing anonymity to their sources to protect them. In addition, their editors should be alerted, and their publishers or attorneys should be made aware that stories may have sources who will remain anonymous to protect them or their families. Reporters should be sensitive to the consequences of identifying victims in their stories, and understand that even when sources given them permission to use their real names they may not comprehend the full implications of doing so.
10. **IMMIGRATION.** While there are laws to protect sex trafficked survivors, immigration enforcement under the current administration might understandably make some reluctant to talk with reporters. Deportation is a real fear for trafficked people, since a return to their home country can be a death sentence. This makes sources very reluctant to speak to reporters on the record with their names provided. It also makes finding sources very difficult. With stepped-up enforcement, we can see people in the unauthorized immigrant community going deeper into the shadows, helping traffickers carry on undetected and unpunished.
11. **MENTAL HEALTH.** Covering sex trafficking in the immigrant community can be a traumatic experience, and reporters should prepare themselves for very challenging work. Seeking professional mental health providers would be an asset in reporting and witnessing traumatic events, interviewing sources who have survived trafficking, and perpetrators of trafficking. Reporters should understand these are among the most devastating stories they will produce, and know when and how to access care.