Human Trafficking: Foreign National Adolescent Survivors in the United States, A Call to Expand OTIP Eligibility Letters

Ailleene L. Maldonado
amaldonado12@usfca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.usfca.edu/thes

Part of the Immigration Law Commons, Social Justice Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation
https://repository.usfca.edu/thes/1555

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the All Theses, Dissertations, Capstones and Projects at USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.
Human Trafficking: Foreign National Adolescent Survivors in the United States,

* A Call to Expand OTIP Eligibility Letters *

Ailleene Maldonado

College of Arts and Sciences, University of San Francisco

MASTER IN MIGRATION STUDIES
Human Trafficking: Foreign National Adolescent Survivors in the United States,

A Call to Expand OTIP Eligibility Letters

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER IN MIGRATION STUDIES

By Ailleene Maldonado

May 8, 2024

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this thesis project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for this degree.

APPROVED:

[Signature]
Advisor

[Signature]
Academic Director

5/10/2024
Date

5/23/2024
Date
Acknowledgments

Para todos los beneficiarios de cartas de OTIP, menores desacompañados y sobrevivientes de trata de personas que he tenido el placer de conocer. Me han impactado la vida y espero que esta humilde tesis les haya hecho justicia a todos ustedes.

To all of my participants, thank you for participating in this study, supporting me, and believing in me. I admire each one of you and the work you do for this community. I couldn’t have accomplished this without your continued encouragement. To Aurora, in particular, I am enormously grateful for you and your kind words. You truly are a light that has continued to uplift me.

To my advisor, Bill Hing, thank you for pushing me to think unconventionally, develop new ideas, and provide your wisdom throughout these two years. Learning from you has been inspirational.

To Dr. Melisa Garcia, thank you for caring and providing our cohort with structure.

Para mis padres, gracias por darme las oportunidades que me han ayudado llegar aquí, gracias por creer en mí y gracias por enseñarme que no hay una meta que no pueda alcanzar, ustedes son mis más grandes modelos. To my sisters, thank you for the laughs and advice and for being my foundation.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................. 3  
Abstract.............................................................................................................................. 6  
List of Abbreviations: ........................................................................................................ 8  
Note to the Reader ............................................................................................................... 9  

Chapter 1: Introduction .................................................................................................... 10  
  Statement of the Problem ................................................................................................ 12  
    What is an OTIP Eligibility letter? ............................................................................... 12  
    Who are OTIP Recipients? .......................................................................................... 13  
    How to apply for an OTIP Letter (submit a Request for Assistance)? .................... 14  
      Figure 1: OTIP Eligibility Benefits ....................................................................... 16  
    Importance of Access to Public Benefits .................................................................. 16  
    How does an OTIP recipient receive benefits? ............................................................ 16  
  Background and Need ..................................................................................................... 18  
    OTIP Eligibility Trends .............................................................................................. 18  
      Figure 2: RFAs submitted per FY for every month since FY16 .............................. 20  
      Figure 3: Child Eligibility Letters Issued ................................................................. 21  
  Purpose of the Study ...................................................................................................... 21  
  Research Questions ........................................................................................................ 22  
  Conceptual Frameworks ................................................................................................ 23  
  Limitations of the Study ................................................................................................. 25  
  Researchers Positionality ............................................................................................... 26  
  Significance ..................................................................................................................... 27  

Chapter II: Literature Review ......................................................................................... 28  
  Narrative I ....................................................................................................................... 28  
  Defining Human Trafficking & Legal Frameworks ....................................................... 29  
  Trafficking & the Northern Triangle ........................................................................... 34  
    Identifying Survivors of Human Trafficking .............................................................. 34  
    Red Flags for Potential Trafficking .......................................................................... 37  
    Trafficking in the Northern Triangle ......................................................................... 39  
  Immigrant (Migrant) Trauma and Mental Health & Trafficking Trauma .................. 45  
    Stressors and Challenges throughout the Migration Process .................................. 45  
    Pre-transit Stressors ................................................................................................. 46  
    Transit Stressors ....................................................................................................... 49  
    Post-Transit ................................................................................................................ 51  
  Trafficking Related Trauma & Trauma-Informed Care ............................................. 55  

Chapter III: Methodology ............................................................................................... 61  
  Narrative II .................................................................................................................... 61
Abstract

The Office of Trafficking in Persons grants child eligibility letters to foreign national minors who have been confirmed victims of trafficking. These OTIP Eligibility Letters provide recipients with public benefits to the same extent as a refugee but do not grant protection from removal or pathways towards legal permanent residence. Additionally, many OTIP recipients have unaccompanied minor status in the United States. In order to capture the experience of OTIP recipients, this research explores existing literature on trafficking trauma and migration stressors/trauma. Additionally, this research identifies international and national legal frameworks to define trafficking and acknowledge the responsibility that the United States has towards these adolescents.

In order to contribute to the existing literature and provide program recommendations, using a Legal Violence lens and a Trauma-informed Social Policy lens, this research incorporates a qualitative thematic analysis through five structured interviews with legal and social service professionals who provide services to OTIP recipients/unaccompanied minors. My experience as an advocate for OTIP recipients is also incorporated throughout this research. A Legal Violence lens, as envisioned by Menjivar and Abrego, was used to capture challenges that these adolescents face within the three spheres of life: family, school, and work to identify the inherent violence that immigration laws have on undocumented persons. A Trauma-informed Social Policy lens presented by Bowen and Murshid was used to identify the six core elements of trauma-informed care (safety, empowerment, choice, collaboration, trust/transparency, and intersectionality) within the current OTIP program. The findings suggest that OTIP recipients experience challenges in their family dynamics, often struggle to live with their sponsor, and may experience discomfort and unsafe living conditions, which can lead to seeking unsafe, exploitative working conditions. As it relates to school, many of these adolescents experience language and cultural barriers. The
findings also suggest that while some elements of trauma-informed care are present within the current OTIP Eligibility Letter program, they are not being executed effectively. The findings demonstrate a lack of transparency when trying to obtain benefits, which fractures the trust of recipients. The findings also identified a lack of collaboration between all stakeholders that hinders safety and empowerment.

The program recommendations were created under the influence of a Trauma-Informed Social Policy lens which argues that trauma-informed care can be reflected in policy to promote healing and eliminate retraumatization for individuals who have experienced trauma. The first recommendation seeks to improve access to public benefits and educate relevant stakeholders in this stage of obtaining benefits. The second recommendation aims to increase transparency, collaboration, accountability, and program oversight. The third recommendation aims to spread awareness and promote community involvement and education about OTIP Eligibility Letters and human trafficking to individuals and systems that encounter unaccompanied minors throughout the third stage of migration. This research seeks to raise awareness of trafficking and OTIP Eligibility Letters, educate, and provide an outline to ensure accountability so that recipients are given the space and tools to heal, feel empowered, and lead self-sufficient lives.

**Keywords:** Human trafficking, unaccompanied minors, trauma-informed care, OTIP Eligibility Letters
**List of Abbreviations:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OTIP</td>
<td>Office of Trafficking in Persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UC</td>
<td>Unaccompanied Minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORR</td>
<td>Office of Refugee Resettlement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RFA</td>
<td>Request for Assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSN</td>
<td>Social Security Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TVPA</td>
<td>Trafficking Victims Protection Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TVAP</td>
<td>Trafficking Victims Assistance Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSA</td>
<td>Social Security Administration office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USCRI</td>
<td>United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBP</td>
<td>Customs Border Patrol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRC</td>
<td>Convention on the Rights of a Child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSP</td>
<td>Legal Services Provider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRS</td>
<td>Post-Release Services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note to the Reader

Throughout this piece, I will be using victim and survivor interchangeably when referring to persons who have experienced human trafficking. Legal framework and most literature that has been written about human trafficking refers to persons who have been trafficked as only victims. To move past a victim-centered narrative, I want to give agency to survivors and/or victims to identify as they want, whether it is only as a victim, a survivor, both, or even neither. In doing so, I hope to create an inclusive space that gives survivors and/or victims personal autonomy, self-determination, and control over their stories throughout their healing process.
Chapter 1: Introduction

I met a child survivor of trafficking for the first time in the summer of 2021. I just began my summer internship at Refugee Services of Texas with the STEP (Survivors of Trafficking Empower Program) team. I was only a couple of weeks into my internship, and the team was experiencing some staff changes. At the time, I was under the wing of a case manager transitioning out of the team. To make the transition smooth for our clients when a case manager leaves, we try to ensure the client is eased into working with a new case manager. Before leaving the position entirely, the case manager made a home visit to one particular client whom I was invited to tag along with. This client was a young girl who entered the United States as an unaccompanied minor (UC). Looking back, I did not know how the meeting would go or the impact she would have on me.

I can almost recall the exact day I met her; it was a typical hot, sunny day in Austin, Texas. Her family apartment was small, and the AC was not working, so it was very hot inside. She was a native Spanish speaker and, at first, was shy. She loved peluches (stuffed animals), so the case manager brought one for her and some other goodies. For the first meeting, I observed the conversation as the case manager went over logistical things and introduced me to the client as the intern who would be working with her new case manager. While I could never know how it feels to talk about something as hard as one's trafficking experience, especially with someone she just met, she was able to open up about her experience with bravery. After hearing about her experience for the first time, I remember acknowledging her strength and resilience. Before the case manager said her goodbyes, we reaffirmed her feelings. Although she was sad about this case manager leaving, she felt some comfort knowing that someone she met would be on her case.
I saw her again for the second time with the new case manager, and she still maintained her shy, quiet composure. We brought her another peluche that she added to her collection, which she showed off. To break the ice, the three of us colored with the new case manager leading the conversation with her cheerful, bubbly personality. The new case manager made us laugh with anecdotes ranging from funny stories of her misusing Spanish words (or making up some words) to getting to know each other. As time passed, her current case manager created a space filled with trust and choice for this young person. I would deliver food boxes weekly, if not bi-weekly, to this young person to catch up with her.

This young person and her case manager worked on many short- and long-term goals together, and I supported her where and when I could. She was interested in learning English, so we helped her by having one-on-one lessons or filling out some worksheets. They also focused on long-term goals, and she was given the space to explore her wide range of interests through potential career options for the future.

I became less involved in her case as months passed, but I always kept tabs on her through her case manager. Eventually, she successfully obtained an OTIP eligibility letter and was discharged from our program to another department of our organization, which helped her obtain benefits from the OTIP eligibility letter.

This young person is one of many survivors of human trafficking that I have met. While each person's trafficking story is different, I do want to acknowledge the immense strength, determination, perseverance, and resilience that these young persons exude. I will forever be in awe of what they can accomplish, and I admire how they look towards the future.
Throughout this research, I will incorporate elements ranging from photos, short stories such as this one above, or even quotes from conversations I remember having with adolescent trafficking survivors. In doing so, I will pay homage to each survivor I have met, as their actual voices are not present in this project. That said, I hope that this project can initiate change and raise awareness to truly help survivors on their path toward healing and leading self-sufficient lives.

**Statement of the Problem**

*What is an OTIP Eligibility letter?*

In 2000, the United States enacted the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), which was the first extensive federal law to address trafficking in persons. TVPA provides a three-pronged approach to address human trafficking: the **prevention** of trafficking in persons, **protection** of victims of trafficking in persons, and **prosecution** of traffickers. Under U.S. federal law, TVPA, as reauthorized, grants assistance to victims in the United States, [a foreign national] who is a victim of a severe form of trafficking in persons shall be eligible for benefits and services under any **Federal** or **State** program or activity funded or administered by any official or agency described in subparagraph (B) to the same extent as [a foreign national] who is admitted to the United States as a **refugee** under section 207 of the Immigration and Nationality Act. (22 U.S.C. § 7105(b)(1)(A)).

This allows the Office of Trafficking in Persons (OTIP), an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to issue child eligibility letters to foreign national minors who have been a victim of a severe form of trafficking in persons.

OTIP’s mission is to combat human trafficking by supporting and leading prevention systems through public awareness, protecting victims through identification, and assisting survivors in rebuilding their lives, aiming toward self-sufficiency (Devine & Mitaro, October...
OTIP is responsible for building capacity to respond to trafficking, develop anti-trafficking policies and programs that work towards the prevention of trafficking, increase victim identification, and nourish the health and wellbeing of survivors of trafficking (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 3). OTIP has three primary functions,

1. **Protection** through victim services and assistance activities, grant programs, Child Eligibility and Adult Certification programs, child victim coordination activities, and funding of the National Human Trafficking Hotline;

2. **Prevention**, through training and technical assistance, survivor engagement, public awareness, regional coordination, and prevention education and;

3. **Research and Policy Advocacy** through identifying, coordinating, and implementing an anti-trafficking research agenda to support programs and policy developments (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 5).

**Who are OTIP Recipients?**

For a young person to qualify for an OTIP eligibility letter, they must be:

1. Under the age of 18 at the time the Request for Assistance (RFA) is submitted,

2. Foreign National Minor,

3. Victims of a severe form of trafficking in persons.

Many adolescents who qualify for an OTIP eligibility letter enter the United States as UCs. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), an office of the Administration of Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, defines an unaccompanied minor as a young person under the age of 18 who entered the United States without a parent or legal guardian and legal status (Silva et al., 2022, p.1). The Flores Settlement Agreement outlines the minimum treatment, placement, and detention of UCs. Under the settlement, UCs must be detained in the
least restrictive setting, which is why ORR is responsible for the care and placement of UCs. Similarly, TVPA, as reauthorized, also requires UCs to be screened as potential trafficking victims while in ORR custody. Chapter 2, I will delve into details regarding UCs, such as identifying challenges and stressors they experience throughout the three migration stages.

How to apply for an OTIP Letter (submit a Request for Assistance)?

Anyone can submit a request for assistance (RFA) for an OTIP eligibility letter on behalf of a foreign national minor. However, most RFAs are submitted by advocates adolescents are already working with. Advocates include legal service providers (LSPs) or case managers obtained while in ORR custody or post-release from ORR custody. RFAs can be submitted through Shephard, the OTIP secure online case management system. Once an RFA is submitted, OTIP will review the application. If more information is needed, the person who submitted the RFA must provide that.

There are three different responses to an RFA. The first would be a denial letter – if a minor receives this, upon obtaining new information about the trafficking experience, another RFA can be submitted. A minor can also receive an interim letter, which means OTIP needs more time to process the RFA, providing the youth with benefits for a certain amount of time. Finally, a minor can receive the OTIP Eligibility letter, which gives full benefits. However, it must be noted that some benefits can expire, and some can only be obtained within a specific time after being granted the letter. To qualify for an OTIP eligibility letter, the adolescent applying does not have to have been successfully trafficked, meaning that attempts to traffic a minor are sufficient to grant an OTIP eligibility letter. (Chapter 2 will delve into identifying survivors of trafficking)

Upon being determined a victim of a severe form of trafficking, foreign national minors receive an eligibility letter (OTIP letter). This eligibility letter gives minors access to trafficking-
specific case management services, medical services, food assistance, monetary assistance, health
insurance, and other public benefits to the same extent as a refugee (Child Eligibility Letters); see Figure 1 for a list of public benefits.

OTIP eligibility letters do not confer immigration status, meaning that this letter does not provide legal protection from deportation, nor does it allow pathways for legal permanent residence for young persons who have been confirmed to be victims of a severe form of trafficking by the Office of Trafficking in Persons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monetary Assistance</th>
<th>Nutrition</th>
<th>Medical Services</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Housing</th>
<th>Multiple Needs Assistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA)</td>
<td>Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP)</td>
<td>Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)</td>
<td>Title IV Federal Student Financial Aid</td>
<td>Job Corps</td>
<td>Public Housing Program</td>
<td>Refugee Social Services and Targeted Assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary Security Income (SSI)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Medicaid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Foster Care Program (URM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)</td>
<td>Office of Refugee Resettlement Medical Screenings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Voluntary Agency Matching Grant Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Refugee Medical Assistance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: OTIP Eligibility Benefits (Child Eligibility Letter Fact Sheet)
**Importance of Access to Public Benefits**

Although OTIP Eligibility Letters do not confer immigration status nor end removal proceedings, child survivors of trafficking need to have access to public benefits that can aid in the short-term stabilization and long-term integration of these youths who have experienced complex trauma (Aron et al., 2006, p.12). OTIP Eligibility letters provide access to public benefits to the same extent as a refugee. Similar to refugees, OTIP recipients flee their home counties due to persecution, continued violence, their trafficking situation, or other crises that leave them without access to basic necessities: food, shelter, and medical care. Access to public benefits also assists when it comes to integration and resettlement – education, language classes, job training, and other support services that aid in self-sufficiency. These public benefits provide a safety net for short-term, intermediate, and long-term needs (Aron et al., 2006, p.12). The importance of access to public benefits will be discussed further in detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

**How does an OTIP recipient receive benefits?**

Once granted an OTIP Eligibility Letter, a recipient can begin to receive benefits. Benefits can be obtained through two different avenues. The first is through an Aspire case manager. The United States Committee for Refugee and Immigrants (USCRI) receives grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Trafficking in Persons (OTIP) to administer the Trafficking Victim Assistance Program (for adults) and Aspire: Child Trafficking Victims Assistance Program. Once approved for an OTIP Eligibility letter, the advocate who submitted the RFA will receive an email with a referral form from Aspire. Once the referral is submitted, the youth will be provided with an Aspire case manager who provides trafficking-specific, comprehensive case management service to aid the youth in obtaining benefits.
On the other hand, many OTIP recipients already have access to legal services providers, many of whom have social workers on staff to assist clients with various social service interventions. If obtaining help from an advocate, like a social worker or case manager, USCRI advises that advocates accompany the OTIP recipient to a Social Security Administration office (SSA) or a benefit issuing agency office. To either the SSA office or benefit issuing agency office, a guardian of the OTIP recipient must be present. The recipient needs to bring the original OTIP eligibility letter and a form of identification [it is advised that they bring their Verification of Release from ORR Custody and another picture ID like a school ID] (USCRI, n.d.). OTIP recipients, their guardians, and their advocates are advised to go to a benefit-issuing agency first and apply for public benefits such as SNAP or TANF. Suppose they cannot obtain public benefits without a non-work social security number (SSN). In that case, the client must obtain a formal letter from a supervisor at the public benefits office explaining the need for a non-work SSN. Then, the advocate and the OTIP recipient must take this letter to request a non-work social security at the SSA office. Suppose an OTIP recipient is denied at both the public benefits office and the SSA office. In that case, USCRI advises to “advocate up the chain and educate office staff on the minors eligibility” (USCRI, n.d.). If still unable to obtain benefits or a non-work SSN, advocates should contact the Social Security Administration Regional Director or USCRI, Aspire.

Nevertheless, how accessible are these benefits? Chapters 4 and 5 will explore this through the interviews conducted and my personal experience trying to help OTIP recipients obtain benefits.

**Background and Need**

The Polaris Project operates the United States National Trafficking Hotline and is leading a survivor-centered movement to end human trafficking. Based on the 2021 data from the National
Human Trafficking Hotline, Polaris acknowledges the significant numbers of survivors and trafficking situations identified in the U.S. However, these numbers are “likely a fraction of the actual problem” for several reasons (Polaris, 2024). The first is due to the hidden nature of trafficking and under-reporting due to fear, shame, coercion, and lack of awareness. Many victims may not recognize themselves as being trafficked (this could be due to multiple reasons such as trauma bonding or culture, which will be discussed throughout this research). Moreover, Polaris has identified inadequate data collection as a result of underreporting, which could be a result of a lack of education about trafficking. Transnational trafficking and its complexity are also factors.

**OTIP Eligibility Trends**

Based on the trends and data provided by the Office of Trafficking in Persons (OTIP), from FY16 to FY23, 14,038 Requests for Assistance (RFA’s) have been received (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 46). Figure 2, below, breaks down the amount of RFA’s received per month of each fiscal year since 2016. Of those requests, not including FY23, 7,315 eligibility letters have been issued; see Figure 3 for a breakdown of child eligibility letters issued per FY (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 47). Moreover, the top ten counties of origin for OTIP recipients are (1) Guatemala, (2) Honduras, and (3) El Salvador.

These numbers demonstrate the significant number of youths who have been identified as potential and identified victims of trafficking. Nevertheless, it must be noted that these numbers do not demonstrate the whole picture as identified by the Polaris Project. However, the amount of RFAs submitted also demonstrates the amount of foreign national youths who have been identified as potential victims of some form of exploitation (labor or sex) by legal service providers or social services advocates; this means that many foreign national minors are at high risk of being
trafficked, have experienced red flags for trafficking, or could experience revictimization in the future.

