Life After Trafficking
Denise Brennan

While reports on life in forced labor and dramatic stories of escape or rescue are common, there has been little focus on what happens after. As an anthropologist, I have followed the lives of trafficking survivors for the past ten years and have witnessed how difficult it can be to resettle in the United States after such traumatic experiences. Our current policies and programs fall short of offering the support these survivors need and deserve.

In order to qualify for a new temporary visa to stay in the United States trafficking survivors have to prove that they labored under conditions of "force, fraud or coercion." This is not easy, especially for those who fear their traffickers. Some survivors describe pretending to not understand English during their first interviews with law enforcement. After months -- and sometimes years -- of exploitation, they had learned to not trust others. Keeping details of their lives to themselves often were often the only aspects of their lives that they could control.

Survivors often do not know a single person in the United States. Isolation is a textbook form of control that traffickers use. Once out of forced labor, survivors have to build all relationships from scratch. This can be
daunting for individuals who have learned to not trust others. While new migrants often move into
neighborhoods where their compatriots live, trafficking survivors may strategically avoid co-ethnics. It can be
dangerous to live in a community where your trafficker, or his or her associates, may still be at-large. Survivors,
thus, cut themselves off from contacts that otherwise could help them find work and housing. Nor do most
survivors ever meet another survivor of trafficking. Attempting to succeed in a new country without the
guidance from anyone with similar experiences adds to survivors’ struggles.

Receiving trafficking visas relieves the burden of living without documentation in the United States. But it is not
a cure-all. While trafficking survivors qualify for the same kinds of benefits that refugees receive, assistance runs
out in about a year, long before survivors can establish an economic toehold. The benefits clock is completely
out of synch with survivors’ needs.

Trafficking survivors most often enter the same low-wage labor market into which they had been trafficked.
They also may still have travel debts to smugglers, recruiters, family or loan sharks. Their families often do not
know what they endured and still expect money to be sent back home. Their families see these survivors as
lucky to be in the United States where they are assumed to be earning high wages. With limited social
networks, travel debts, and obligations to family back home, survivors often live in poverty.

Survivors insist, however, that they are not victims and that they are more than their stories in forced labor. They
are emphatic that although their time in forced labor changed them, it does not stop them. But survivors
willing themselves forward is not enough. We need more policies and services that offer support over time --
not just in the immediate aftermath of forced labor.

Many survivors, for example, spend nearly all their waking hours on buses and trains as they juggle more than
one job. Programs that provide driving lessons and assistance to purchase a car and insurance would make a
profound and immediate impact in survivors’ lives. So too would social-service benefits that help survivors for
more than a year. Educational fellowships would provide another important path to success. And regulating
temporary labor recruiters’ astronomical (and sometimes bogus) fees would ease debt burdens.

Ending trafficking must also involve supporting survivors throughout their resettlement process -- not just in
the weeks and months following their exit from forced labor. Right now, as a social worker in New York City
laments, we offer them a temporary visa and then say “Go ahead, make a life.” They deserve more.

Denise Brennan is Chair of the Department of Anthropology at Georgetown University and author of Life
Interrupted: Trafficking into Forced Labor in the United States. All the proceeds of the book support the Survivor
Leadership Training Fund (which is administered through the Freedom Network).