

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY



SPOR Evidence Alliance
Strategy for Patient-Oriented Research

Alliance pour des données
probantes de la SRAP
Stratégie de recherche axée sur le patient

Strategy for Patient-Oriented Research

SPOR
Putting Patients First

Human Trafficking Detection in Health Care Settings

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Summary

This study looked at the tools and strategies used in healthcare settings to identify victims and survivors of human trafficking. It found many existing tools and guidelines, but no clear agreement on which ones work best. Most tools focus on sex trafficking among minors, while labour trafficking and adult victims are often overlooked. Training can improve awareness and helps healthcare workers feel more prepared but doesn't always lead to identifying more cases. There are educational programs and protocols in place, but there are still major gaps in identifying and supporting trafficked persons, particularly due to limited time, lack of privacy, and discomfort among healthcare workers, and the challenges that trafficked persons may face in coming forward for help.

What is the current situation?

Healthcare providers could play a critical role in spotting and helping trafficked individuals. However, they often lack reliable tools and training, and there are many challenges that make it difficult to use existing resources effectively. Many healthcare settings, especially in the U.S., use different tools to detect human trafficking, and there is no agreement on which tool works best. To improve identification and support for trafficked persons in healthcare systems, healthcare workers need better tools and clearer protocols.

Citation: Villatoro-Rodríguez SN, Velásquez-Salazar P, García D, Vélez CM, Patiño-Lugo DF, Ekpe Adewuyi E, Burkhart A, Ramírez P, Ramírez CL, Florez ID. Human trafficking detection in health care settings: a scoping review. Unit of Evidence and Deliberation for Decision Making (UNED), University of Antioquia & SPOR Evidence Alliance, September 30, 2025.

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What questions did we aim to answer in our research?

- What tools are available to help healthcare workers detect human trafficking?
- How are these tools used in practice?
- What kinds of education and training are available to healthcare workers?
- What barriers exist to using these tools effectively?

How did we approach these questions?

We did a scoping review, which means we searched for and analyzed a wide range of published studies, reviews, and reports. We followed established guidelines to ensure a structured and comprehensive process. We focused on information from databases and institutional repositories, and we used recognized frameworks to organize the results.

What answers did we find from our research?

- **26 screening tools** were identified, most from the U.S., with limited testing or validation.
- **7 toolkits** include not just screening tools but also training and referral processes. The UNODC toolkit stood out for covering different types of trafficking.
- **37 protocols** (from various countries) were found, many emphasizing trauma-informed care.
- Tools mostly focus on **sex trafficking**, especially involving minors; **labour trafficking** is underrepresented.
- Physical, emotional, behavioral, and situational **indicators** are used as red flags, but are not reliable for diagnosis.
- **23 studies** assessed educational programs; while these improved awareness, only a few showed an increase in actual case detection.
- **ICD-10 codes (an international classification system for diseases)** for trafficking are rarely used, even though they could help track and support trafficked individuals better.

How confident are we in these findings?

The review was thorough and followed a rigorous method, so we are confident in the **breadth and accuracy** of what was found. The results show that many tools are not **well-tested**, and **no single tool or protocol is clearly the best**. This **limited validation of tools**, as well as the focus on **only some types of trafficking**, means that more research is needed to guide healthcare professionals effectively to identify victims and survivors of human trafficking.