In the last four years, the number of OTIP eligibility letters issued has increased, which could be attributed to advocacy efforts from OTIP to spread knowledge on trafficking and child eligibility letters. OTIP has made efforts to educate legal service providers and other social services providers who work with unaccompanied minors or foreign national minors directly to look out for red flags for trafficking to submit RFAs so that these individuals can obtain benefits. These statistics demonstrate the need to bring awareness to child trafficking while also creating trauma-informed programs that are based on understanding the individual experiences and implications that trafficking has on individuals to promote the six core elements of trauma-informed care that will be explored throughout this project.
Figure 2: RFAs submitted per FY for every month since FY16; data provided by OTIP (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 46)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>FY16</th>
<th>FY17</th>
<th>FY18</th>
<th>FY19</th>
<th>FY20</th>
<th>FY21</th>
<th>FY22</th>
<th>FY23</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total RFAs</td>
<td>805</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>1008</td>
<td>1418</td>
<td>907</td>
<td>2178</td>
<td>3150</td>
<td>3633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal Year</td>
<td>Eligibility Letters Issued</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>102</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>114</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>217</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>239</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>334</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>506</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>465</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>892</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>672</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>1,143</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>2,226</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>7,315</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3: Child Eligibility Letters Issued (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 47)*

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, I will investigate OTIP Eligibility Letters and assess accessibility to benefits. Second, by applying a Trauma-Informed Social Policy lens, I will
determine what elements of trauma-informed care are present within the program's existing structure, particularly regarding obtaining benefits.

The second is to advocate for expanding the program to include legal protections with a pathway for legal permanent residence within the existing structure of the program. With the use of a legal violence lens, I will be able to identify challenges that OTIP recipients face in the United States as grounds to expand the program. I will also apply a Trauma Informed Social Policy lens to advocate for expanding the program. Moreover, I will also assess domestic and international laws and protocols designed to protect, prevent, and suppress trafficking, including legal protections within the program.

I will accomplish these objectives by interviewing legal and social service providers working with OTIP recipients. In doing so, I will be able to theorize and provide a program recommendation that can allow foreign national adolescent survivors of trafficking to begin to feel that they are more than just their victimization or survivor of their traumatic experience and where the legal system is not just another barrier to accomplish that goal.

**Research Questions**

To assess accessibility to public benefits granted by the OTIP Eligibility Letter and understand the need to expand the program, I will use the following research questions to guide my research. I am proposing that along with the current benefits provided, OTIP Eligibility letters need to provide legal protections from deportation and a pathway to legal permanent residence and citizenship. The first set of questions will enable me to understand how human trafficking affects victims and what approaches are recommended when interacting with survivors. Through this question, I will also be able to assess how accessible benefits are through trauma-informed care strategies that are present within the program. Question two is designed to analyze legal
frameworks that address human trafficking concerning the responsibility that the U.S. has to address this issue. Finally, the last question aims to assess the effects of keeping OTIP eligibility letters as is on recipients.

1. How does human trafficking affect survivors' ability to reestablish their lives after the trafficking has already occurred? What approaches and strategies are needed to promote empowerment, healing, and safety? How is this reflected within the existing structure of the OTIP Eligibility Letter Program?

2. Why should the United States amend OTIP Eligibility letters to include legal protections for national foreign minors? How should the United States go about this?

3. How would keeping the program as is affect OTIP recipients?

**Conceptual Frameworks**

I will apply a *Trauma-Informed Social Policy* framework, which Bowen and Murshid imagined. This conceptual framework argues that trauma-informed care can be applied to social policy. Trauma-informed social policy projects a politicized comprehension of trauma and reflects the reality of trauma and its effects; policy can better exhibit the six core principles of trauma-informed care (Bowen & Murshid, 2016, p. 1). The six core principles of trauma-informed care are as follows:

1. **Safety**: efforts to ensure clients' physical and emotional safety. Safety can be understood as reasonable freedom from danger and/ or harm to prevent retraumatization;

2. **Trustworthiness/Transparency**: the extent to which an organization [in this case, OTIP & advocates working with *survivors* of trafficking] maintains transparency
in policies and procedures to build trust among stakeholders, staff, clients, and community members;

(3) **Collaboration**: staff viewing clients *survivors of trafficking* as partners and experts in their own lives. This can be accomplished through peer support;

(4) **Empowerment**: efforts to share power with clients *survivors of trafficking* by providing a space where they can share their voice in decision-making at individual and agency levels;

(5) **Choice**: Providing meaningful choices and options is associated with stronger treatment in multiple scenarios;

(6) **Intersectionality**: awareness of identity characteristics such as gender, race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and the privileges or oppression these characteristics can provoke (Bowen & Murshid, 2016, p. 2).

Applying a Trauma-Informed Social *Policy* lens, I will be able to assess trauma-informed elements present within the OTIP Eligibility program. Once the elements of trauma-informed care are identified and explored, I will use this lens to create a program recommendation that reflects the six core elements of trauma-informed care.

Menjívar and Abrego conceived the second conceptual framework I will apply. They use an analytical lens to capture the experiences of immigrants with unresolved legal status and theorize how laws shape their everyday lives. Immigration laws create inherent violence that has become normalized and accepted in today's society. The *legal violence* lens addresses this complex issue and addresses the overlooked effects it has on immigrants' path towards assimilation (integration) and incorporation. To theorize about legal violence, they link specific laws and their implementation to outcomes in three aspects of the participants' lives: **family**, **work**, and **school**.
(Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). This theoretical lens makes visible different types of structural violence created within the law that become normalized and the standard. This analytical approach provides a pathway to capture immigrants’ experiences with unresolved legal status and a space to theorize the role of law in shaping everyday life (Menjívar et al., L., 2012, p. 1381). Doing so emphasizes the need for comprehensive immigration reform and social justice.

Legal violence also identifies the contradictions in the formation and implementation of laws that punish undocumented migrants and push them to spaces outside of the law. This makes immigrants accountable to the law but excludes them from legal protections or rights. This theoretical lens seeks to understand and analyze how legal systems perpetuate harm to marginalized individuals, even when these systems are intended to uphold justice. Applying this to immigration, laws, and policies leads to suffering and insecurity no matter the intentions, whether it be neutral or well-intentions, they ultimately lead to family separation, human rights violations, detentions, and other harmful results (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012).

Using these two conceptual frameworks will help me fulfill the purpose of this study and answer my research questions.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study has many limitations. The first limitation is the inability to include the voices, testimonies, and first-account experiences of OTIP eligibility recipients within the study. There is an immense need to capture the integration experiences of OTIP recipients/ foreign national minors who are survivors of trafficking and acknowledge the complex trauma they experience to aid in long-term stabilization, safety, and empowerment. Moreover, purposeful sampling was used to select participants, which could result in generalizations, bias, and a small sample size. The researcher would have liked to have a larger sample size and diversity of job titles of the
participants, but due to time constraints, I was unable to do so. As a result, participants' answers may be similar based on their work with OTIP recipients. Chapter 3 will delve more into the limitations of the study.

**Researchers Positionality**

As mentioned previously, I have worked with survivors of trafficking and survivors of other violent crimes starting in 2021. I started as an intern and later became a full-time case manager with the Survivors of Trafficking Empowerment Program (STEP) team. As a case manager, I would execute crisis-related resources and case management services to survivors who were foreign national adults and minors. I also have provided legal assistance for unaccompanied minors while they were detained in ORR custody and post-release from ORR custody. As a legal assistant, I also encountered foreign national minors who were survivors of trafficking and helped them obtain OTIP eligibility letters.

My background and the work I have done with this community have given me an understanding of the challenges, successes, and complex, unique experiences surrounding foreign national minors, particularly survivors of trafficking/OTIP recipients. I have learned that by having patience and creating a space filled with acceptance, choice, and empowerment, this community can flourish and look beyond their traumatic experiences. As a result, I have an unwritten commitment to these adolescents, as each adolescent I have met has had a profound impact on me; in return, I have a bias in favor toward them. In acknowledging my privilege and positionality, I am in a place where I can be an effective advocate for these youths on their journey toward integration, healing, and leading self-sufficient lives. Through my deep admiration for these young persons, I hope to continue creating a space and conversation surrounding these youths.
where they can begin to unload and alleviate some of the weight they carry and feel as if the systems and institutions they encounter are not another barrier they have to face.

**Significance**

The significance of this research is multifaceted. It will seek to enhance access to benefits by highlighting the program's effectiveness. This research serves as a form of advocacy for systemic change that can aid survivors and prevent re-trafficking while contributing to the existing literature. Applying a trauma-informed care lens is significant as it re-enforces and highlights the need for policy and programs to be educated on trauma and sensitive to the unique needs of survivors. This study can contribute to developing more effective policies and programs to ensure the well-being of survivors. This study holds significance through the potential to inform policy, raise awareness, enhance support for survivors, and uphold the dignity and empowerment of survivors of trafficking.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Narrative I

“‘Why did you come to the United States?’” That’s the first question on the intake questionnaire for unaccompanied migrant children” (Luiselli, 2017, p. 7). Over the past year, I conducted legal screenings and know-your-rights presentations to unaccompanied minors (UCs) who just entered ORR custody. Within about an hour of meeting me, these young persons would tell me their life stories from the beginning until that moment. Before, throughout, and after I
conducted the legal screenings, I created a space where, even just for a moment, these young persons could alleviate some of the weight they carried. They displayed different courage and strength as they told me, a complete stranger, their entire life story. For most of these young persons, this would be the only meeting they would have with me; the exception was those youths whom the organization I worked with at the time would represent legally. I always let them know that although this would be our only meeting, siempre estaré en tu esquina echándote porras desde lejos (I will always be in your corner cheering you on from afar).

In order to preserve their unique experiences and remember and commemorate each and every one of them, I, with the help of the social work team, put together jars filled with beads [photo above]; every bead represents a young person that I met while in ORR Custody. The bead bracelet with my name on it was made and given to me by an exceptional young person I met semi-regularly over about seven months, as he was detained in ORR custody for that time period. Some of the beads also represent young persons for whom I was able to help obtain OTIP eligibility letters while they were in ORR custody. Although I will never know how their stories end, this jar is a way to keep their experiences from becoming generalized and showcasing their individuality, strength, and complex journey.

Part of this literature review will delve into the experiences that UCs face throughout the three stages of migration. By including this photo and memory, I wish to honor each UC who has entered the U.S., whether or not they are survivors of trafficking.

**Defining Human Trafficking & Legal Frameworks**

In 2000, the United Nations created the Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, which has two supplemental protocols: The Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants
and the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol). The United Nations set out to establish the very first definition of trafficking, which combines various other forms of human exploitation practices. Article 3 of the Palermo Protocol defines human trafficking as the:

Recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons, by the means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control of another person, for the purpose of exploitation. (United Nations & Annan, 2004, Article 3 p. 42).

The United States signed the Palermo Protocol in December of 2000 and ratified the protocol in 2005. As a state party and to abide by the Palermo Protocol, the United States created the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) as the first comprehensive federal law to prevent, protect, and punish trafficking in persons. TVPA has been reauthorized through the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) of 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2017, and 2018 (Polaris, 2024). Additionally, TVPA provides definitions for labor and sex trafficking; below, I will provide elements used to identify sex and labor trafficking.

Along with providing a universal definition of human trafficking, the purpose of the Palermo Protocol is to prevent and combat trafficking, protect and assist victims of trafficking “with respect for their full human rights,” and promote cooperation and collaboration among state parties (United Nations & Annan, 2004, Article 2 p 42). Under the Palermo Protocol, state parties should consider creating means to provide for the,
physical, psychological, and social recovery for victims of trafficking in persons… in cooperation with non-governmental organizations… and other elements of civil society… [by supplying victims with] (A) appropriate housing, (B) Counselling and information [on legal rights in a language of their understanding] (C) Medical, psychological, and material assistance; and (D) Employment, educational and training opportunities…. (United Nations & Annan, 2004, Article 6, p. 44).

This article encourages the United States to provide multi-need assistance to survivors of trafficking. The United States accomplished this provision through the OTIP Eligibility Letter program, as identified in Chapter 1. Moreover, Part II, Article 6 of the Palermo Protocol states that "Each State Party shall endeavor to provide for the physical safety of victims of trafficking in persons while they are within its territory." Coupled with Article 6 and Article 7 of the Palermo Protocol, state parties must adopt legal measures to permit victims of trafficking to remain in their territory either permanently or temporarily (United Nations & Annan, 2004, Article 7, p. 44). In response to these requirements, Section 107 of TVPA 2000 creates the non-immigrant Trafficking-Visa, also referred to as the T-Visa, which grants foreign nationals continued presence to remain in the United States legally; 5,000 T-Visas are allotted per FY, and the cap has never been reached (USCIS, n.d.; 22 U.S.C. § 107(a), 114 Stat. 1464).

As mentioned above, the Palermo Protocol also aims to combat trafficking; Section 3, Article 9 outlines prevention tactics state parties should use. State parties should participate in research initiatives, mass media campaigns, and social and economic initiatives to combat and prevent trafficking (United Nations & Annan, 2004, Article 9, p. 45-46). State parties should engage in multilateral and bilateral cooperation, educational initiatives, and social or cultural measures while also engaging with non-governmental organizations and civil society to
accomplish these goals (United Nations & Annan, 2004, Article 9, p. 45-46). As identified in Chapter One, the Office of Trafficking in Persons (OTIP) is an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that was created to combat human trafficking through public awareness, increase victim identification and access to services, and develop anti-trafficking strategies, policies, and programs (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 3).

While the Palermo Protocol’s primary purpose is to combat trafficking and outline victim's rights for protection, it is not the only convention that addresses and acknowledges human trafficking and the rights that survivors are entitled to, particularly as it relates to children and adolescents. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (CRC) was created in 1989 and came into effect in 1990. The Convention on the Rights of a Child (CRC) was created to promote and protect children's rights worldwide and provide a framework for governments to work towards ensuring the well-being and growth of children. CRC references the UN Declaration on Human Rights, acknowledging that “childhood is entitled to special care and assistance”; additionally, children “need special safeguards and care including appropriate legal protection” (General Assembly, 1989, p.1). CRC recognizes that children who live in challenging conditions and are entitled to special protection (General Assembly, 1989, p.1). The United States signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1995, but it has not yet been ratified. The United States remains the only UN country that has signed but not ratified this convention (Ataiants et al., 2018, p.6). Ataiants et al. identify that the U.S. agrees with the principles of CRC as a signatory state; however, they are unwilling to be held legally accountable, particularly regarding the treatment of UCs (2018, p.7). Ataiants et al. argue that the United States has signed the convention, insinuating that they uphold the purpose behind CRC and should address their intention to do “their best” for
UCs (2018, p.7). For this research, while many OTIP recipients also have UC status, I will apply Ataiants et al.’s argument to provide recommendations for the OTIP Eligibility Letter program.

Specific articles of the Convention on the Rights of a Child address human rights, health, and safety that can be applied to UCs and, by extension, OTIP recipients. Articles 2 and 3 acknowledge that State actions regarding children should consider the child’s best interests (General Assembly, 1989, p.2). CRC acknowledges that children have the right to live in freedom from all forms of violence as stated in article 19, “states shall take appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and education measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence…[and] maltreatment or exploitation” and article 37 states, “no child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment or punishment” (General Assembly, 1989, p. 5,10; Ataiants et al., 2018, p.8). Articles 34, 35, 36, and 39 require states to protect all children from armed conflict, trafficking, and sexual and economic exploitation; specifically, article 39 states:

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment that fosters the health, self-respect, and dignity of the child. (General Assembly, 1989, p. 11; Ataiants et al., 2018, p.8)

On a similar note, article 24 requires states to acknowledge a child’s right to enjoy the “highest attainable standard of health” and that children have access to health care services, also includes access to mental health services (General Assembly, 1989, p.7; Ataiants et al., 2018, p.8).
Identifying these conventions and legal frameworks intended to address and combat trafficking that also outlines protection for victims of trafficking and safeguarding their rights, particularly of children and child victims, is necessary when discussing the legal responsibilities that the United States has when creating programs and policies for this population. Identifying said frameworks will allow the researcher to create program recommendations that follow international and national protocols.

**Trafficking & the Northern Triangle**

In Chapter 1, I identified trends provided by the Office of Trafficking in Persons (OTIP) as they relate to recipients of child eligibility letters. Foreign nationals from the Northern Triangle are the top three recipients of OTIP Eligibility letters; Guatemala ranks first, then Honduras and El Salvador (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 47). Due to this, it is essential to identify what trafficking looks like, what vulnerabilities children have that can make them susceptible to trafficking, and methods traffickers use to traffic minors as it relates and applies to this region and demographic. Moreover, this section will begin to subtly introduce stressors identified in the first stage of migration that cause unaccompanied minors to migrate; however, I will go into detail about stressors and trauma experienced throughout the three stages of migration further in this literature review.

*Identifying Survivors of Human Trafficking*

This section will serve as a guide on identifying survivors of trafficking and address misconceptions of trafficking. Additionally, this section will provide context to what victims of trafficking experience to begin to understand the trauma associated with trafficking; however, below, I will expand on the literature found that explicitly addresses trafficking trauma.
Under TVPA, labor trafficking in minors needs to reflect three elements: **an action, a means, and a purpose.** To identify sex trafficking in minors, only two elements need to be present: **an action and a purpose.** For both labor and sex trafficking, **action** needs to be identified; actions can include recruitment, harboring, transporting, provisions, obtaining, soliciting (only when identifying commercial sex in minors), and patronizing (only when identifying commercial sex in minors) (22 USC § 7102; Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 15). The **means only** needed to identify labor trafficking in minors include force, fraud, or coercion (22 USC § 7102; Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 16; Golob, 2022, p. 31). Lastly, a **purpose** for both sex and labor trafficking needs to be identified. A purpose can include involuntary servitude, debt bondage, peonage, slavery, and commercial sex. (22 USC § 7102; Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 17; Golob, 2022, p. 29). To clarify, only one element in each category needs to be identified for a minor to have been a victim of trafficking.

There are many misconceptions when it comes to identifying human trafficking. Smuggling and trafficking are commonly lumped together as the same thing. The definition of trafficking (above) differs from smuggling because smuggling can be seen as a crime against a country instead of against a person. Trafficking and smuggling are not interchangeable; a survivor can be smuggled for trafficking purposes, but the act of smuggling itself is not considered trafficking (Cicero-Dominguez, 2005, pp. 305; Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 9; Golob, 2022, p.25). Smuggling can be a business arrangement between the smuggler and a person entering the country. Smuggling will always involve the physical movement of a person, whereas trafficking does not need to include smuggling (Cicero-Dominguez, 2005, pp. 305; Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 9).
Moreover, trafficking and ransom are also two different issues. Ransom involves an individual being held against their will for an organization or perpetrator receiving money, and trafficking involves forced labor, commercial sex, or both (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 9). Ransom typically involves someone being held against their will, but trafficking, at times, does not involve being held against someone's will. Finally, a ransom is paid directly to an individual holding the person, and trafficking includes forced labor or commercial sex to pay off debt or money owed to an individual (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 9). Depending on the case, the tactic of ransom can be used to traffic a person, but the act of ransom itself is not trafficking.

The most common and well-known types of trafficking are sex and labor trafficking. In Golob’s book, *Gang Strategies in the Northern Triangle: Coerced Criminal Activity as a Forum of Human Trafficking*, he identifies that sex trafficking is the “loss of autonomy and sovereignty over one’s body due to control over another individual” (UNODC 2021 as cited in Golob, 2022, p. 23). An unrecognized form of sex trafficking is forced marriage; there are around 15.4 million persons who are victims of forced marriage (End Slavery Now 2021, ILO 2021, as cited in Golob, 2022, p. 23). More than 10,000 children are sexually exploited or trafficked in the United States, and there are an estimated 4.8 million victims globally of forced sexual exploitation (SFHRC, 2021; ICE 2021, as cited in Golob, 2022, p. 24).

Labor trafficking can assume various shapes, ranging from agriculture workers, restaurant staff, factory workers, etc. (Golob, 2022, p. 24). As it relates to misconceptions, it is assumed that only women and children are victims of trafficking, but anyone can be a victim as well as a perpetrator (Golob, 2022, p. 24).

Domestic servitude is another form of human trafficking that often goes unnoticed because it takes place in a private home. Golob explains that domestic servants can resemble “house slaves”
who are forced to clean, cook, care for children, and complete other domestic work; instead of being treated as a members of the household, they are viewed as a part of the home (2022, p. 25). Domestic servants are unable to leave the home in their downtime and are confined to a room or a section of the home; this type of trafficking is considered labor trafficking; however, it is a specific form of trafficking that is overlooked, and the legal system is behind in finding ways to identify and assist these victims (Golob, 2022, p. 26).

A child soldier also receives minimal awareness; this type of trafficking focuses on the recruitment, training, and exploitation of children or adolescents as “workers” for state and non-state military or paramilitary groups (Golob, 2022, p. 26). Child soldiers range from the age of 8 to 18 and can be used as armed soldiers, cooks, messengers, wives, sexually exploited, and more (Golob, 2022, p. 26).

Red Flags for Potential Trafficking

Approximately a quarter of trafficking victims internationally are children, and adult survivors report that they experienced trafficking as a child or other abuses before trafficking (Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative as cited in Chambers et al., 2024, p. 43). If suspecting trafficking concerns among youths, there are certain red flags to look out for. Children are more vulnerable and exploitable through typical trafficking tactics, and recruitment tactics are gendered (Golob, 2022, p. 26). Brainwashing is a tactic often used to alter the experienced reality of a victim, which can include force, threats of force, and debt bondage (Golob, 2022, p. 31). Through brainwashing, victims are conditioned to fear law enforcement and social service workers who could provide assistance and believe that said agencies will cause them harm or incarnate them (Golob, 2022, p. 31). It is crucial to keep in mind how the youth interacts with individuals. Red
flags also can include youths who live with multiple individuals who are not family or living with a caregiver or person who serves as an employer (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 20).

As it relates to labor trafficking, Golob identifies that victims can be easily kept secret and isolated in hazardous and challenging jobs; additionally, labor shortages create a dangerous climate for forced labor (Golob, 2022, p. 25). Often, children and adolescents who live in poverty are encouraged by family or even forced to work; this makes them susceptible to labor exploitation, and frequently, adolescents can be unaware that they are victims of human trafficking (Golob, 2022, p. 25).

Isolation is another red flag to watch out for, as mentioned above. The inability to attend school regularly and frequent movements can also be red flags for potential trafficking (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 20). Youths who are missing or are frequent runaways are considered at high risk for experiencing trafficking. Research supports the association between runaways and increased vulnerabilities for experiencing sexual exploitation and human trafficking. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) estimates that 19% of runaway youths likely experience sex trafficking (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 21).

Exposure and normalization of exploitation, sexual abuse, physical abuse/ neglect, emotional abuse/neglect, limited access to basic necessities, medical neglect, educational neglect, separation of family, rejection by family, community violence/ gang violence, and involvement in the justice system create risk factors for trafficking and continued revictimization. These definitions of trafficking and pointers on how to identify potential victims or revictimization are needed to understand the effects that trafficking has on survivors, but also to understand the section that follows as it will discuss a specific trafficking situation that young persons in the Northern Triangle can find themselves in.

As identified above, State Parties to the Palermo Protocol are encouraged to promote cooperation among signatory states. Hence, the United States releases a Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP) each year. This report aims to raise awareness of trafficking, assess efforts to protect survivors, monitor progress, influence policy, evaluate global efforts to combat trafficking, and provide recommendations. The TIP Report ranks countries based on TVPA’s minimum standards. The 2023 TIP Report categorizes Guatemala and Honduras as tier two countries, whereas El
Salvador is rated tier two watch list. Countries categorized as tier two suggest that these countries' governments are not fully meeting the TVPA’s minimum standards but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance (President Biden et al., 2023, p. 73). The difference is that tier two watch list countries estimated numbers of trafficking that are significant or the numbers are increasing significantly. There is a failure to provide evidence of increasing efforts to combat trafficking in persons from the previous year (President Biden et al., 2023, p. 71).

To understand why the countries in the Northern Triangle are categorized at tier two and tier two watch list, I will identify trends and tactics used by traffickers in the Northern Triangle to either force, coerce, or fraudulently obtain adolescents for trafficking. This section will also introduce motives for migration that can subtly create complex trauma; however, general movies for migration will be discussed in detail in this literature review.

The Office of Trafficking in Persons (OTIP) identified trafficking trends among foreign national minors based on the Request for Assistance (RFA’s) they receive. These trends include commercial sex and smuggling, domestic and sexual servitude, forced criminality, forced labor and smuggling, forced labor by a caregiver, and forced labor on the journey (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 18).

While traffickers can be anyone, such as family members or someone that a youth finds “dependable,” this section will center on forced criminality imposed on adolescents by gangs in the Northern Triangle (Counter-Trafficking Data Collaborative, n.d.; International Organization for Migration, 2017 as cited by Chambers et al., 2024, p. 43). Although the countries in the Northern Triangle created laws and are a part of other international conventions, “it appears that criminal groups are in fact winning the war. Central America is in the grip of these criminal
networks, and neither the isolated nor joint actions by authorities are having an effect.” (Lopez & Ornella, 2015, p.2 as cited in Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 244).

Gangs in the Northern Triangle have been around for centuries but evolved from neighborhood groups that fought over territory to transnational criminal organizations that control entire areas of cities or national territories and have developed national and transnational networks of criminal activity (Boerman, 2007, p. 208; Seelke, 2014, p.206; Cruz, 2010, p.2013; Fogelbach, 2011; Farah, 2012; Fontes, 2018; Gutierrez Rivera, 2010, 2013; Levenson, 2013; USAID, 2018 as cited by Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 245). The two significant gangs in the region are the 18th Street Gang, also known as Barrio 18 and M-18, and their rival Mara Salvatruche or MS-13 (Seelke, 2018, p.3 as cited by Golob, 2023, p.37). Both gangs originated in Los Angeles due to the mass influx of Central American migrants fleeing civil war; hence, gang members are commonly referred to as “homies” or “homeboys” (Perez, 2013, p.225 and Arana, 2005, p.101 as cited in by Golob, 2023, p.37; Sawyer & Marquez, 2016, p. 70). While members of these two gangs operate in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, members can also be found in Mexico, the United States, and other parts of Latin America (Golob, 2023, p.37) In Luiselli’s essay, *Tell Me How It Ends*, she tells a story of a youth who fled Honduras to the United States because of gang violence, once he resettled in the U.S. he still was unable to escape Barrio 18 or MS-13 as his high school is a hub for those two gangs; “teenagers have all be touched in one way or another by the tentacles of the MS-13 and Barrio 18…though the degree of their contact and involvement with pandilleros varies” (2017, p. 73).

Members of these gangs are predominantly young adults or youths from marginalized neighborhoods who are linked to crimes related to drug trafficking, kidnapping, homicides, and money laundering but focus mainly on extortion acts (Golob, 2023, p. 73). Golob identifies that
socio-political factors play into gang involvement and contribute to their growth and power; such characteristics are poverty, lack of education, inaccessibility to education, cultural and social stigmas, media attention of gangs with views of an iconic image, and *mano dura* policies (Golob, 2023, p. 73). Such factors could also create vulnerabilities or potential red flags for trafficking.

Boerman and Golob (2020) conducted a study based on eighteen years of research on trafficking, gangs, gender, and the government's willingness and ability to control criminal activity and protect citizens (p. 242). The study included over 200 semi-structured interviews with male and female adolescents and young adults who have been “subjected to gangs’ attempts to coerce them into criminal activity and/ or exploitative male-female relationships” and over 200 interviews with governmental professionals, social service providers, educators, human rights activists, etc. (Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 242). Instead of using the traditional techniques of trafficking, such as kidnapping and being sold into service to supply market demands of sexual and domestic services, forced marriage, forced labor, illegal adoptions, and human organs, gangs in the Northern Triangle rely primarily on coercion and force to establish and maintain control to exploit them for the needs of the gang (Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 241).

This study emphasizes the need to differentiate gang membership vs. coerced servitude. Being a gang member or “homie” involves protection, power, status, and money due to the recognition as a member, whereas coerced servitude deprives one of personal autonomy or rights and does not have membership status. (Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 241). Adolescents who are coerced into servitude are viewed as short-term resources; the gang approaches and recruits young persons through threats of harm or threats to kill the young person or their family or other loved ones until they comply. One of the interviewees conducted by Boerman & Golob, 2020, stated,
“They (gang members) told me that I needed to start delivering things for them. I kept saying no but they came to my house with a gun and said they had given me enough time and made me go to a place with them. They had some other people there that they were trying to force to work for them. The leader of the gang made one of them stand up, the boy was crying and shaking, and the gang leader shot him in the head and I knew that is what was going to happen to me if I didn't do what they told me to do.”” (Anonymous Boerman interview, August 21, 2019, p. 246).

Gangs force young boys to deliver or sell drugs, transport arms, spy on rival gangs, monitor police, collect rent from community members, smuggle illicit substances, engage in personal sexual servitude, serve as decoys, and/or engage in gang-controlled agriculture (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 19; Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 246). Children and adolescents who do not have a reliable or protective caretaker that is an adult, especially a protective male adult figure, are at high risk for coerced servitude (Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 247). This includes youths living in female-led households, homeless youth, youths who have come of age and can provide for themself, and youths living with an abusive male (Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 247).

Before addressing coerced servitude among adolescent girls or young women, gender dynamics in the Northern Triangle need to be acknowledged. The Northern Triangle countries are male-dominated, where children, adolescents, and adult females are subject to physical, verbal, and emotional abuse at the hands of males who do not face impunity (Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 249). Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is rampant and unchecked in the three countries, and gang members are the most “hyper-masculinized” and the most violent (Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 249). When a gang claims a territory, they are also referring to the women and girls within that territory that they control; a Jaina is a term commonly used by gang members that translates
as a girlfriend but does not reflect a mutually consenting relationship – a *Jaina* encompasses complete ownership and control of females (Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 249). Gang members employ SGBV to assert dominance, punish women who have fallen out of favor, punish males who have fallen out of favor, support the gang through coercing female criminal involvement, and project a message to society that the gang does not have any limits (KIND, 2018, as cited by Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 249). Gangs have raped and tortured girls and left their bodies in public to control and generate fear within society (KIND, 2018, as cited by Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 249).

Gang SGBV includes a multitude of activities: young girls are forced to partake in sex and domestic servitude, smuggling contraband into prisons, and “conjugal visits with incarcerated gang members and leaders” (Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 246). Moreover, girls and young women face the risk of being *agarrada* (grabbed); this is a tactic commonly used by gangs that is well-known in communities. When a girl is *agarrada*, they are kidnapped, held hostage, and subject to sexual violence and often disappears (murdered); this happens on the way to and from school or just moving around the community (Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 250). Being a gang leader or a gang member’s *Jaina* is also dangerous as women in this position are viewed as property of the gang; *Jaina*’s are often forced into domestic and/ or sexual servitude – women in these relationships experience extreme psychological, physical, and sexual violence as the gang has complete control over every detail of the women's life such as relationships with family and friends [trauma as a result of trafficking will be explored below] (Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 250). It is common for victims not to report the violence they have experienced. One of the participants in Boerman and Golob’s study is a young girl who had been stolen for a gang member's birthday present, and she was held in sexual and domestic servitude; the parents did not report the incident to the police.
because “‘she is his now and I can’t risk my other children…’”, many victims or family members of victims face retaliation if these crimes are reported (Anonymous personal interview, March 12, 2018 as cited in Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 251).

These are only some of the trafficking situations that adolescents in the Northern Triangle potentially face. I do want to reiterate that trafficking does not always look the same and can happen in a variety of settings; this section focused on trafficking by gang perpetrators. Unchecked gang violence and sexual violence against young girls create motives as to why UCs choose to migrate. This next section will discuss various other motives for migration and the trauma they are exposed to.

**Immigrant (Migrant) Trauma and Mental Health & Trafficking Trauma**

*Stressors and Challenges throughout the Migration Process*

It is essential to continue to contextualize the reasons that unaccompanied minors chose to migrate before addressing the trauma experienced as a result of migration and trafficking. For this research, I will categorize trauma experienced into two different categories: migration trauma and trafficking trauma. Migration trauma refers to the exposure to trauma throughout the different stages of migration. Ko and Perreira (2010), as referenced by Menjivar and Perreira (2019), identify three stages of migration - pre-transit (pre-migration), transit (migration), and post-transit (post-migration) (p.203). While migration trauma can overlap with trafficking trauma, as trafficking could occur at any point throughout the three stages of migration, this section is intended to address and understand the trauma that unaccompanied minors and OTIP recipients are exposed to or have experienced throughout their lives that is distinct from the trafficking trauma itself.
Pre-transit Stressors

Above, it was identified that gangs in the Northern Triangle engage in illicit criminal activity and force and coerce adolescents to partake in such acts, which is considered a type of human trafficking. The Congressional Research Service acknowledges that while motives for migration vary among individuals, socio-economic and security concerns heightened by natural disasters and poor governance are drivers for migration (CRS Reports, 2023, p.1). Due to this, the Northern Triangle region experiences security concerns, which motivates migration. In the 2000s, homicide rates in the region rose rapidly because the region became the primary passageway for narcotics bound to the U.S. (CRS Reports, 2023, p.2). Transnational criminal organizations secured trafficking routes by combating one another and intimidating and penetrating government institutions. Gangs such as the Mara-Salvatrucha (MS-13) and 18th Street Gang (M-18) engage in turf wars to control local drug distributions, extortion, and other illicit activities (CRS Reports, 2023, p.2). The Northern Triangle also experiences sexual and gender-based violence. The United Nations Refugee Agency found that at least 71,500 Salvadorians and 247,000 Hondurans have been displaced internally as of 2018; data for Guatemala is unavailable due to the country not recognizing internally displaced persons associated with violence (CRS Reports, 2023, p.2). Nevertheless, security concerns are not the only drive for migration out of the region.

To this day, the countries of the Northern Triangle deal with the repercussions of historical political instability and weak structural institutions, which have also affected socio-economic conditions for the region's inhabitants for an extended period. El Salvador experienced a civil war that took place between 1979 and 1992, and Guatemala still faces consequences as a result of a 36-year civil war that took place from 1960 to 1996 (Sawyer & Marquez, 2016). In Honduras in 2009, the military coup halted opposition with excessive force, which suspended freedom of
assembly and press and attacked peaceful protests (Sawyer & Marquez, 2016, p. 70). Historically, land ownership and economic power in the Northern Triangle were controlled by a small group of elites that left a legacy of inequality and poverty (CRS Reports, 2023, p.1). The market-oriented economic reforms that took place in the 1980s and 1990s caused greater macroeconomic instability, which resulted in the continuance of impoverished living conditions for many. According to the Congressional Research Service, working-age populations are expected to grow over the next two decades since; currently, 44% of Guatemalans, 42% of Hondurans, and 36% of Salvadorians working are under the age of 20 years old (CRS Reports, 2023, p.1). The lack of jobs in the region will cause people to choose between limited working opportunities in the irregular informal sector or seeking employment opportunities elsewhere (CRS Reports, 2023, p.1).

Inclusively, environmental issues are also drivers for migration. Warm temperatures have increased, and parts of the region have struggled with droughts; additionally, rural communities have faced crop losses, which has created declining employment opportunities, particularly in the coffee industry (CRS Reports, 2023, p.1). The coffee industry provided a crucial source of income for more than one million families in the Northern Triangle (CRS Reports, 2023, p.1). Similarly, due to COVID-19 and hurricanes Eta and Iota, families in the region sold their land and migrated. This loss contributed to gross domestic product (GDP) declines of 9.0% in Honduras, 7.9% in El Salvador, and 1.8% in Guatemala in 2020 (CRS Reports, 2023, p.1). The World Food Program reported that food-insecure persons in the Northern Triangle tripled from 2.2 million in 2019 to 6.4 million in late 2021.

Moreover, Menjivar and Perreira (2019) cite Parish (2017) to provide further context for the cause of migration by unaccompanied minors to the United States. Political and structural violence, worsening living conditions, declining economic opportunities, and limited access to
education create stressors for migrating (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p. 203). Immediate violence and long-term structural and economic conditions are a combination of the motives of migration by these young persons. Stinchcomb and Hershber (2014), as cited by Menjivar and Perreira (2019), acknowledge that the lack of access to education, health care, and job opportunities creates social marginalization, encouraging migration by unaccompanied minors. Menjivar and Perreira identify reports from the United Nations, Amnesty International, and other human rights organizations that discuss human rights violations that women, girls, and boys are vulnerable to; these include environments that normalize death, torture, abduction, sexual violence, harassment, and weapons (2019, p. 204). As previously mentioned, the consequences and legacies of civil wars in Central America resulted from inequality, limited access to goods and services, and crime organizations have created an uncertain and violent atmosphere; gang violence, extortion, and corrupt governments add to violent conditions in the region (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p. 204).

Similarly, youths experience poverty, community violence, family violence, and family separation in their home country (Kennedy, 2013; Perreira & Ornelas, 2013; Stinchcomb & Hershber, 2014; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010, as referenced in Cardoso et al., 2017, p. 279). Some have argued that child migration from Mexico and Central America can also be attributed to family reunification as the result of the continued need for their parents’ labor in the United States; yet, family and social networks are not the immediate motives for migration, rather violence in the sending country (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p. 199). Many unaccompanied minors experience stressful life events in this stage of migration, such as separation from parents, loss or disappearance of family members, persecution, life threats, and other interpersonal/ witness violence (Ataiants et al., 2018, p.3).
When asked, “Why did you come to the United States?” Luiselli identifies that the reasons for migration vary depending on the youth, such as fleeing neglect, abandonment, and violence, but most importantly, “the more modest aspiration to wake up from the nightmare which they were born [into].” (2017, p. 13). These experiences of repeated violence put these youths at risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression (Ataiants et al., 2018, p.3).

*Transit Stressors*

UCs leave their home countries without an entry visa and rely on different actors ranging from smugglers, grassroots or religious organizations, and fellow travelers to make the journey (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p. 206). When exploring migration's impacts on UCs, one needs to look at transportation methods, accompaniment throughout travel, and conditions of the journey. The journey from the Northern Triangle to the United States via land is infamous for its dangerous process. The journey to the destination country, in this case, UCs from the Northern Triangle to the U.S., can take up to several months. UCs often travel over 1000 miles on foot, by bus, or by freight trains; one of the most common freight trains is called La Bestia (the beast) (Ataiants et al., 2018, p.2; Luiselli, 2017, p. 20). *La Bestia* receives its name from the way “it mutilated the bodies of migrants that fell off” (Vogt, 2017, p.6). *La Bestia*’s route begins near the Mexican-Guatemalan border. It makes its way up to the U.S.-Mexico Border following the eastern Gulf route to Reynosa or western routes to Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua or Nogales, Sonora, which share borders with Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico (Luiselli, 2017, p. 20).

In transit, migrants are exposed to assault, robbery, torture, inhumane treatment, sexual violence, and death throughout their journey to the United States (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p.206; Ataiants et al., 2018, p.2). 70 to 80% of unaccompanied minors are victims of human trafficking, many of whom seek the help of smugglers who sell them into forced labor or sexual
servitude (Ataiants et al., 2018, p.2). Gender is also central in shaping UC’s experiences, as young girls face a higher risk of experiencing sexual violence by smugglers, criminals, and authorities (Parish 2017, as cited by Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p.206). Amnesty International reports that 6 out of 10 women and girls from Central America experience sexual violence on the journey to the United States through Mexico (Pereria 2010 as cited by Menjivar and Perreira, 2019, 206). Moreover, many Central American youth migrants must find temporary jobs during transit to support themselves (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p. 206).

Borders have become “spaces of exception” where a person's rights and protections are stripped away (De Leon, 2015, p.29). The United States has enacted deterrence policies such as Operation Hold the Line, 1989; Operation Gatekeeper, 1994; Operation Safeguard, 1994 and 1999; and Operation Rio Grande, 1997. These policies were intended to militarize the border while also forcing undocumented migrants to cross in areas where border patrol could monitor (De Leon, 2015, p.31; Fitzgerald, 2019, p.136; Vogt, 2017, p.5). Due to border fortification in the U.S.-Mexico border, smugglers have had to alter their transportation strategy, which has become a lucrative and dangerous business; similarly, this forces migrants to cross through remote, dangerous areas (Sonoran Desert) to avoid increased border security (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p. 206, 207; De Leon, 2015, p. 32). These routes isolate migrants from water, food, and other resources. Many migrants die crossing through remote areas, and many of their bodies are unrecovered; the actual number of people who have died in the Sonoran Desert or while crossing into other remote areas is unknown (De Leon, 2015, p. 36). The Land of the Open Graves provides an account of the author on what it is like to traverse through the Sonoran Desert to search for dead bodies; De Leon explains, “People whose loved ones have disappeared in this desert will tell you
that it's not knowing what happened to them coupled with the flashes of grotesque possibility that drive you insane.” (2015, p. 25).

The journey to leave their home country is a defining experience in the lives of migrants, in this case, UC’s, as it “compounds experiences of structural, political, and everyday violence and trauma that the migrant children leave in their home countries.” (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p. 206). Although UCs are exposed to and experience life-threatening situations, they are also introduced to grassroots organizations, church organizations, shelters, and institutions that assist Central American migrants; corresponding, UCs meet other young persons and adults on the way who provide needed information to continue (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p. 207). These formed connections provide migrant youth with means to navigate institutions and “the ropes of migrant life” which will equip them with survival strategies to get through challenges in the next stage of migration (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p. 207). Although the journey to the U.S. is dangerous and filled with risks, “[UC’s] chase after life, even if that chase might end up killing them…They have an instinct for survival, perhaps, that allows them to endure almost everything just to make it to the other side of horror, whatever may be waiting for them there.” (Luiselli, 2017, p. 19-20).

*Post-Transit*

Once UCs arrive at their destination country (the United States), they experience additional barriers that enhance stress and the harmful consequences of pre-transit and transit experiences. Post-transit stressors include detention, screenings to determine the forms of immigration relief, immigration court proceedings, and resettlement (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p. 208).

The 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, the 1967 Protocol to the Refugee Convention, and the Convention Against Torture outline the treatment of UCs by which the U.S. abides. As signatories, states need to abide by the concept of non-refoulment, which states that
states cannot return an individual to a country where that individual will face persecution from a
government or a group the government is unable or unwilling to control based on race, religion,
nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group and/or there are grounds
to believe that they may be tortured. (American Immigration Council, 2015, p.3; UNHCR, 2005,
p.26) The Flores Settlement also outlines the rights that unaccompanied minors have while in
detention, stating that children under the age of 18 must be detained in safe and sanitary conditions
(Hing et al., 2018, p. 627). Due to the Flores Settlement, immigration protocols have been
developed; two of the most important developments include the transfer of responsibility of UCs
to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and the TVPRA of 2008 requires UCs to be placed
in the least restrictive setting in the best interest of the child and screened as potential trafficking
victims and to the “greatest extent practicable” to provide access to an attorney for immigration
court proceedings (6 U.S.C. § 279 (a), (b)(1)(A), (g)(2) as cited in Hing et al., 2018, p. 628-629;
Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, 208; CRS, 2021, p. 5).

Many UCs turn themselves into border patrol once they arrive at the border or are
apprehended internally. UCs who are apprehended at the border are processed by the U.S. Customs
and Border Protection (CBP), and those who are apprehended internally are processed by
Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p. 208). In both scenarios,
UCs are transferred to Department of Homeland Security (DHS) detention centers, where they can
be detained for up to 72 hours while age determination is made and identification documents are
validated (Hing et al., 2018, pp. 664-665). Although youths are supposed to be held in the least
restrictive, most humane setting, as defined under the Flores Settlement and TVPA, reports have
surfaced of CBP holding a child for longer than 72 hours and in inhumane conditions. Inhuman
conditions include freezing temperatures, CBP detention centers commonly referred to as *la hilera*
(the icebox) often lack medical care and provide inedible food; children are piled together in rooms with no personal space; and immigration officials have been accused of verbal, sexual, and physical abuse by children (Ataiants et al., 2018, p.5). Detention centers have been criticized for having unsafe, unhealthy, and overcrowded conditions that threaten the development of a child (House of Lords 2016, & Phippen 2015 as cited by Menjivar and Perreira, 2019, 209; CRS, 2021, p. 23).

Once DHS determines that this youth is an unaccompanied minor - meaning they entered the United States without a parent - they are transferred to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Upon being transferred to ORR, UCs are placed in shelters awaiting reunification with a sponsor. In FY23, UCs were detained in ORR custody for about 27 days (Fact Sheets & Data, 2024). Sponsors are family members or friends; if a sponsor is not identified, the UC will go into long-term foster care.

ORR shelters have been known to be understaffed and inadequately screening youths who fear sharing details of their stories will threaten their safety and their families (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p. 209). Concerns about care and resettlement provided to youths have surfaced – these adolescents require education, health, and social services. However, high-quality care and resettlement services require local investments that some communities are unwilling or unable to make (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p. 209).

While in ORR custody, youths are required to obtain legal orientations commonly referred to as Know Your Rights presentations. When unaccompanied minors enter the United States without a valid visa, they are placed in removal/deportation proceedings, but they cannot be placed in expedited removal proceedings (American Immigration Council, 2015, p.7). Hence, this presentation is designed to explain the legal process, identify the types of immigration documents
they receive, and provide information on protections against deportation; these young persons also
receive legal screenings where immigration relief is identified. Legal service providers whom ORR
funds provide these legal orientations and screenings. Although while in ORR custody, they are
supplied with information to understand their legal case, all of this information, combined with
their experiences from the first two stages of migration, can overwhelm and be too much for these
youths to take in.

Once a child is released to their sponsor, they face the burden of attending their immigration
court hearing on their own, given that counsel is not granted at the expense of the government
(Hing et al., 2018, p. 802; Snider & DiBennardo, 2021, p.1). While legal service providers across
the country offer free legal services, including removal defense, these organizations are often
exhausted and at limited capacity (Hing et al., 2018, p. 802). Navigating legal systems is a
challenge for adults and even more so for children. Immigration courts can be dehumanizing and
alienating; additionally, technical legal language, which is also not in the UC’s native language,
makes it challenging to understand proceedings and places an undue burden on UC’s (Snider &
DiBennardo, 2021, p.2; Song, 2021, p. 3). The burdens of immigration court add to the poor mental
health of UCs, coupled with the traumatic events experienced in the first two stages of migration.
Studies on UCs have demonstrated high rates of PTSD at 17-85%, depression at 13-76%, and
anxiety at 11-85% (Song, 2021, p. 3). Along with PTSD, depression, and anxiety, UC’s experience
“behavioral and conduct, psychotic and somatic disorders” coupled with traumatic experiences
such as political violence, loss, forced displacement, and community violence which has led to
“functional impairment, academic and behavioral problems.” (Ataiants et al., 2018, p.3; Song,
2021, p. 3) This will be developed further in Chapters 4 and 5 through the interviews conducted
and applying a legal violence lens.
Loss of control and powerlessness have been associated with poor mental health, which can be even more detrimental to these adolescents who also experienced trafficking, as trafficking takes away a person's sense of self and safety (Song, 2021, p. 6). This next section will delve into specific trauma associated with trafficking.

**Trafficking Related Trauma & Trauma-Informed Care**

While migration trauma and stressors can overlap with trauma experienced as a direct result of trafficking, some traumas are distinct from trafficking. This section will delve into what survivors experience once they are out of their trafficking experience.

As briefly identified at the beginning of this literature review and reiterated throughout, human traffickers use methods of coercion to influence, control, and exploit victims. Traffickers often target the most vulnerable persons, mainly houseless persons and runaway youths, survivors of former abuse and trauma, persons with substance abuse disorders, and those with mental illness (Choi, 2015; Lo & Chambers, 2016; Polaris Project, 2019 as cited in Chambers et al., 2024, p. 43; Wangberg et al., 2022, p.1). Traffickers use love, security, and gifts as means of coercion, but also threats of violence, abandonment, immigration status, and law enforcement to create forced or coerced compliance of victims (Chambers et al., 2024, p. 43). As mentioned above, brainwashing or psychological manipulation and coercion are tactics used by traffickers to convince victims that the trafficker loves them; the traffickers and the victim are a family trying to survive, and the labor or sex trafficking will end soon, and they will experience a new life; such examples are “fed into the hopeless and broken minds of victims” (Shared Hope International, 2013 as cited in Golob, 2022, p.32).

Human trafficking takes away a person’s perception of safety, ownership of one's body, and self-esteem (Hopper, 2017, p.12). These feelings are heightened in survivors of sex trafficking
in which the person’s body is being sold (Hopper, 2017, p.12). When someone is trafficked, they are treated as an object that can be used and abused – this damages self-perceptions, self-esteem, self-assurance, and relationships (Hopper, 2017, p.13). It is prevalent for a survivor to self-blame and internalize views of themselves as damaged; moreover, survivors of sex trafficking may view their body as the objective source of pain and disconnect from their own body (Hopper, 2017, p.13). Trafficking can also lead survivors to feel that they are helpless or do not have control of their own lives; inclusively, other people can be viewed as threats and shut down personal relationships (Hopper, 2017, p.13). These symptoms have been referred to as “‘complex trauma’ or “complex PTSD’” (Herman, 1997; Luxenberg, Spinazzola, & Van de Kolk, 2001, as cited by Hopper, 2017, p.13).

Non-complex PTSD can emerge from one traumatic event. In contrast, complex PTSD is a result of complex trauma that involves exposure to multiple traumatic events over time, often interpersonal, which is hard to get away from (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment as cited in Chambers et al. 2024, p. 42). Such traumatic events are often related to a caretaker or caregiver that happens in early life for children; this can interfere with a child’s development and their ability to form healthy and secure relationships (Chambers et al., 2024, p. 42). Children who were trafficked, mainly if they were trafficked by a family member or “dependable” person, experience a lasting complex trauma that influences all aspects of physical and mental health development (Counter-Trafficking Data Collaborative, n.d.; International Organization for Migration, 2017 as cited by Chambers et al., 2024, p. 43).

Frequently, survivors of trafficking have a history of abuse and trauma, which can create the basis for trauma-coerced attachment (TCA), also known as trauma bonding, which can worsen PTSD symptoms and other psychological disorders (Counter Data Collaborative, nd; Doychak &
Trauma bonding is a term coined by Patrick Carnes; he defines trauma bonding as “the misuse of fear, excitement, sexual feelings, and sexual physiology to entangle another person” with repeated series of rewards and punishments; this causes an emotional bond to form between the victim and abuser which is hard to break (as explained in Rosenberg, 2019, p.2 and as cited by Chambers et al., 2024, p.43). Trauma-coerced attachment (TCA), as explained by Doychak, is “a powerful emotional dependency on the abusive partner and a shift in word- and self-view, which can result in feelings of gratitude or loyalty toward the abuser and denial or minimization of the coercion and abuse” (Doychak, p. 339 as cited by Chambers et al., 2024, p. 43). These feelings can lead to survivors taking responsibility for crimes committed by the abuser and even protecting the abuser from legal consequences and social backlash (Chambers et al., 2024, p. 43). These feelings or attachments can remain after a survivor is out of their trafficking situation; this can develop into hard-to-predict behavior that others do not understand (Chambers et al., 2024, p. 43). Survivors who experience TCA are at high risk of returning to their abuser or their trafficking situation; hence, addressing the implicit psychological response that leads to and results from TCA is essential for a survivor's path toward recovery and healing (Chambers et al., 2024, p. 43).

Many survivors of trafficking experience double trauma; this is the case for many OTIP recipients, as they were exposed to multiple forms of trauma throughout the three stages of migration discussed above. Initial trauma creates vulnerabilities or puts young persons at high risk of manipulation and trauma of the trafficking itself (Chambers et al., 2024, p. 43). This results in altered development, meaning that developmental trauma combined with repeated exposure to traumatic experiences, the threat response is unfunctional, either responding too much – hypervigilant, “fight or flight,” nightmares, insomnia, and panic – or too little – numbness,
dissociation, ignoring danger signs, and risk-taking (Chambers et al., 2024, p. 43). Inclusively, children who have experienced trafficking experience a high rate of depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Kiss et al., 2015, as cited in Hopper 2017, p.163). Persons with altered development seek a guardian, and if one is not present, they will settle for a relationship with the abuser, ignoring red flags out of the need to have someone caring for them, which creates the dysregulated threat response (Chambers et al., 2024, p. 44). This has also led trafficked youth to struggle with emotional and behavioral issues (Hopper, 2017, p.163). Hopper, 2017, conducted a study with trafficked youth that found that over half the youth in the study reported issues with self-perceptions, impulse regulation, attention, cautiousness, and relationships (p.173).

Understanding the trauma experienced by survivors of trafficking is essential to acknowledge then the most effective care for each individual’s complex and unique needs (Chambers et al., 2024, p. 42). Medical professionals and organizations worldwide are becoming educated and executing procedures to identify survivors and facilitate the beginning phases of leaving their trafficking situations (Barrows & Finger, 2008; Chambers, 2019; Lo & Chambers, 2016; O’Callaghan, 2012 as cited in Chambers et al. 2024, p. 42). This creates an emphasis on urgent, short-term care of survivors instead of also focusing on long-term needs on the road to recovery; because of this, Chambers et al. argue that healthcare professionals need to include an understanding of long-term needs with a heightened focus on the aftermath that trafficking creates, this includes complex PTSD and trauma-coerced attachment (Chambers et al., 2024, p. 42). In doing so, and by applying trauma-informed care principles, healthcare providers can use “appropriate survivor-centered care modalities, medications, and treatment plans, thus equipping patients with resources necessary to reclaim their freedom and livelihood.” (Chambers et al., 2024, p. 42)
Assessment of survivors is an essential first step in creating safety plans, meeting daily needs, identifying at-risk survivors, making intervention referrals, and creating a course for recovery for social service providers (Hopper, 2017, p.13). Trauma-informed care and assessments can help identify the symptoms stated in the sections above to provide practical, holistic services individually to each survivor. As identified in Chapter 1, the six core elements of trauma-informed care include **safety, trust/ transparency, choice, empowerment, intersectionality, and collaboration**. Trauma-informed care seeks to reduce re-traumatization in a “provider-patient” relationship; to do so, there needs to be mutual trust and respect for choice (Grossman et al., 2021, p. 5). Trauma-informed care should be used by health or social service providers and embedded throughout institutions (Grossman et al., 2021, p. 6; Bowen & Murshid, 2016). According to Grossman et al., this can be accomplished through formal teaching and training, mentoring, and establishing trauma-informed institutional structures; this concept is also present within a trauma-informed social policy lens (2021, p. 6; Bowen & Murshid, 2016). Hopper, 2017, identified that trafficked youth had experienced difficulties in working with systems that are not sensitive to trauma, do not have appropriate language services, and experience cultural differences which led to alienation; this also highlights the need to implement trauma-informed care in systems for trafficking adolescents (p.173). In the same study, Hopper identified that youths expressed wanting to “make meaning out of their trafficking experience and to protect other potential victims.” Because of this, Hopper identifies that empowerment can include belonging to a survivor group, public speaking, lobbying, participating in awareness campaigns, writing about life experiences, developing materials, and other outreach efforts to educate (2017, p.173) Because of this, this research will identify the trauma-informed elements that are present within the OTIP Eligibility
Letter program through interviews which will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Once identified, I will be able to provide a program recommendation.

This literature review has been able to successfully define trafficking and identify international and national frameworks intended to protect survivors and prevent re-trafficking. Additionally, while trafficking takes on various forms, I have been able to uncover common trafficking trends among foreign national minors in the U.S. and adolescents in the Northern Triangle based on the existing literature. In identifying stressors and challenges faced throughout the three stages of migration coupled with trafficking trauma, I have been able to capture the experiences of this demographic to uncover the need to ensure that these youths are interacting with trauma-informed institutions and programs to inflict harm further. This literature review serves as contextual evidence needed to conduct interviews for this study.

**Chapter III: Methodology**

**Narrative II**

In July 2023, a colleague and I conducted a Know Your Rights group presentation to teen boys in ORR custody. These adolescents were all detained together at CBP, where they leaned on each other for support and carried their companionship to the ORR shelter they were assigned to. In particular, two boys in the group were related and journeyed together from Mexico to the U.S.-Mexico border. The boys were engaged in the presentation and had many questions about their immigration case and what was to come. Throughout the presentation, we reminded them to save their personal questions for the legal screening, where we would have time to talk in private. I conducted the first legal screening with one of the related boys, and my colleague took the other. This youth began telling me why he came to the U.S. He and his relative, whom he traveled with, experienced attempts for coerced servitude by a gang in his area that was disputing with another
gang over territory. Although the boys were not successfully recruited, they fled before it was too late.

It wasn’t until after I met with this youth and touched base with my colleague that we decided they could qualify for an OTIP Eligibility Letter. After speaking with the directing attorney, we went ahead and discussed OTIP Eligibility letters and the benefits they afford to the boys and asked if they were interested. During our conversation with the boys, they expressed interest and began telling us more information about the situation so we could submit RFA’s on their behalf. Toward the end of the conversation, one of the boys states, “ya no quiero recordar” (OTIP Recipient, July 2023). Before ending the conversation, we reaffirmed the boys and thanked them for sharing what they were willing to share.

These boys successfully obtained OTIP Eligibility Letters and received PRS services. PRS services provide youths with a case manager who can help them access the benefits of the letters. Once both boys were discharged and released to their sponsor, I could speak to them again about the next steps. These two boys and their sponsor were very thankful and hopeful after receiving their OTIP Eligibility Letter.

---

**Research Design**

This study centers on the observations of legal and social service providers as it relates to the work they do (or have done) with foreign national minors who are survivors of trafficking to be able to assess trauma-informed elements within OTIP Eligibility Letters and advocate for legal protections for OTIP recipients. Legal and social service providers witness firsthand the successes and complex struggles that survivors of trafficking experience as they navigate legal institutions, systems, and daily life. These testimonies from legal and social services providers will be viewed through two conceptual frameworks: the *Legal Violence* lens, as created and theorized by Cecilia
Menjivar and Leisy Abrego, and the *Trauma-Informed Social Policy* lens, as developed by Bowen and Murshid.

The objective of the legal violence lens is twofold: to inspire others to capture the experience of migrants with unresolved or uncertain legal status and to theorize how laws shape lives on a day-to-day basis (Menjivar & Abrego, 2012, pp.1381). This conceptual framework aims to capture the damaging effects that immigration laws have on undocumented migrants. Menjivar and Abrego do not directly examine the long-term effects of current laws. Instead, they add to the comprehensive discussion of the place of immigration law (not of legal status) on immigrant incorporation (2012, pp.1383). To theorize about legal violence, Menjivar and Abrego propose to link statutes and their implementation to the outcomes of three aspects of immigrants' lives: (1) family, (2) work, and (3) school (2012, p.1384). Through these three spheres, immigrants come into contact with “institutions in the wider society and thus are key areas to examine when assessing long-term incorporation and paths of assimilation. As such, they also represent the most salient spheres of life through which immigrants experience the effects of the law.” (Menjivar & Abrego, 2012, pp.1384).

*Trauma-Informed Social Policy* lens proposes that policy can reflect the six core principles of trauma-informed care. Trauma-informed care aims to acknowledge, recognize, and empathize with the impact that trauma has on an individual. Trauma-informed care is centered on principles that promote healing and eliminate retraumatization (Bowen & Murshid, 2016, p.1). The six core principles of trauma-informed care are:

1. **Safety**, as it relates to a program, attempts to ensure OTIP recipients physical and emotional safety (reasonable freedom from danger) to prevent retraumatization;
2. **Trust/Transparency** relates to the level of transparency from an organization in its policies and procedures to build trust among staff, OTIP recipients, community members, and other vital providers;

3. **Collaboration** relates to the view that OTIP recipients are partners and experts in their own lives who can contribute;

4. **Choice** relates to the meaningful options and level of control that OTIP recipients are given, which is associated with better treatment outcomes;

5. **Empowerment** relates to efforts that programs make to share power with OTIP recipients and provide them with a strong voice and platform in decision-making at the individual level and agency levels;

6. **Intersectionality** refers to awareness of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and privileges or oppression these characteristics can incur on OTIP recipients (Bowen & Murshid, 2016, p.3).

Bowen and Murshid argue that trauma-informed care can be a meaningful framework for analyzing social policy and advocacy efforts (2016, p.2). These core principles of trauma-informed care can serve as a basis for guiding policy advocacy with the help of service providers and clients, in this case, OTIP recipients (Bowen & Murshid, 2016, p.10). Trauma survivors and those who provide services can educate policymakers about the importance of trauma-informed care and how social policies can display them. In actuality, society and social order are not largely trauma-informed; in applying this lens to policy, the norm can begin to shift.

The research design utilized will be a qualitative thematic analysis. A thematic analysis is appropriate for this study because it will help the researcher identify, categorize, analyze, and identify patterns from the participants' responses. The use of a thematic analysis will help the
researcher focus on challenges within the three spheres of life: (1) family, (2) work, and (3) school, as proposed by Menjivar and Abrego. As well as uncovering the six elements of trauma-informed care: (1) trust/ transparency, (2) Safety, (3) Collaboration, (4) Choice, (5) Empowerment, and (6) Intersectionality.

The conceptual frameworks and research design will help the researcher understand the challenges that OTIP recipients/ foreign national minors who are survivors of trafficking face on a day-to-day basis post-migration. Moreover, I will be able to identify the six core elements of trauma-informed care within the program's existing structure. By combining these two purposes, I can theorize a program recommendation for OTIP Eligibility Letters that better serves this community on its path toward healing and leading self-sufficient lives, which will be presented in Chapter 5.

**Recruitment Plan & Participants**

In total, there will be five participants in this study. The participants were selected via purposive sampling. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to choose their participants based on characteristics, expertise, experiences, and knowledge. By using purposive sampling, the researcher can interview legal and social service providers who have provided services to OTIP recipients/ foreign national minor survivors of trafficking. Using this recruitment method follows the belief that policymakers need to hear from those directly on the ground, such as service providers, as stated by the *Trauma-Informed Social Policy* lens (Bowen & Murshid, 2016, p.10).

The participants in this study were recruited through connections I maintained from the work I have done as a service provider and advocate. I began working with survivors of human trafficking in 2021 as a case manager. In 2022, I started working with unaccompanied minors as a legal assistant; in this position, I also had the opportunity to meet and work with survivors of
trafficking. I have provided a wide range of social and legal services to this community; hence, the participants included in this study were recruited through connections I had maintained over the years.

I created a flier that provided the purpose of the study, who can be participants, what the participants will be asked to do, where and when the interview will take place, and the benefits of participation. I sent this flier to former colleagues who might be interested in participating in this study. I also sent this flier to a USCRI Trafficking Services Regional Coordinator, who included it in their monthly newsletter. However, I did not receive respondents from USCRI. Additionally, I sent this flyer to OTIP Child Welfare and Protection Specialist and Child Trafficking Prevention and Protection Coordinator; I did not receive responses from them. To respect the confidentiality of the participants, I will be using pseudonyms. Table 1 below provides the names (pseudonyms) of the participants and their current or former job titles.

**Table 1: Participants & Occupations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Itzel</td>
<td>Legal Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Attorney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastian</td>
<td>Former Case Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurora</td>
<td>Supervising Social Worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elise</td>
<td>Social Worker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All participants have worked with OTIP recipients and/or survivors of human trafficking. The first two participants in this study, Rosa and Itzel, currently provide legal services to unaccompanied minors. This involves helping unaccompanied minors apply for different forms of immigration relief such as Asylum, Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), and U-visa; Rosa also provides full-scope removal defense to unaccompanied minors. Rosa currently works with foreign national survivors of trafficking. Itzel also works presently with foreign adolescent
survivors of trafficking and, before their current position, working with survivors of violent crimes that included survivors of trafficking by providing legal services.

The following two participants, Aurora and Elise, provide social service interventions for unaccompanied minors as social workers. Aurora is a supervising social worker who has worked with immigrant youth for 25 years. She has been providing services to immigrant adolescent survivors of trafficking for a long time. Elise has been working with unaccompanied minors and immigrant adolescent survivors of trafficking for around six months. Finally, the last participant, Sebastian, formerly provided case management services for survivors of trafficking and other violent crimes. Sebastian worked with survivors of human trafficking for a total of one year.

The researcher conducted structured interviews that ranged from 20 to 30 minutes individually with each participant. The participants were asked the following preconceived questions. The participants were advised beforehand that they could skip questions if they did not apply to their work with OTIP recipients.

**Preconceived Questions:**

1. *What is your current job title?*

2. *Do you currently work with national foreign minors who have been victims of trafficking?*
   
   If not, have you in the past?

3. *How long have you worked with OTIP recipients or foreign minors who have been trafficked?*

4. *Does access to public benefits promote healing, empowerment, and self-sufficiency in national foreign minors who have received OTIP Letters? If so, how?*

5. *What risks do national foreign minors receiving an OTIP Eligibility letter face if forced to return to their home country?*
6. From what you have witnessed or while conducting needs assessments, what are some daily struggles that OTIP recipients have?

   a. Address the challenges as it relates to family, school, and work

7. How does the exclusion of providing a pathway for legal status and ending removal proceedings further impede healing and self-sufficiency in national foreign-born minors?

8. What challenges do national foreign-born minors face when trying to receive these benefits?

9. What does trafficking-specific case management entail for minors? Or what should it look like?

10. How long does it take for minors to receive these benefits?

11. How hard or easy is it for Minors to receive these benefits? Provide a timeline.

12. In what ways does the current OTIP Eligibility Letter program foster hope? What other emotions have you perceived it provoked in national foreign minors?

13. Does the process of receiving these benefits further the feeling of helplessness?

14. How is the healing process affected by knowing that they [national foreign minors] could be sent back to their home country where either the trafficking occurred or where they will not have access to benefits that will continue to help them heal?

15. What do you think is critical when trying to help survivors on their journey toward healing and self-sufficiency?

16. Is there anything else you want to add that will contribute to the purpose of this study?

Limitations

The study has a couple of limitations, the first being diversity in job titles. I would have also liked to have participants who work for the Office of Trafficking in Persons (OTIP), the
United States Committee for Refugees and Immigration (USCRI) Trafficking Victims Assistance Program (TVAP), and Aspire case managers (they are the case managers provided to OTIP recipients). Similarly, I would have liked to have a larger sample size and interview service providers in other parts of the country. Due to time constraints, I was unable to do so. Because of this, there was a limited sample size, and the results may not be generalizable or biased.

Most importantly, another limitation of this study is the inability to include the voices of OTIP recipients/ foreign national minors who are survivors of human trafficking in this research. Even though I was unable to include the voices of foreign national minors who are survivors of trafficking in this study, I do want to acknowledge the tremendous strength, courage, and resilience they exude. The inability to have their voices present in this research does not belittle or diminish their experiences or their own voices. With that being said, I have included short narratives, photos, and quotes from foreign national survivors of trafficking that I have met as a way to incorporate them into this research. I hope that the testimonies present within this research validate foreign nation minors, as legal and social service providers witness the complex struggles and successes they have experienced on their pathways to healing, empowerment, and leading self-sufficient lives.

**Setting Description**

Depending on where the participants are, interviews could be in person or via Zoom. Aurora’s interview was in person, while the others were via Zoom. Providing these two options was appropriate and necessary as it let each participant choose their preferred form based on their comfort level. In allowing the participants to choose, they were guaranteed a space where they felt safe and calm to discuss and answer questions regarding foreign national minors who are survivors
of trafficking. Moreover, it allowed those who are not based in the Bay Area the opportunity to participate.

**Data Collection**

For this study, the researcher engaged in qualitative research, one-on-one interviews with five participants. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted around 25 to 35 minutes each. Before the interview, participants were given a consent form that provided the purpose of the study and granted permission to participate in this study. The consent form was given to each participant before the interview and returned signed to the researcher before the interview. Four interviews were recorded via Zoom, and one was recorded using the voice memo app on the researcher's iPhone. After the interview on the researcher’s iPhone, the researcher uploaded the recording to the researcher’s Google Drive. The interviews recorded via Zoom were also uploaded to the researcher's Google Drive. Each participant had their folder in Google Drive and coded under the pseudonym for this research.

The only demographic question asked was each participant's current job title. As previously mentioned, to respect their privacy, I will not use the participants' actual names nor include their current or previous employers. I already know their job titles because I have a professional relationship with each participant. Still, for this research, I did ask them to state their job titles before we got into the rest of the questions.

**Data Analysis**

The participants' interviews were transcribed from the audio recording. For two interviews, I used Descript, a tool that transcribes recordings. Zoom transcribed the other three interviews. Each transcription had its own Google document. The researcher listened to the recordings from start to finish to correct any grammar and spelling errors. The researcher created a Google
document with each interview question in the second data analysis phase. Under the question, I copied and pasted each participant's answer right next to their name. At the top of the Google document, I create a key for the themes I would be looking for and assign a color to each theme. When a participant discussed trauma experienced, I would highlight the phrase or sentence in yellow. If the participants discussed anything legal-related, it was highlighted in orange. General discussions about public benefits were highlighted in blue. Challenges at home, school, or work (as proposed through the legal violence lens) were red. Finally, when a participant mentioned any of the six core principles of trauma-informed care, it was highlighted in green. Many of these themes overlapped, so if that were the case, I would comment the other theme or element that applied. Similarly, since the six core elements of trauma-informed care were all highlighted in green, I would comment on which one(s) were referenced.
Chapter IV: Analysis

Narrative III

When I began working as a full-time case manager with survivors of trafficking and other violent crimes, both domestic and foreign national minors and adults, I began to witness the complex challenges they faced as it relates to adjusting to life in a new country (integration) and navigating legal systems, law enforcement, and social service agencies all while trying to cope with the trauma of trafficking and migration. There was this one teenager in particular that I worked with as a case manager who came to mind while conducting these interviews.

He showed me his approved OTIP Eligibility Letter during the intake process, and we identified immediate needs. While we waited for the referral with another department in my agency to help this youth obtain benefits from the letter, I tried to maintain contact with this youth and their guardian. This youth and their guardian were challenging to connect with, and I would go weeks without hearing from them. Even though I never got a reply, I would text this youth weekly to let him know I wanted to catch up and ensure he was doing well.

He finally reached out on his terms and confined me about struggles he was facing at school and with his sponsor and wanted help to relocate with a family member he had in another part of the state. He no longer wanted to live with his sponsor and did not feel comfortable in the home. On top of what was happening at home, he had no support at school and did not want to continue. This youth also had a post-release case manager (provided upon release from ORR Custody) who provided services to this youth. After a few days of not hearing from my client, his post-release case manager called me and notified me that he had run away. After multiple attempts to reach out, I never heard from this youth again. Still, I was informed by a family member that he decided to return to his home country of Guatemala (he did make it home safely) due to the difficulties he
faced in the last stage of migration. Although this youth could not receive the support and community he needed, I want to recognize his agency in making the challenging decision to return home.

Many of the participants involved in this study discuss the feelings that arise as a result of trafficking and lack of continued support, similar to that of the narrative above. I want to reiterate that every youth's journey towards healing and leading self-sufficient lives is not linear; however, many of these youths experience similar feelings of isolation and face multiple barriers once they have arrived in the United States. These feelings and obstacles that foreign national adolescent survivors of trafficking experience will be explored further through the eyes of legal and social service providers in this chapter.

The purpose of this research study is twofold: The first is to assess trauma-informed elements that exist and are present within OTIP Eligibility Letters. The second is to provide a program recommendation in the form of including legal protections.

To explore this purpose, I selected a qualitative thematic analysis. Data for this study was collected from legal and social service professionals who currently or have worked with OTIP recipients and/or foreign national minors who are survivors of human trafficking. To accomplish the purpose of the study, I will be looking for themes determined by the two conceptual frameworks I will be using: Trauma-Informed Social Policy and Legal Violence. A Trauma-Informed Social Policy lens applies six elements of trauma-informed care: Trust/Transparency, Choice, Safety, Empowerment, Collaboration, and Intersectionality. A Legal Violence lens looks at challenges that the undocumented community faces once in the destination country as it relates to work, school, and family. I will be looking at these themes in the participants' responses. As a refresher, the participants in the study have provided either legal or social services to OTIP
recipients, unaccompanied minors, and/or survivors of trafficking. Below are their names and job
titles.

**Participants & Occupations**
- **Itzel**: Legal Assistant
- **Rosa**: Attorney
- **Sebastian**: Former Case Manager
- **Aurora**: Supervising Social Worker
- **Elise**: Social Worker

Moreover, many of these themes intersect; therefore, while the sections below will be split up by theme, but keep in mind that there will be intersections between many of the themes.

**Trauma-Informed Approaches**

As briefly acknowledged in Chapter 1 and expanded on in Chapter 2, survivors of trafficking have changing needs over time based on the complex trauma they experience and the stage they are in after leaving their trafficking situation.

To build off the literature in Chapter 2, I asked the participants what trafficking-specific case management should look like to identify best practices when working with this population. Three participants chose to answer this question, and each response built off the other. Aurora identified that it should start with the core principles of trauma-informed care, “creating relationships that are very safe, that offer security, that offer the youth to have some voice and some choice in their services and maybe even who their case manager is and how they connect and when they connect with that case manager.” (Personal Interview, December 2023).

Sebastian believes that services provided for survivors should be trauma-informed, “all-encompassing,” and address all needs (Personal Interview, January 2024). Needs include access to mental health services, a safe and stable place to live, grounding techniques, and awareness of specific cultural and language characteristics.
Being educated on the language you use with them….Maybe trafficking isn't something they [identify with]. Maybe they're just like, hey, this bad thing happened to me. [So] I think it's really good to just **validate** whatever they think their experience is. Also [being aware of] cultural differences, between, you know, [an] American-born case manager and a foreign-born minor. [And] being aware of the signs of potentially being re-trafficked (Sebastian, Personal Interview, January 2024).

Itzel concurs that that services need to be culturally competent; if not, “we can further inflict harm when you're not…posing relevant questions or culturally sensitive questions.” (Personal Interview, January 2024) Itzel adds that in her experience, many service providers are not trained in trauma-informed practices, and service providers need to have a “real awareness” of what trafficking is and how to provide services for this community (Personal Interview, January 2024).

All of these elements and best practices, suggested by the literature found in Chapter 2 and by the professionals interviewed who work with this community, will be explored as they relate to the OTIP program and the potential risks foreign national minors who are survivors of trafficking face if they are to return to their home country.

Likewise, it is important to address why access to public benefits is necessary for survivors of trafficking. Chapter 1 identifies the need for access to public benefits. However, the participants also expanded on the importance of access to public benefits for foreign national minors who are survivors of trafficking. Elise stated that access to public benefits is a “basic human right,” especially for newly arrived youth without access to food, housing, monetary assistance, etc. “How do you survive?” (Personal Interview, February 2024). Elise mentions that “it would be unfair to strip [these rights] away from [these kids] because of their status” (Personal Interview, February 2024). Aurora adds to Elise’s insight by acknowledging how costly it is to provide for children,
“Money just makes everything better… raising a child, raising a teenager in the United States is extremely expensive.” (Personal Interview, December 2023) Aurora explains that the financial benefits provided by the OTIP Eligibility letter are crucial in ensuring stability and safety for these young persons, especially if these adolescents live with family or an individual who cannot or does not provide support. Aurora describes safety as “safe roofs, safe homes, [and a safe] space for sleeping” (Personal Interview, December 2023).

Moreover, it must be acknowledged that undocumented individuals in the United States do not have access to public benefits. Aurora mentions that OTIP eligibility letters are “a unique carve out for individuals who are undocumented.” (Personal Interview, December 2023) That said, many of the participants who are based in California referenced Medi-Cal throughout the interview. Medi-Cal grants access to healthcare to everyone residing in California regardless of legal status; not every state in the U.S. has something similar. For example, Texas does not have a version of Medi-Cal. Hence, access to medical care, particularly for individuals who do not live in states that provide healthcare for all residents regardless of legal status, is a vital element provided by the program.

Sebastian also acknowledges that in the U.S., these minors may lack a support system, so something as simple as “food and shelter” is fundamental (Personal Interview, January 2024). According to Rosa, the prospect of having access to public benefits allows these minors to not stress about obtaining access to basic necessities. It can enable them “to focus on school [and] their healing” (Personal Interview, February 2024).

Given this, how accessible are these public benefits that OTIP recipients are entitled to, and how trauma-informed is the program? Throughout the themes identified below, participants also elaborated on the need for access to public benefits.
Trust, Transparency, and Collaboration

As mentioned in Chapter 1, a non-work social security number is needed to access public benefits. There are two avenues to obtain benefits from the letter: the first is through an Aspire case manager, as provided by the OTIP Letter, and the other is through an advocate that the youth is already working with, like a social worker or case manager.

All participants defined obtaining public benefits as hard and challenging, with many barriers and hoops to jump through. From an attorney’s perspective, Rosa mentions that explaining the process of obtaining benefits to the youth and their guardian is unclear and challenging, especially if there is no social worker on staff. Elise described a lack of transparency as it related to obtaining benefits from the OTIP eligibility letter,

The biggest challenge is the timeline…having access to the benefits after receiving the letter takes longer than anticipated or expected… Right now, in California, they updated one of the policies for trying to obtain a non-work social security number… also for the advocates working on the case for or with the child… another challenger is trying to stay up to date with the most current policies in place and understanding the right protocol, and knowing where to submit, what to submit, what the deadlines are. (Elise, Personal Interview, February 2024)

Moreover, Sebastian remembers the process of receiving an OTIP eligibility letter to be lengthy and recalls the youth feeling like they were in “limbo for a couple of weeks” (Personal Interview, January 2024). However, he does acknowledge that the organization he worked for at the time did have a department that helped OTIP recipients obtain the benefits that the letter grants; hence, the process of obtaining benefits would look different as opposed to an advocate whose
organization does not have a department that is trained and knowledgeable in helping refugees obtain public benefits.

When asked about the timeline for obtaining benefits, Aurora talks about how access to benefits should look like this, “ideally, you get your letter [and] you get connected to a case manager, and within just a matter of weeks, you get your benefits… I don’t think that's happening. I haven’t seen that happening ever.” (Personal Interview, December 2023) A main contributing factor as to why access to benefits is so hard is the way the system is set up. Aurora explains that there is a lot of confusion, “agencies that are set up to help that don’t understand how they can help or that they do need to help.” (Personal Interview, December 2023) She elaborates, explaining that because undocumented persons do not have access to public benefits, welfare offices are not informed and educated about the eligibility of these youths with OTIP Eligibility letters.

Moreover, Itzel acknowledges that a youth needs access to a legal service provider or an advocate to know what an OTIP eligibility letter is. The program, as seen through the eyes of Itzel, “falls short in fulfilling the promises. The promises being the benefits they are supposed to get…” (Personal Interview, January 2024) The lack of accessibility in obtaining benefits, according to Itzel, “fractures the idea of support on a structural level,” which creates “distrust” from the OTIP recipient towards the advocate, agency, and program (Personal Interview, January 2024). Itzel acknowledges that there's a lack of transparency not only with the program but also within organizations that are helping these young persons,

I don't think that the legal service providers, in my experience, have the bandwidth and the capacity to really be able to identify and successfully obtain an OTIP letter, much less the benefits that are given once or supposedly afforded… Aspire helps, but I think that maybe they just don't have the capacity to also support …I don't think that there is the capacity on
that level to successfully connect… [and cannot] follow up with the minor and the guardian. (Itzel, Personal Interview, January 2024)

The participants identified a lack of transparency when it comes to obtaining benefits. This creates mistrust towards advocates and the OTIP program itself, but what other emotions does this bring up? Trust, Transparency, and Collaboration intersect with Choice and Empowerment; if there is mistrust, lack of transparency, and collaboration within the OTIP program, advocates, and social service agencies, how can a survivor feel empowered and that they have a choice? The following section will discuss feelings related to choice and empowerment; however, it is essential to remember the impact and importance of trust in relation to empowerment and choice.

**Choice and Empowerment**

When discussing other emotions that arise while obtaining benefits, many participants expressed that it offers validation to the minors who receive this letter. Aurora mentions,

The OTIP letter just offers this validation that what happened to you was not right … and I think it offers hope … there is a potential for healing and for a new path that includes safety rather than, you know, insecurity and harm and fear… You are worthy, you exist. And there is, you know, this sort of nebulous agency that trusts that you're gonna be okay and wants you to be okay. (Aurora, Personal Interview, December 2023)

Like Aurora, Itzel acknowledges that the letter offers validation: "Something like the OTIP eligibility letter may validate the fact that they did [experience harm especially] when a lot of you know caregivers around them have failed them. It really solidifies the idea that they have been harmed.” (Itzel, Personal Interview, January 2024) Along with validation, Itzel expands that it can also create confusion and potential re-traumatization. Confusion comes into the mix as the minor has “several things going on at once” particularly as it relates to their legal case; similarly the
process can be, “re-traumatizing for a young person to constantly answer specific questions related to the benefit[s].” (Itzel, Personal Interview, January 2024)

Elise mentions that it can also create stress, particularly if the minor is turning 18 soon and only has a little time to complete an RFA. Elise also mentions the level of safety provided by the OTIP eligibility letter, which will be explored in more detail below.

Rosa and Sebastian both mention that the letter can create hope in these young people. Sebastian discusses that the monetary aspect can create hope in that the young person has access to basic necessities, especially if they are not getting that from their guardian. This will also be explored as it relates to safety below.

When asked if obtaining benefits exacerbates feelings of helplessness, all participants except one agreed. Sebastian mentions, “When you go into any new country, and you encounter systems there, and it's in a language that you don't understand, that can definitely, you know, feel hopeless.” (Sebastian, Personal Interview, January 2024) He also mentions that language barriers make the youth reliant on their case manager or their advocate; this adds pressure on the advocate but also furthers the feeling of helplessness because “they're having to rely on this person to get them the resources that that's so needed” (Sebastian, Personal Interview, January 2024).

Rosa and Itzel also agree that it creates feelings of helplessness because of the timeline, “[the process] it's so difficult and windy, you know, and takes a long time” (Rosa, Personal Interview, February 2024). Elise was the only participant who did not fully agree that helpless was the correct term. She mentions that a sense of security is tied to the benefits, which will be explored below.

The process of obtaining benefits brings up many feelings these youths can feel. Although it can validate the minor and also create a sense of hope, Aurora mentions,
[it is] harmful to give that message [of validation], but then not follow up with the services that actually, you know, are indicated in the letter. So if you're saying, you know, we wanna protect you, you have suffered some harm that was wrong, we want you to be safe, we want you to be okay, but then you don't take the steps to actually make that happen. That can be extremely harmful, especially for somebody who's, you know, suffered some type of trauma in the past. (Aurora, Personal Interview, December 2023)

Safety & Legal Violence: Family, School, & Work

Safety relates to the reasonable freedom from harm and danger to a person's physical and mental safety (Bowen & Murshid, 2016, p. 2). As mentioned previously, many of these themes intersect with one another. Safety will also be discussed through the exclusion of legal protections within the existing structure of the program below. The participants all acknowledge the importance of safety as it relates to the well-being of OTIP recipients; hence, this section will focus on accessibility to benefits that provide safety and safety and community as it relates to family, work, and school.

Regarding safety granted by the OTIP Eligibility letter grants recipients access to health care (mental health services) and housing assistance. Some of the participants, like Elise, add that access to public benefits can create and provide a level of safety. When talking about Medi-Cal and access to health care services, Rosa mentions, “I know that OTIP letters also give minors access to counseling or therapy… the kids that I've worked with, I don't think that they've actually been able to get access to that… but I know that somehow they can. I just haven't seen it” (Rosa, Personal Interview, February 2024). Moreover Aurora identifies that “some of 'em also are resistant to mental health treatment and so they need somebody to kind of really be gentle with them and help them, in a really long-term easy way to open up to maybe some healing and mental
health support” (Aurora, Personal Interview, December 2023). Therefore, if access to benefits is challenging, there is the potential for these young persons to become even more resistant to seeking mental health services because of the timeline.

The participants also touched on safety and support in relation to family, school, and work. The rest of this section will focus on family, school, and work challenges regarding safety, support, and community.

When asked about challenges that OTIP recipients face daily, all participants discussed that everything is challenging, ranging from going to school, obtaining access to medical care, and dealing with language barriers. Aurora mentions that OTIP recipients struggle with building safe attachments to people and “feeling like a relationship is something they can trust, that people can be trusted.” (Aurora, Personal Interview, December 2023) This directly relates to challenges that recipients face, especially regarding family dynamics. As mentioned in Chapter 2, most OTIP recipients enter the United States as UCs; therefore, in order to be released from ORR Custody, a sponsor needs to be identified and evaluated. Sponsors can be family friends, parents, or other family members who are not parents. Often, many of these young persons are resettled with a sponsor whom they do not know too well or have only had a long-distance relationship with. This can create tensions within the home regarding safety, comfort, trust, and support. Elise touches on some of the things she has witnessed or been told as they relate to struggles within the home,

A lot of them don't feel comfortable living in their home, but because the guardian may not even be a relative of theirs. So there's that level of comfort that they don't feel in the home but they also don't have anywhere else to go. So sometimes it's not by their choice where they're living, which kind of creates tension in relationships. The Guardian may not agree
with things that the minor is doing and I think that also can impact their legal case at large. (Elise, Personal Interview, February 2024)

Itzel has also heard similar experiences from these young persons while adding, there's a lack of trust that is built, so I think just feeling isolated in the home and not knowing how to articulate it to somebody who may be able to sympathize with the experience of being… a young migrant… and I think also within the home, I've heard [Minors] have experienced…being dismissed in their home for their experiences. (Itzel, Personal Interview, January 2024)

Moreover, Rosa also identified similar struggles, They're just struggling to connect with the person that they're living with and kind of butting heads a lot because they have, you know, they're feeling all these emotions. They have no one else to take their frustration out, and so I do hear about, you know, Minors telling me like “I just don't get along with my sponsor, my aunt, or they don't understand me” and maybe sometimes it's hard for them to explain why they don't feel understood. (Rosa, Personal Interview, February 2024)

Building on trust and comfort within the home, Sebastian also identifies potential challenges that could lead to revictimization or re-trafficking. [Maybe] guardian's not able to access [basic necessities or] resources for them. Maybe they're, at threat of eviction or, you know, not getting enough food and they [Minors] have to rely on other means to do so that might not be the most safe… that goes into the re-trafficking part of it where they might seek out, employment, quote unquote employment that isn't legal or isn't correct. (Sebastian, Personal Interview, January 2024)

Elise adds,
If you're in a situation where you do need money, and you kind of will just do anything to get a job and it doesn't really matter what it is, what you're working, how long you're working, as long as you're bringing in money at the end of the day. And so sometimes those other factors aren't really considered and it's just like, Oh, well, this is an opportunity so let me just take it no matter the cost which could lead to further trafficking if they're not aware.

(Elise, Personal Interview, February 2024)

Rosa also mentioned that other colleagues with whom she works have expressed that they have also met foreign national minors who are being forced to work in the home and contribute to the household. The participants brought up the potential of re-victimization related to lack of legal status, which will be discussed below.

Moreover, many participants mentioned that many foreign national minors, especially those who are survivors of trafficking, struggle with “isolation” and are missing community. Sebastian explains that these young persons can experience isolation not only in the home but at school too,

Going to a school [that] predominantly won't be your home country's language, you know, that's something that can also be isolating… a lot of the time, sometimes they don't want to go to school. I know that was one of my clients, they didn't want to go to school because they were scared of what the other students would say … (Sebastian, Personal Interview, January 2024)

Elise also touches on potential challenges at school,

A lot of them are in survival mode and so that kind of impedes like when it comes to maybe family and school, [that] constantly feeling [of] not having emotional regulation or not
being able to succeed in school because of language barriers [and] because of lack of access to basic needs. (Elise, Personal Interview, February 2024)

Itzel contributes to challenges in school by adding,

Some of the young people that I work with have anxiety, or the young people who have been survivors of trafficking, it is really hard to be in a classroom setting [because of] hypervig[ance] and anxiety… they're required to go to school with minimal support. (Itzel, Personal Interview, January 2024)

On top of these challenges at home and in school, Sebastian mentions that these young persons are also dealing with the trauma of being trafficked, which can also be isolating.

Just dealing with the trauma of being trafficked that's, you know, just a huge one in itself. I think I've had a couple of clients who, yeah, they would have, you know, flashbacks at different points of the day, not necessarily every day, but, you know, seeing something online, seeing an ad in the paper, you know, little things like that can trigger, you know, a minor to, you know, reliving that experience. (Sebastian, Personal Interview, January 2024)

Aurora also mentions, “I see a lot of youth just kind of having PTSD symptoms and struggling with, um, you know, being stuck sort of in their trauma [and] healing process.” (Aurora, Personal Interview, December 2023)

**Intersectionality**

Participants in the sections above have subtly mentioned intersectionality; however, to reiterate, intersectionality relates to the awareness of identifying characteristics such as race, culture, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation and the privileges or oppression these characteristics can provoke (Bowen & Murshid, 2016, p. 2). While awareness of what trafficking
looks like and awareness of language barriers have been discussed above, the participants expanded on intersectionality as it relates to what is needed when providing any services for this population, particularly Sebastian and Itzel. As previously mentioned, Sebastian highlights the importance of cultural competency and recalls a minor he worked with,

Maybe culturally it was fine for them to work at that age, but then, you know, coming into the U.S., it's something that, oh no, I guess a minor is supposed to go to school, you know, until 18 and, you know, get their high school diploma…. I was working with a foreign-born minor from Guatemala. It was typical to, you know, go to school up until maybe fifth or sixth grade, and then you just start working, in their family, and that was something normal for them. So when they're like, oh, I've been labor trafficked, it's kind of like, oh, maybe their idea of what trafficking is and the definition over here might be a little bit different. (Sebastian, Personal Interview, January 2024)

Moreover, Itzel mentions that these youths face language barriers within healthcare, “not having access to mental health providers who are Spanish-speaking, but also culturally competent and sensitive to their experience as a newly arrived young person.” (Itzel, Personal Interview, February 2024)

Hence, I, as well as the participants, want to reiterate the need to provide culturally competent services that acknowledge the role of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual identity and orientation.

**Exclusion of Legal Protection & Healing**

To determine the need for the inclusion of legal protection within the program's current structure, I asked the participants what risks these youths would face if they were forced to return to their country of origin. All of them agreed that they would face continued violence, the potential
for re-trafficking, and a lack of support if forced to return. Aurora mentions, “I know some of our youth would even face threats of death and violence, so returning home is not an option.” Along with the potential of experiencing re-traumatization, Sebastian discusses what that looks like for a lot of these youths,

When something traumatic happens to you, and you go back to that place that happened, sometimes that can be triggering, and if they don't have a support system there either, you know, maybe 'cause they've been away for so long, or maybe, you know, home country just doesn't have as many resources as say, the US does, [that is another risk]. (Sebastian, Personal Interview, January 2024)

Itzel identifies that their home countries do not have the infrastructure to support these youths properly,

Structurally, they wouldn't be supported. I haven't seen any of the home countries' governments support minors… but they also don't support survivors of trafficking. So, on a structural level, on an interpersonal and individual level, they would be facing several levels of harm on which they've already experienced. (Itzel, Personal Interview, January 2024)

Moreover, she also identifies that for young persons who are forced to return and are under the age of 18, “they risk being further exploited for their labor…. so they would be working without pay, without access to good working conditions, but also for those [who have been] sex trafficked [potentially face] further sexual violence.” (Itzel, Personal Interview, January 2024)

Elise identifies economic and family challenges these young persons would be exposed to if forced to return to their home country,
From my experience, [they will face] economic difficulties, maybe there's a lack of employment opportunities, [and] maybe there's distress in family function and in the home. And so the thought of going back, maybe they have a place to go back to, maybe not which then leads to economic issues like housing and food and shelter and even employment. (Elise, Personal Interview, February 2024)

Furthermore, I asked the participants to discuss the role that excluding legal protections and being in deportation proceedings has on healing and leading self-sufficient lives. Aurora mentions that everyone deserves to feel as if they belong somewhere, and this feeling of security and stability has been taken away from these young persons. In their home country, they “lack that sense of belonging… [and] they’re not offered the ability for healing and a way forward.” As it relates to removal proceedings, she mentions that deportation “is [a] threat over their heads… [deportation] really is an impediment to healing… if all you can do is worry about whether you're gonna be deported or not, how do you have the emotional energy for healing and future-looking?” (Aurora, Personal Interview, December 2023)

Itzel identified that the lack of legal protection comes at the cost of potential re-trafficking and re-traumatization. Legal protections in this country come with a valid work permit, so the exclusion of legal protections “[makes you] more susceptible to wage theft and poor working conditions.” (Itzel, Personal Interview, January 2024) Itzel argues that the exclusion of legal protections does not promote healing, nor does it promote independence. She continues,

I feel like in my experience, young people who don't have access to a work permit are working in really hazardous jobs. I think it's just very obvious that a legal pathway for citizenship or a legal pathway towards citizenship is ideal. But I also don't think that it's
enough, as we know, for young people to have access to legal status in this country. (Itzel, Personal Interview, January 2024)

Moreover, Itzel acknowledges that healing may not even happen fully here in the U.S. However, she does recognize the stress of being in removal proceedings, especially when “legal service providers and everyone around them is telling them your removal proceedings [and] it is your responsibility… There's just too many levels of stress that really make it hard to even think about healing.” (Itzel, Personal Interview, January 2024)

Rosa adds that trafficking trauma is already challenging and heavy for these young persons to deal with and that the next layer of deportation proceedings creates more confusion, stress, and anger. Being in removal proceedings creates tensions: “Sometimes they don't know how to handle those pressures, and it also affects the people that they're living with, and that adds more stress.” (Rosa, Personal Interview, February 2024) She recalls interactions with clients who feel the looming effects of deportation, and they no longer want to continue the process of even trying to gain legal status.

Moreover, Elise brings up “survival mode” again. She explains that these adolescents feel stuck because they do not have legal status and are in removal proceedings, “you don't really feel like you can be settled anywhere, because, you know, there is that slight chance that you might have to pick up and leave again…. just not having that peace of mind with being able to have guaranteed protection.” (Elise, Personal Interview, February 2024)

Summary of Findings

All of the participants were in agreement that while this program is validating and has the potential to be helpful for survivors, the inaccessibility and timeline to obtain benefits create more harm to this community. Correspondingly, while there seem to be elements of trauma-informed
care, there is a lack of execution. Additionally, the participants were able to identify the harm of excluding legal protections in the form of re-trafficking, re-traumatization, and lack of stability.

Before ending the interview, I asked all participants if they wanted to contribute anything else to this study. Aurora mentions,

Our survivors need protection in a sense of belonging and we're trying to do a good job, but we need to do better…. We need to make sure that, you know, what we say we're gonna do, we actually do it because doing the opposite is just causing more harm, [creating] more feelings of not belonging and more feelings of just unworthiness, which is just harmful.

(Aurora, Personal Interview, December 2023)

Itzel adds,

I don't think that any government-funded agency has been successful and really capturing the support that a young person who had been trafficked needs. It's always just like, Oh, get them housing like it just doesn't seem like it's rooted in holistic support. I just find a lot of failures, as we know, in these agencies. (Itzel, Personal Interview, January 2024)

Elise adds, “I just hope that the systems that are being created will kind of facilitate a better streamline, and help recipients receive benefits quicker. I don't know what that looks like, but I just hope it can happen.” (Elise, Personal Interview, February 2024)

The participants hope that this study can create steps to help OTIP recipients obtain benefits quickly. The findings and participants' contributions suggest that the main issue within the OTIP Eligibility Letter program is not the only one I identified and envisioned at the start of this research: the exclusion of legal status. Although the lack of legal status is still an issue, the more pressing problem with the program is the absence of Trauma-Informed Care due to the inability to ensure that OTIP Eligibility Letter recipients are granted access to the public benefits to which they are
entitled. Once this issue has been solved, it only makes sense to envision an inclusion of legal protections within the program's structure. Instead of creating a program recommendation that envisions the inclusion of legal status, in Chapter 5, I will discuss the findings and focus on creating program recommendations that help OTIP recipients successfully obtain public benefits through trauma-informed approaches and mechanisms.
Chapter V: Discussion and Recommendations

In Chapter 4, we heard directly from legal and social services providers who have worked with OTIP recipients, unaccompanied minors, and/or survivors of trafficking. They contribute to the literature in Chapter 2, as it relates to the effects that trafficking trauma has on foreign national adolescents in a general way. They reaffirmed that many of these young persons struggle with establishing and creating safe relationships, struggle with feelings of isolation, and feel safe as a result of trafficking. However, it must be noted that the preconceived questions that the researcher created were focused more on identifying trauma-informed elements within the OTIP Eligibility Letter program and identifying the need for a program recommendation instead of focusing on trafficking trauma. Rather, Chapter 2 delves into trafficking trauma and the effects that has on survivors based on the existing literature.

Additionally, as it relates to part of my first research question, What approaches and strategies are needed to promote empowerment, healing, and safety? They also reaffirmed the literature found in Chapter 2 that trauma-informed care is recommended and the best approach when working with this community. Services tailored specifically for this community need to be holistic addressing the various changing needs over time that offer security, voice, and choice; inclusively, services need to be culturally competent with service providers being educated on trafficking and how it can take on various forms.

Because of this, I set out to identify the 6 elements of trauma-informed care within the currency OTIP Eligibility Program. The six elements of trauma-informed care identified through a Trauma-Informed Social Policy lens are Trust/Transparency, Choice, Empowerment, Safety, Collaboration, and Intersectionality. Many of these elements interconnect with one another as demonstrated in Chapter 4. Moreover, combining a Trauma-Informed Social Policy lens with a
Legal Violence lens allows the researcher to view challenges that this community experiences as it relates to Family, School, and Work once in the third stage of migration. Doing so allows the researcher to identify the need to provide a program recommendation based on the experiences of the participants. Originally, I planned on creating a program recommendation that sought to include legal protections with pathways towards legal permanent residency; yet, the findings demonstrate that the actual need at this moment is creating a simplified process that ensures recipients obtain access to public benefits and education/ awareness of the program.

Trust/ Transparency & Collaboration

Trust/ Transparency was the first element of trauma-informed care that the participants touched upon, particularly as it relates to the timeline of obtaining public benefits from the OTIP Eligibility Letter. All of the participants agreed that the process of receiving these benefits granted by the letter is challenging. There is a lack of transparency from OTIP as it relates to obtaining benefits. Based on the way that the program is advertised, once a Request for Assistance (RFA) is submitted and a youth is approved, the recipient will be connected to an Aspire case manager, if a referral is made (normally, the advocate who submitted the RFA will receive an email with the referral form) and then they can begin to receive benefits within a couple of weeks. The advocates in this research communicated that this is not the reality and struggle with helping recipients obtain benefits and find it unclear where to begin and how to go about it.

Elise, a Social Worker, discussed a lack of transparency from OTIP concerning active policies and procedures designed to help obtain a non-work social security number. As a reminder, non-work social security is needed to have access to public benefits such as TANF, SNAP, etc. Moreover, there seems to be a lack of collaboration between OTIP and social service agencies. The absence of transparency and collaboration has created confusion within welfare offices and
social security offices as they are not educated or aware that these youths are entitled to public benefits (given that undocumented persons in the U.S. are not able to access public benefits). The findings suggest that there is a lack of collaboration between advocates/service providers, benefit issuing agencies, and OTIP to help make the process of obtaining public benefits seamless.

Additionally, Itzel, Legal Assistant, acknowledged that unless a youth has access to an advocate or a legal service provider, they would be unaware of OTIP Eligibility Letters and the needed benefits it affords. In Chapter 1, it was identified that OTIP is responsible for increasing victim identification and access to services; inclusively, OTIP also aims to work towards the prevention of trafficking through training, survivor engagement, public awareness, regional coordination, and prevention education (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 5). This insinuates a lack of collaboration and transparency from OTIP to educate and spread the word about trafficking and OTIP Eligibility Letters given that unaccompanied minors (OTIP recipients) who are in removal proceedings are not “provided counsel at government expense” and any free legal service programs and pro bono attorneys are exhausted and frequently unable to offer representation to all persons in removal proceedings (Hing et al., 2018, p.802, 806; DiBennardo & Snider, 2021, p.1). Although unaccompanied minors are screened in ORR custody, as discussed in Chapter 2, ORR shelters have been criticized for their inability to successfully screen youths who fear sharing details of their stories out of safety and potential repercussions to themselves and/or family members (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p.209). This means that unless an unaccompanied minor has access to legal representation and said legal representation successfully identifies that they qualify for an OTIP Eligibility Letter, there could be many more adolescents who have not been identified as victims of trafficking. Once again, insinuates a lack of transparency and collaboration as it relates to public awareness, prevention education, and victim
identification. On a similar note, this participant also identified that legal services providers do not have the “bandwidth” and “capacity” to identify and obtain OTIP eligibility letters for youths “much less the benefits that are supposedly afforded” (Itzel, Personal Interview, January 2024).

As mentioned above, Aspire case managers are designed to provide trafficking-specific case management services, part of which includes helping these youths obtain benefits. However, as the participants identified, this has not been happening.

Moreover, the participants identified a lack of collaboration between OTIP, advocates, and social service agencies, yet none of the participants mentioned collaboration with OTIP recipients themselves. The *Social Policy Trauma-Informed* lens acknowledges that collaboration not only involves open communication between those providing services but also the incorporation of “service users” in this case, OTIP recipients/ foreign national survivors of trafficking, as active partners and experts in their own lives (Bowen & Murshid, 2016, p.3). Correspondingly, as mentioned above, OTIP also works towards the prevention of trafficking through survivor engagement. The participants in this study mentioned the importance of *choice* that these young persons have in the services being provided to them, yet none of the participants discussed how OTIP recipients are being granted the *choice* to *collaborate*. This could be a result of various reasons, the first being that OTIP recipients are not being granted the *choice* to *collaborate* as it relates to the process of benefits being granted. Second, this could be due to the small sample size. The researcher was unable to obtain more participants due to time constraints. Third, this could have resulted in the inability to obtain participants from other agencies such as OTIP, Aspire, and USCRI Trafficking Victims Assistance Program, which could have provided another perspective.

In sum, as it relates to Trust/ Transparency and Collaboration, the participants identified that these elements are not effectively present and executed within the current OTIP Eligibility
Letter Program. The lack of transparency and collaboration has resulted in mistrust from OTIP recipients towards advocates, OTIP, and social service agencies such as welfare offices and social security offices. Apart from creating mistrust, the participants discussed additional effects and feelings that the process of obtaining benefits and OTIP Eligibility letters themselves have on recipients, which influences the following section.

**Choice and Empowerment**

As identified in Chapter 4, many of the six elements of trauma-informed care engage and build off one another. In the section above, Trust/Transparency and Collaboration, I touched on choice as it relates to collaboration with OTIP recipients, however, this section will discuss Choice and Empowerment as they relate to one another. I chose to blend Choice and Empowerment because having choice gives people agency which in turn can lead to empowerment. Through a Trauma-informed Social Policy lens empowerment reflects “not only a rhetoric of liberation, but actual shared power in terms of extending decision-making ability to the target populations of social policy” (Bowen & Murshid, 2016, p.6). As discussed above, none of the participants discussed the role that OTIP recipients have in terms of having “shared power” as it relates to accessing benefits. One participant did mention that benefit issuing agencies are unfamiliar with OTIP and the benefits granted by the letter. Moreover, as identified in Chapter 1, USCRI advises an advocate who is struggling to help adolescents obtain benefits to “advocate up the chain and educate office staff on the minor's eligibility” (Benefit Application Guidance Sheet, USCRI). Given that accompanying youths to benefit-issuing agencies and providing advocacy support is very important, it is also equally important for OTIP to educate said benefit-issuing agencies. In this respect, it implies and identifies a deficiency in the OTIP program as it relates to
empowerment and choice. However, what other feelings of empowerment and choice, if any, does the program provoke in recipients?

When it comes to viewing the OTIP Eligibility Letter program as a whole relating to empowerment and choice, the participants identified that the program is validating for a lot of recipients. The participants identified that being granted this letter validates that what these adolescents experienced was not right and that there is potential for healing and future looking. When it comes to providing trauma-informed services, the participants discussed the importance of validating the minor’s feelings and meeting them where they are. Coupled with validation, the participants did mention feelings of hope associated with the letter. The monetary aspect of obtaining benefits is a big hope to a lot of recipients so that short-term and long-term needs are continuously met, particularly, if the youth is not receiving support from their guardian. The participants, as well as Chapter 2, discuss the resettlement of unaccompanied minors from ORR custody to family or family friends.

Comparatively, the participants did mention some negative feelings associated with obtaining the letter and the process of receiving the benefits. One participant mentioned that it can create more stress and confusion because these youths have a lot on their plate particularly as it relates to their legal case and removal proceedings. Additionally, the process of obtaining benefits can make these youths feel helpless due to the timeline of obtaining benefits and language barriers when interacting with benefit-issuing agencies and other systems. As identified before, USCRI recommends legal and social service providers to advocate and educate benefit-issuing agencies, however, one participant did mention that this can create an overreliance on advocates to help navigate such systems while also adding another layer of pressure to advocates who are already overburdened.
One participant acknowledged that helplessness was not the correct term to use as it relates to the feelings that OTIP Eligibility Letters generate. The participants mentioned that the letter can bring up other positive feelings such as hope and a level of security (economic, physical, and emotional) through access to public benefits. These feelings can promote empowerment and choice; however, the findings suggest that because of how challenging the process of obtaining benefits is, it can create further harm. The participants pointed out that promoting a false sense of validation, security, and hope is harmful, particularly for these youths who have experienced complex trauma. Based on the participants' experiences, the OTIP program is not taking the steps necessary to make sure that benefits are being successfully obtained. This suggests that empowerment and choice are not effectively executed within the current structure of the program.

**Safety & Legal Violence: Family, School, and Work**

In the section above, it was identified that the OTIP Eligibility Letter can and does, to a certain extent, provide a level of security which in turn can also be viewed as safety. This section will discuss the safety that the OTIP Eligibility Letter Program provides, however, I will also discuss the findings on safety as it relates to family, school, and work. A *legal violence* lens requires the researcher to view the challenges that these youth face as they relate to family, school, and work. The participants touched on challenges within these three spheres of life as it relates to safety, which is why I have combined these themes.

Safety relates to the reasonable freedom from harm and danger to a person's physical and mental safety (Bowen & Murshid, 2016, p.2). The OTIP Eligibility letter provides monetary assistance, housing assistance, and access to mental health services; access to these public benefits is intended to aid in short-term and long-term physical and mental stability and safety. One participant mentioned that many of these youths are resistant to mental health services, so they
need advocates and programs that are understanding, patient, and empathic. As identified in the sections prior, because of how challenging it has been to obtain benefits, this can result in youths being more impervious to seeking mental health services. To reiterate, the inefficiency and challenges that come with trying to obtain benefits affect the way safety is executed within the program; once again implying that while means to provide physical and mental safety are present, it is not being carried out successfully.

Moreover, the findings suggest that many OTIP recipients risk not feeling safe in their family dynamics. As mentioned above and discussed in Chapter 2, to be released from ORR Custody, the minor will be released to a sponsor – this sponsor can be a parent, sibling, uncle, cousin, and/or family friend. The participants acknowledged that many of these young persons feel isolated and misunderstood by their guardian (sponsor) once in the third stage of migration. Often there are tensions within the home, one of the participants discusses that tensions could arise not only from feeling of being misunderstood and dismissed because of their feelings but also because their guardian is unable to provide basic necessities such as food and a stable, comfortable living environment. The participants identified that this in turn could lead the youth to seek out unsafe jobs or work conditions which could lead to potential re-trafficking, exploitation, and re-traumatization. OTIP also aims to develop anti-trafficking strategies and programs to prevent trafficking, yet based on the findings, if recipients are unable to access housing, financial, and mental/physical health services, how is this program aiding in combating re-trafficking? (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 3)

Furthermore, the participants identified that many of these youths feel isolated and are lacking community. Feelings of isolation not only arise within the home but also at school. The participants identified that attending school where their first language is not spoken can be
isolating and make these youths feel excluded. Additionally, one participant identified that many of these youths are anxious and hypervigilant, so being in a school setting can be very challenging because of the trauma they have experienced. When discussing safety in terms of the program and within the identified three spheres of life, the participants touched on how these young persons deal with trafficking trauma. Coping with trauma as a result of trafficking can be very isolating. A participant mentioned the importance of providing these youths with grounding techniques that they can use when feeling triggered. Another participant identified that many of these adolescents have PTSD symptoms and struggle with being stuck in their trauma and the healing process. The inability to access said public benefits that are included to provide physical and mental safety can be a setback in the healing process and continue to inflict harm on recipients who have already been through repeated violence and barriers.

**Intersectionality**

Intersectionality refers to the awareness of identifying characteristics such as race, culture, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, and the privileges or oppression these characteristics can provoke (Bowen & Murshid, 2016, p.2). Intersectionality allows service providers and programs to understand discrimination, privilege, and human rights violations that happen because of these combining identities that a person could identify as (Bowen & Murshid, 2016, p.8).

As discussed in the sections above, OTIP recipients have faced challenges as it relates to language barriers when encountering benefit issuing agencies, obtaining legal and social services, obtaining health services, and in school. The participants also discussed the importance of providing culturally competent services to these individuals. One participant discussed recognizing cultural differences as a U.S.-born case manager providing services to youth from the Northern Triangle. Recognizing cultural views on work, school, and family dynamics is essential
to avoid further harm. Being aware of cultural differences is key when providing holistic services to these youths.

It must be noted that all of the participants discussed intersectionality as it relates to cultural competency. Participants did mention that benefit issuing agencies at times lack linguistic inclusivity, however, as it relates to acknowledging gender and sexual orientation, the participants did not touch on these identifiable characteristics. The lack of discussion on gender and sexual orientation could be a result of the limitations of the study – a small sample size, the inability and inaccessibility of being able to obtain participants from other agencies, and time constraints. More research needs to be done to obtain information on intersectionality as it relates to OTIP Eligibility Letters.

**Responsibility to Ensure Access to Public Benefits**

When it comes to healing and leading self-sufficient lives, the participants identified that the use of trauma-informed care can promote feelings of belonging, security, and stability which in turn creates a space for healing. Public benefits are designed to provide a safety net and to help ensure short-term and long-term stability and safety that can help recipients get out of “survival mode” (Elise, Personal Interview, February 2024). The participants mentioned that they have not seen benefits being granted, so how exactly is the program aiding in the protection of survivors and prevention of trafficking/re-trafficking? So long as the program is unable and unwilling to ensure access to the benefits afforded, the program is not trauma-informed and is creating further harm to these youths.

Additionally, Chapter 2 identifies legal frameworks designed to protect victims and prevent trafficking (or re-trafficking) such as the Palermo Protocol, TVPA of 2000, and the Convention on the Rights of a Child; inclusively, in Chapter 1, I highlighted the mission and function of OTIP.
These frameworks were originally included to create a program recommendation to include legal protections; instead, the findings made visible the reality that OTIP recipients are not being granted public benefits, which is the program’s main purpose. These legal frameworks and the OTIP program’s mission are still relevant concerning the results from the findings, the United States has a legal responsibility to ensure the “physical, psychological, and social recovery for victims of trafficking in persons” especially in children, recovery and integration should take place in spaces that foster health, confidence, and dignity (United Nations & Annan, 2004, Article 6, page 44; General Assembly, 1989, p. 11; Ataiants et al., 2018, p.8).

Until now, I have only provided narratives from my point of view from interactions with OTIP recipients to incorporate them into this research; yet, my experience as a service provider has not been included. This next section will delve into a brief account of my experiences as an advocate navigating the OTIP Eligibility Letter program.

**My Experience as an Advocate for OTIP Recipients**

As mentioned throughout this project, I have provided a wide range of support to OTIP recipients, from legal to social services. I first became aware of OTIP Eligibility Letters as a case manager with the Survivors of Trafficking Empowerment Program (STEP) at Refugee Services of Texas (RST) in 2021. Most of the teens that I worked with had these child eligibility letters; given that, RST was a refugee resettlement agency, I was able to refer these kids to another department within RST since the letter grants **benefits to the same extent as a refugee**. As an organization, RST was overwhelmed by the number of potential clients and retained clients due to the high demand for services, but there were not enough case managers. Due to this, my clients with OTIP Eligibility Letters were put on a waitlist. Throughout my time as a STEP case manager, I never saw public benefits granted to my clients with OTIP letters.
It must be noted that RST, as an organization, no longer exists. This is a result of the declining number of refugees admitted into the United States. In 2017, Obama proposed a new cap on refugee admissions to 100,000 (Roy et.al., 2024). However in 2017, Trump reversed Obama's proposed ceiling to 50,000, then 45,000 in 2018, 30,000 in 2019, and by 2020 there was a ceiling of 15,000 refugees (Roy et.al., 2024; Fayyad, 2024). In 2022, Biden raised the ceiling to 125,000 which still stands as of now (Roy et.al., 2024; Fayyad, 2024). The effects of the cuts under the Trump administration still linger today and have resulted in refugee resettlement agencies, most of whom are non-profits that aided people who fled persecution, war, and other injustices, being forced to close or cut staff or close offices (Alvarez, 2014; Roy et.al., 2024). This serves as evidence of fewer resources available for these minors with OTIP letters. Underfunded and erased resettlement agencies demonstrate that there are fewer structures and institutions to help OTIP recipients obtain benefits. These refugee resettlement programs, like RST, could help recipients obtain benefits or even aid in the education of other advocates on obtaining benefits; however, they are exhausted with limited capacity to provide support. This is a failure in the system to provide mechanisms for support and the ones who are losing out are OTIP recipients.

To continue, I began working as a legal assistant at the Immigration Center for Women and Children - San Francisco (ICWC-SF) at the end of 2022 and the organization had just initiated their ORR program. Acacia Center for Justice has an Unaccompanied Minors Program (UCP) and works in collaboration with the VERA network, which has a contract with ORR, to support and provide legal services to UCs through LSPs like ICWC. An organization as highly regarded as it is was unfamiliar with OTIP Eligibility letters, and at least the San Francisco office was unknowledgeable about this program. As the first hire for the ORR project at the ICWC-SF office, I aided them in creating standard procedures for screening and submitting RFAs for eligible
children, either detained or not. Throughout my time at ICWC-SF, there was not a constant designated social worker in the SF office to offer social service interventions. Because of this, I was hopeful that Aspire case management, as afforded by the OTIP Eligibility letter, would be able to help recipients obtain benefits. Aspire is a case management service under USCRI, as reiterated throughout this project. Although referrals were made to Aspire and the regional coordinator was responsive, the adolescents we helped obtain the letters were still unable to obtain a case manager who was designed to help aid in the process of obtaining public benefits. With guidance from the supervising social worker in the LA office, I tried to help these youths obtain a non-work SSN. Per the Benefit Application Guidance Sheet provided by USCRI, the OTIP recipient, her guardian, and I went to a benefit issuing office to obtain a denial letter stating that this youth was unable to obtain public benefits due to not having a non-work SSN. The employee who assisted us at the benefit issuing agency did not speak Spanish and was dismissive, impolite, and impatient with us as I tried “advocating up the chain and educating office staff on the minor's eligibility” as advised by the Benefit Application Guidance Sheet. We were told that this youth would receive, via postal mail, a verification letter stating that she did not qualify for public benefits and we could take that to the SSA office to obtain a non-work SSN. This letter never arrived. After a couple of weeks, the supervising social worker and I met with the USCRI regional coordinator who was responsive and tried to help us figure out why there was no follow-up with an Aspire case manager. The USCRI regional coordinator notified us that if an adolescent has an ORR post-release case manager (PRS), then that case manager would be responsible for helping the child obtain benefits and could not obtain Aspire services. Only one guardian of the recipients heard from Aspire but was still unable to receive help obtaining benefits. As an organization at the time, ICWC-SF was overwhelmed and did not have the capacity to aid in following up with helping
these youths obtain access to benefits. When I left ICWC-SF in January 2024, all of the youths who were retained clients to whom I helped obtain OTIP Eligibility Letters had yet to receive the benefits they were entitled.

In February 2024, I met with the director of the deportation clinic and the social services coordinator at the University of San Francisco to discuss OTIP Eligibility Letters so they could incorporate this into the services they provide. The director of the deportation clinic was not entirely unfamiliar with OTIP Eligibility letters as she had met youths who were released from ORR Custody already having obtained the letters, but that was the extent of her familiarity with them. She also had not witnessed follow-up to obtain benefits granted by the letter, due to capacity and/or time. Once again, this demonstrates another legal service provider, that provides the highest quality of legal services to unaccompanied minors, being in the dark regarding OTIP Eligibility Letters, the benefits it provides, the process to obtain the letter, and the benefits afforded.

My experience coupled with the testimonies of the participants demonstrates multiple recurring issues with the program:

1. Lack of knowledge about the OTIP Eligibility Letter Program from various agencies and systems that encounter unaccompanied minors throughout the third stage of migration;
2. The inability of OTIP/USCRI to successfully ensure recipients are granted public benefits;
3. Absence of Trauma-Informed Care and approaches to accomplish the mission and purpose of the OTIP program (this includes collaboration among service providers and OTIP, but also incorporation of OTIP recipients as active participants;
promotion of choice, empowerment, and safety; and creating a program filled with trust/ transparency).

Since benefits are not being granted, what exactly are these kids benefiting from? The OTIP Eligibility letter that these adolescents receive, at this point, functions solely as a label that identifies them as victims of trafficking which is very harmful to the healing process. Survivors of trafficking need to be validated, this could occur through normalizing symptoms, offering hope, and elements to build coping skills, as identified in Chapter 2. The participants also discussed that validating the experiences of survivors is important to the healing process, but providing a false sense of validation and hope can be harmful and triggering, which is what is currently happening. In only being viewed as a victim and experiencing barriers to obtaining benefits afforded by the letters, the healing process is impeded. These letters need to be more than just a label identifying these adolescents as victims. OTIP Eligibility Letters have the potential to provide survivors with the tools and resources needed to ensure safety, stability, empowerment, and choice if executed correctly; unfortunately, this is not the case. The next section will identify program recommendations to address these issues.

**Program Recommendations**

The OTIP Eligibility Letter program has the potential to aid foreign national minors who are survivors of trafficking towards short-term and long-term stability that can lead to a space for healing. These program recommendations are designed and intended to help these youths successfully obtain benefits, increase outreach to educate all providers who come into contact with unaccompanied minors and ensure transparency and accountability. These recommendations are created through a trauma-informed social policy lens. A trauma-informed social policy lens identifies that when social policy becomes trauma-informed, policies will become participatory,
transparent, and collaborative to promote empowerment and safety to disrupt disparities that foreign national minors who are survivors of trafficking face once they have arrived in the United States (Bowen & Murshid, 2016, p.10). These recommendations intersect with one another, will build off one another, and have recurring concepts.

I. Improve Access to Benefits & Education

The first recommendation is concerning obtaining public benefits. All the participants, except for one, discussed that obtaining benefits was a challenge, not obtaining the OTIP Eligibility Letter itself. Because of this, coupled with my own experience, I will focus on providing recommendations after an adolescent has obtained the OTIP Eligibility Letter. The process of obtaining public benefits needs to be simplified. Many of these youths are recent arrivals and thus are unable and unknowledgeable to navigate benefit-issuing agencies independently; the same goes for most of their sponsors/guardians. Without an advocate, navigating such agencies alone can be intimidating and almost impossible due to language barriers. Assuming that a youth opts to not receive case management from Aspire and chooses for their advocate to help obtain benefits, this is what I recommend.

According to the Benefits Applicant Guide created by USCRI, requirements to obtain an SSN “vary” at the local SSA office; due to this, it is advised to visit a benefits office first and then request a non-work SSN from the SSA office. If benefits are not granted due to not having a non-work SSN, the OTIP recipient needs to obtain a “formal letter” from the benefit issuing agency explaining the need for a non-work SSN, with the name and wet signature of the authorized employee at the benefit issuing agency. USCRI recommends that an advocate accompany or be available to the recipient when visiting these offices to “advocate up the chain of command” and educate office staff on Minor’s eligibility (Benefit Application Guide). This has created a reliance
on advocates that already have limited capacity. Not being able to try to obtain benefits on their own in accompaniment with their sponsor (who oftentimes also do not know how to navigate such agencies given their legal status and language barriers), creates feelings of inadequacy that hinder empowerment and self-sufficiency in these youths.

OTIP and USCRI need to require a uniform process for all SSA offices and benefit issuing agencies across the country to follow because the back and forth creates confusion for the advocate, OTIP recipient, and even SSA and benefit issuing agencies. The original OTIP Eligibility letter should be sufficient documentation to ensure identification, but also eligibility for benefits. Instead of going to a benefit issuing agency first to obtain a formal letter to take to the SSA office, the first step should be for the minor and guardian (and advocate if needed) to go to the SSA office and obtain a non-work SSN. Before this step, OTIP and USCRI need to provide training on what exactly OTIP Eligibility Letters are so that OTIP recipients, their advocates, and guardians are not turned away at SSA offices. This training also needs to include a trauma-informed lens that captures the six core elements of trauma-informed care when interacting with recipients and their sponsors. Such training should also be accomplished with the help of other service providers who work with unaccompanied minors and survivors of trafficking to provide holistic, culturally competent training.

Additionally, since one of the core elements of trauma-informed care is choice, I believe that many OTIP recipients should have the opportunity to choose who will accompany them to said agencies to promote empowerment and confidence in their abilities to handle a wide range of situations and tasks without the over-reliance of an advocate. For example, when I was a case manager at RST, I was helping a foreign national report trafficking to the national human trafficking hotline. I gave her the choice of calling on her own or together, and she chose to call
on her own, knowing that if she needed help, I would be able to assist. She was able to successfully report the crime on her own because the National Human Trafficking Hotline executes holistic, seamless services, which is lacking in the OTIP Eligibility Program. Allowing survivors to have a choice, not only in their services but in how they obtain their services is a crucial part of achieving empowerment and self-sufficiency.

Access to adequate language services could be a barrier in allowing OTIP recipients the choice in how they obtain access to benefits, however, agencies such as SSA offices and benefit issuing agencies already have access to language services such as Language Line that can connect employees to an interpreter. The social security office website mentions that language access is free and an appointment can be made at the local SSA office with an interpreter present. If any issues relating to access to language services arise, I recommend that USCRI work in partnership with Acacia Center for Justice. Acacia Center for Justice ensures that legal service providers, under ORR funding, can access interpreters to provide language access to UCs working with their advocates. Given this, Acacia is already well-versed in helping UCs receive services with adequate language assistance. Because of this, they can aid USCIR/OTIP to ensure that SSA and benefit issuing agencies provide culturally and linguistically competent services. Once a non-work SSN is obtained, then the youth would be able to go to a benefit issuing agency and apply for public benefits.

Moreover, suppose a youth chooses to have an Aspire case manager through USCRI. In that case, I recommend that Aspire case managers receive training and work in partnership with refugee resettlement agencies in their area who are well-versed in helping refugees obtain benefits. Below is a map of refugee resettlement organizations and their site locations. Using this map, we can see that there are many spread throughout the country and cities, which means they are well-
versed in local SSA regulations and would be able to offer support to either Aspire case managers or advocates. In addition to streamlining the process, USCRI and OTIP need to also focus on capacity building to ensure the simplicity of the process. The next section will focus on recommendations as they relate to collaboration between OTIP, USCRI, advocates, and OTIP recipients.

Figure 4: Resettlement & placement Agency Contacts, FY 2023 (Refugee Processing Center, n.d.)

II. Increase Transparency, Collaboration, Accountability, and Strengthening Program Oversight

With the first recommendation, I began touching on collaboration to simplify the benefit-obtaining process. I mentioned that there needs to be a uniform process that all SSA offices and benefit issuing agencies follow, along with uniform training on OTIP eligibility letters to ensure that recipients are not being turned away. This hopefully will limit the difficulties faced when
trying to obtain benefits; however, to ensure that the program runs seamlessly, regular meetings to
discuss program updates, challenges, and best practices need to take place. Because there are so
many stakeholders involved, I propose that USCRI continues to serve as the agency that advocates
go to for any concerns. As mentioned before, USCRI has regional coordinators who are enlisted
to troubleshoot any issues relating to Aspire case managers to help advocates obtain benefits for
OTIP recipients. In order to ensure accountability, I propose other avenues to guarantee
clarifications or a way to raise concerns. The first is a designated “office hours” monthly that
advocates can attend if they are having issues obtaining benefits, clarifying standard procedures,
etc. Each regional coordinator will hold these office hours to ensure that concerns are heard. Apart
from holding office hours, a Google form should be available for advocates to submit questions to
USCRI. The same system will be applied among USCRI regional coordinators, benefit issuing
agencies, and SSA offices. To add another layer of support, I propose that all of these stakeholders,
including refugee resettlement agencies that can offer support based on the first recommendation
above, be a part of an “in-network” email group where advocates can ask OTIP-related questions
and obtain responses from other advocates and relevant stakeholders. Implementing these
recommendations encourages advocates and relevant stakeholders to collaborate with one another
to provide adequate, impeccable services to UCs.

Next, I recommend collaboration with OTIP recipients as active participants in the program
to promote empowerment. USCRI needs to create age-appropriate surveys that OTIP recipients
can fill out as they relate to the quality and accessibility of services from Aspire case managers,
advocates, and other stakeholders who provide direct services to recipients. Surveys should be
tailored to the services being received depending on the agency’s purpose; for example, surveys
provided by SSA offices/ benefit issuing agencies will be tailored to the process, language
accessibility, and customer service experience whereas surveys distributed by Aspire case managers or advocates will also include how the services provided has helped recipients, how they have grown, etc. By creating these surveys it allows OTIP recipients to have a choice in the services they receive while also being granted the ability to collaborate towards refining the program.

Additionally, it is important to solicit regular feedback to inform program operations. OTIP needs to conduct semiannual program evaluations and assessments to identify areas for improvement and measure progress toward the program goals. Inclusively, this research identified that intersectionality, as it relates to race and gender, was not touched on by the participants in implementing these recommendations; it could reveal any other challenges/ successes as it relates to other elements of intersectionality.

III. Community Outreach and Awareness/ Education

The last recommendation I want to discuss is designed to increase survivor identification and awareness of the OTIP Eligibility program. In the first recommendation, I suggested training for SSA and benefit issuing agencies so that OTIP recipients are not turned away and can obtain benefits, however, another issue that arose from this research was the lack of knowledge or awareness of the OTIP program from advocates or agencies who encounter UC’s through the third stage of migration (post-transit). Because of this, OTIP needs to continue training and advocacy efforts, including workshops, webinars, written materials, and online resource efforts to raise awareness.

Once a minor is designated a UC after encountering border patrol, they are then transferred to ORR Custody/ shelters within 72 hours. Once in ORR Custody, case managers at ORR shelters conduct screenings (where OTIP eligibility is screened); however, as discussed, many UCs fear
sharing details of their stories out of safety and potential repercussions to themselves and/or family members (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p.209). Due to this, when legal service providers go to ORR shelters to conduct Know Your Rights presentations and legal screenings, as required by ORR, for the detained youth, this is where OTIP Eligibility can be screened. The purpose of legal screenings is to identify the forms of immigration relief that these youths qualify for, however, since OTIP Eligibility Letters do not protect from removal or an avenue to remain legally in the U.S., it can often be overlooked, especially if LSP’s are unaware of the letters and the needed benefits it provides, as demonstrated throughout this research.

Additionally, when a youth is released from ORR custody to a sponsor, said sponsor has to attend Legal Orientation Programs for Custodians (LOPC). Organizations conducting LOPC services need to be trained and educated on OTIP Eligibility Letters to provide this resource for the sponsor through the presentation itself and in the form of fliers. These fliers should be created by USCRI, directing potential clients to benefits issuing agencies that could help them apply, since based on the first recommendation, benefit-issuing agencies should be educated on OTIP Eligibility as well as trauma-informed.

However, these efforts to raise awareness should not only be limited to LSPs, but among refugee resettlement agencies, community organizers/ members, staff at educational institutions (high schools) such as counselors, teachers, etc., and other social migratory networks like churches, shelters, and accessible mental health providers.

Additionally, OTIP Eligibility letters and fliers described above, explaining the program and qualifications should also be posted in benefit issues agencies/ SSA offices, particularly in states that have programs like Medi-Cal. This would ensure that other migrants and/or undocumented persons seeking said benefits (like Medi-Cal) will visit benefit-issuing agencies to
Obtain services. These fliers should also be posted and distributed among community members who provide services to immigrant communities.

Awareness and advocacy should be accomplished in partnership with advocates who are knowledgeable of the program and even OTIP recipients themselves. OTIP recipients should be given the opportunity and choice to contribute towards awareness of the program. This could be accomplished through the survey recommended above. The survey should have a box that OTIP recipients could check if they want to participate in awareness and advocacy campaigns. If a recipient consents, then the program could share a snippet of the responses provided on the survey during presentations and other advocacy efforts made. OTIP recipients should also be given the opportunity/choice to participate in direct advocacy efforts as well.

By implementing these recommendations that emphasize collaboration, accountability, and the other elements of trauma-informed care, the OTIP Eligibility Letter program can address the identified challenges and better meet the needs of UCs who are survivors of trafficking to promote empowerment, healing, and safety.
As a legal assistant, I was also responsible for scheduling intakes for potential clients for the ORR program. I scheduled an intake for a young girl who I flagged as OTIP Eligible for the attorney conducting the intake. While I was not present at the time of the intake, I was told that this young girl struggled to speak to the attorney handling her case, and to answer questions, she would only give a thumbs up or a thumbs down. Given my experience working with trafficked youth and conducting legal screenings with kids at the ORR shelter I visited, it was decided that I would meet with this youth to try and make her feel comfortable and try to obtain more information to submit an RFA for an OTIP letter.

Before I met with this young girl, I reached out to the supervising social worker to help me come up with ideas on how to conduct the meeting. Before going into the meeting, the only thing I knew about this young girl was that she liked art class in school. I told the social worker that since I like to watercolor, I was planning on bringing my watercolor kit so we could paint together
and get to know one another. During my conversation with the social worker, she used a phrase that has resonated with me to this day: "Go at the speed of trust."

During my meeting with this young girl, we painted and got to know each other. She was initially highly reserved, but as I kept talking, telling her about myself, asking about her interests, and acting silly, she would reply and laugh. At the end of our meeting, I asked her if she wanted to keep her painting, which she did. The photo I included above was what I painted during our time together. Ultimately, while I was asked to try and obtain information for her legal case and OTIP letter, my goal was never disclosure. I wanted to create a safe space for this young girl where she knew that if she ever wanted to discuss anything, she had a support system in the form of advocates that she could fall back on when she was ready.

---

**Conclusion**

I wanted to begin the conclusion with this narrative because, based on my experience working with UCs and foreign national survivors of trafficking, both adults and minors, it's essential that services and programs tailored for this community understand the need to “going at the speed of trust” based on what this community has experienced.

The first purpose of this research was to identify how human trafficking affects survivors on their path toward healing. Based on this, I sought to determine recommended approaches to promote healing, empowerment, and safety. Based on the literature identified in Chapter 2, traffickers target the most vulnerable and use methods of force, fraud, and coercion to control and exploit victims. Human trafficking can take on various forms, does not always look the same, and is not linear. Traffickers can use love, security, immigration status, and law enforcement to create forced compliance and psychological manipulation (Chambers et al., 2024, p. 43; Golob, 2022, p.32). Some of the most common trafficking trends identified by OTIP based on RFA’s received
include forced criminality, forced labor on the journey, forced labor by a caregiver, forced labor and smuggling, domestic and sexual servitude, commercial sex and smuggling (Devine & Mitaro, October 2023, slide 18).

Additionally, this research centered on human trafficking trends in the Northern Triangle because these are the top three countries of origin of OTIP recipients as identified by OTIP. In the Northern Triangle, the most common trend is forced criminality by gangs in the region. Adolescents who are coerced into servitude are viewed as short-term help; the gang approaches and recruits young persons through threats of harm, such as threats of death of loved ones or even the young person themselves. Inclusively, young girls are often grabbed by gang members and forced into domestic and sexual servitude. Many young girls experience extreme psychological, physical, and sexual violence as a result of being caught or kidnapped (Boerman & Golob, 2020, p. 250).

Human trafficking takes away a person’s perception of safety, ownership of one's body, and self-esteem (Hopper, 2017, p.12). Trafficking damages self-perception, self-esteem, self-assurance, and relationships (Hopper, 2017, p.13). Trafficking can also lead survivors to feel that they are helpless and do not have control of their own lives; these feelings have been referred to as complex trauma (Hopper, 2017, p.13). Apart from the trafficking experience itself, many OTIP recipients arrive in the United States and have unaccompanied minor status, meaning they experience and are exposed to another layer of trauma throughout the three stages of migration. In the first stages of migration, adolescents experience political and structural violence, worsening living conditions, declining economic opportunities, and limited access to education (Menjivar & Perreira, 2019, p.203). In the second migration phase, UCs experience a dangerous and challenging journey to reach the U.S.-Mexico border. The journey is a defining experience in the lives of these
youths. Once in the third migration stage, UCs experience more legal and social barriers that enhance stress and the harmful consequences of pre-transit and transit experiences.

Given all of these experiences, the existing literature identifies that trauma-informed care is the ideal method to use when providing services and creating programs for these youths. Additionally, in chapter 4, the participants in this research reaffirmed the literature found in chapter 2, first as it relates to challenges experienced throughout the three stages of migration. Through a legal violence lens, I was able to identify challenges that these youth face in the third stage of migration as it relates to family, work, and school. I was able to do so by interviewing legal and social service providers who work with UCs and survivors of trafficking. Regarding challenges in the third migration stage, one participant mentioned that almost everything is challenging. These youths often do not have safe and trusting relationships with their sponsors/guardians, face challenges in school, and language and cultural barriers.

The participants were also able to identify how trafficking affects youths. They discussed that many adolescents have difficulty trusting others and feel isolated. Because of this, the participants identified that trauma-informed care is the correct method to use when working with this population, reaffirming the literature found in Chapter 2. Because of this, I sought to identify what elements of trauma-informed care were present within the existing structure of the OTIP Eligibility Letter program. With the help of a Trauma-Informed Social Policy lens, I explored which elements of trauma-informed care were present in the program: trust/transparency, choice, empowerment, intersectionality, safety, and collaboration.

The findings in Chapter 4 highlight issues within the current structure of the OTIP program. Regarding trust/transparency, all participants mentioned they have not seen benefits being granted by the OTIP Eligibility Letter. The participants identified that this is a result of multiple
reasons, the first being a complicated, unclear process, which insinuates a need for more transparency from OTIP and USCRI. There is also confusion at benefit issuing agencies and SSA offices, given that these letters are a unique program that allows undocumented people (minors) access to public benefits. This concludes that there needs to be more transparency, but there is also a lack of collaboration between all agencies involved. The OTIP program needs to facilitate openness and cooperation. More knowledge about the program is necessary, not just from benefit issuing agencies and SSA offices, but from advocates who provide services to this community. One participant discussed that unless a UC has access to an LSP, they would be unaware of the program and the benefits it is said to afford. This can be attributed to a lack of efforts to increase awareness of the OTIP program. However, these low-cost, pro bono programs are overburdened due to high caseloads and underfunding.

Although the participants explained that obtaining benefits is challenging, the OTIP Eligibility Letter provides a form of safety and validation. It validates that what these youths experienced was not okay; this feeling of validation can lead to empowerment and hope, creating feelings of a potential for healing and a future. Access to public benefits, as identified by the participants, can offer safety based on short-term and long-term needs. Access to mental and medical health care, housing assistance, food, economic support, and education opportunities creates a safety net for these youths. However, because of the timeline to obtain benefits and language barriers have also created feelings of helplessness (only one participant disagreed that helpless was not the correct term to use). Language barriers can cause an overreliance on advocates who are already exhausted. Given this, the participants did add that giving a false sense of validation through the difficulty/inability to obtain the benefits of the letter can be very detrimental for these youths who have already experienced so many barriers and trauma.
Additionally, as it relates to empowerment, none of the participants mentioned how OTIP recipients are given the choice to collaborate in the program as a whole. The limitations of the study could also contribute to this outcome. The participants did mention that trauma-informed services include presenting the adolescent with a choice on the services they are receiving – this also should consist of a choice in how their services are being provided and the choice to provide feedback. Having choice leads to empowerment and helps positively alter perceptions of self.

As it relates to intersectionality, the participants did mention that many agencies that provide services to UC/OTIP recipients are not culturally or linguistically competent. The participants did not mention the role that race and gender have, which could be a result of the study's limitations. More research needs to be done to uncover elements of intersectionality within the OTIP Eligibility Letter program. Given this, while there are elements of trauma-informed care in the program, they are not being executed successfully.

Before conducting this research, I was very fixed on including legal protections within the existing structure program. I intended to accomplish this based on two elements, the first being domestic and international frameworks designed and implemented to protect survivors and prevent re-trafficking. The second was based on the harm these youths would face if forced to return to their home country and the best environment to promote healing, as identified by the participants. The participants discussed the harm that could await these youths if forced to return, as determined in Chapter 4. I want to highlight what one participant emphasized as it relates to healing, “I don't know to what extent they really heal in this country” (Itzel, Personal Interview, February 2024). Another participant mentioned that many of these youths are in “survival mode” and because of this, it can be hard to even think about healing and what that means/ looks like for each youth (Elise, Personal Interview, February 2024). Another participant mentioned that to begin healing,
these youths need to feel that they belong, are secure in their relationships and overall environment, and live in a stable climate (Aurora, Personal Interview, December 2023). Before each interview ended, I asked each participant if there was anything else they wanted to contribute to the study. Again, I want to highlight what one participant said, “I don't think that any government-funded agency has been successful and really capturing the support that a young person who had been trafficked needs… it just doesn't seem like it's rooted in holistic support. I just find a lot of failures, as we know, in these agencies (Itzel, Personal Interview, February 2024).” All participants overwhelmingly mentioned that they hope this study can contribute to creating a better, more straightforward process for accessing benefits.

While including legal protections is still an important issue surrounding the OTIP Eligibility Letter, I could not ignore the overarching matter: the program has not successfully fulfilled what is promised: affording public benefits and awareness. Participants affirmed this, and my experience as an advocate who has provided social and legal services to this community is expanded on in Chapter 5. Leaving the program as is would be a disservice to these youths; it would further inflict harm through the potential of re-trafficking, feelings of isolation, unworthiness, and deepening mistrust towards institutions and advocates. The benefits granted by the OTIP Eligibility letter have the potential to help these adolescents leave “survival mode” and provide stability in the form of mental and medical safety, physical safety, and economic stability/safety, along with the choice/ opportunity to explore a potential future here in the United States through access to educational and job support. Based on this, I chose instead to create program recommendations using the six elements of trauma-informed care to address the issues raised based on the findings. The domestic and international legal frameworks identified in Chapter 2, TVPA of 2000, the Palermo Protocol, and the Convention on the Rights of a Child still apply to the shift
in program recommendations. Chapters 2 and 5 delve into each framework's specific sections and articles that apply to this issue.

The first program recommendation, as discussed in Chapter 5, is designed to improve access to public benefits. This should be accomplished by creating a uniform, standard procedure to obtain public benefits. The education of SSA offices and benefit issuing agencies about the OTIP program/eligibility letter and collaboration with all stakeholders are the first steps towards ensuring that the elements of trauma-informed care are being executed. Creating a uniform and simplified process would help advocates with limited capacity based on the demands for free legal/social service programs. Still, it also incorporates a trauma-informed element: choice in how these obtain services, which can lead to empowerment. Incorporating this first recommendation could address feelings of mistrust that UC/OTIP recipients have towards their advocates and the program itself.

The second recommendation is designed to increase transparency and collaboration. This recommendation intersects with the first recommendation. However, this recommendation centers on the accountability of all stakeholders through cooperation among each other and allows OTIP recipients the choice to contribute to the services they are receiving.

Finally, the third recommendation is designed to increase awareness and enhance education about the OTIP program for all agencies, systems, and institutions that UCs interact with throughout the third stage of migration, post-transit (integration stage). This recommendation is designed to foster partnerships and collaborations between OTIP and other organizations working with trafficking survivors and UCs to maximize resources. USCRI and OTIP must utilize multiple avenues to circulate information about the program and collaborate with community-based organizations and advocacy groups.
This research was conducted to investigate the elements of trauma-informed care present within the OTIP Eligibility Letter program and provide a program recommendation to include legal protections as a benefit of obtaining this letter. Instead, with the help of my participants and my own experience, I uncovered precedent issues with the OTIP Eligibility Letter Program. At this moment, this letter serves as a label that identifies these recipients as just victims of trafficking. This letter can serve as a tool that can aid these adolescents in short-term stabilization and long-term self-sufficiency, which can create a potential space for healing. The OTIP Eligibility Letter program is one that I believe in, and I hope that this research was able to raise awareness, educate, and amplify accountability to not continue harming these adolescents.
References


Hing, Chacón & Johnson, Immigration Law and Social Justice (2021), 2d Edition


National Human Trafficking Hotline, Office on Trafficking in Persons Child Protection Specialists, & Trafficking Victim Assistance Program. (n.d.). *Use your letter to apply for benefits and services.*


President Biden, Secretary of State, & Ambassador-At-Large. (2023). *Trafficking in Persons report.*


https://www.wrapsnet.org/rp-agency-contacts/


USCRI. (n.d.). *Benefits Application guidance*. 


USCIS. (n.d.). *Characteristics of T Nonimmigrant Status (T Visa) applicants*.

