



HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN DELHI: A 2026 RESEARCH OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Human trafficking remains a grave socio-legal issue in India's capital, Delhi, involving exploitation of women, children, and vulnerable populations through forced labour, sexual exploitation, and interstate trafficking networks. This research examines recent data trends, systemic challenges, policing and judicial responses, victim profiles, and policy implications in the context of Delhi in 2026.

KEYWORDS: *Human Trafficking; Missing Persons; Child Trafficking; Women Exploitation; Interstate Trafficking Networks; Forced Labour; Sexual Exploitation; Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTU); Delhi Police; Delhi High Court; National Human Rights Commission; Criminal Justice System; Victim Rehabilitation; Urban Vulnerability; Organized Crime; Delhi 2026.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking is defined under Indian law as the recruitment, movement, harbouring or receipt of persons by deception or force for exploitation. Delhi, as a major urban centre, acts both as a destination and transit hub for trafficked individuals from other states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and West Bengal.

2. STATISTICAL LANDSCAPE AND TRENDS

2.1 Missing Persons and Trafficking Concern

In early 2026, Delhi recorded alarmingly high missing-persons figures: 807 individuals were reported missing between January 1–15, 2026, with women and minors comprising a significant share over 500 women and girls. This surge has raised concerns about possible links to trafficking and exploitation.

Long-term data from the ZIPNET portal indicates that from 2015 to 2025, 5,559 children were reported missing, with hundreds still untraced. Over this period, 6,759 minors were rescued in documented trafficking cases and 2,407 formal human trafficking cases were registered in Delhi alone.

2.2 Rescue and Enforcement Efforts

In 2023, Delhi Police reported a 22 % increase in rescued trafficking victims, with 839 individuals saved compared to the previous year.

Various police operations have dismantled trafficking rings, including busts of sex trafficking networks and the rescue of dozens of trafficked women and minors.

2.3 Historical NCRB Data

Historical data reveals that Delhi has previously recorded high human trafficking cases, with notable increases (e.g., 73.5 % jump in certain periods), highlighting a long-standing problem that predates 2026.

3. NATURE AND MODUS OPERANDI

Traffickers typically exploit socioeconomic vulnerabilities poverty, lack of education, migration aspirations, and weak family support to lure victims with promises of jobs, schooling, or better lives.

Delhi's major railway stations and outer districts have been cited as entry points where victims especially children are procured and transported either for forced labour, sexual exploitation, or bonded servitude.

Trafficking rings often operate trans-regionally, bringing individuals from poorer or rural states into the capital, complicating identification and rescue efforts

4. VULNERABLE GROUPS

4.1 Women and Children

Women and children remain disproportionately affected. In the first 15 days of 2026, nearly two thirds of missing persons were women and girls, highlighting gendered vulnerability to trafficking, abduction, or exploitation.

Children trafficked into Delhi are often forced into labour or coerced into prostitution under threat or coercion.

4.2 Inter-State Trafficking Networks

Evidence shows children trafficked from neighbouring states such as Jharkhand were brought into the Delhi-NCR region for illegal labour and exploitation.

5. INSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL RESPONSE

5.1 Law Enforcement

Delhi Police maintains specialized units such as the Anti Human Trafficking Unit (AHTU), which uses forensic analysis and investigative tools to trace and recover missing individuals linked to trafficking.

5.2 Judiciary

The Delhi High Court has taken a stringent stance against trafficking, denying anticipatory bail in child trafficking cases to prevent misuse and ensure deeper investigation.

5.3 Human Rights Oversight

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has taken suo motu cognizance of missing person's cases in 2026, urging detailed reports on systemic gaps that may facilitate trafficking.

6. CHALLENGES AND GAPS

6.1 Data and Definitions

A fundamental challenge lies in differentiating between missing persons, kidnappings, and trafficking cases, especially when disappearance does not immediately imply exploitation yet unresolved cases often signal trafficking risk.

6.2 Prosecution and Conviction Rates

Studies show low prosecution and conviction rates for trafficking offences nationally, with many cases abandoned or offenders acquitted due to evidentiary challenges.

6.3 Socio-economic Vulnerability

Poverty, unemployment, and lack of awareness deepen risk, pushing families and individuals toward traffickers' deceptive promises.

7. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen prevention and response, the following are critical:

- **Improved Data Integration:** Unified databases linking missing persons with trafficking registers to detect patterns early.
- **Victim Support Services:** Secure rehabilitation and social reintegration for rescued victims.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Targeted education on trafficking dangers and reporting mechanisms.
- **Judicial Reform:** Faster case processing and witness protection to improve conviction rates.

8. CONCLUSION

Human trafficking in Delhi in 2026 represents a complex interplay of socioeconomic vulnerability, criminal networks, and institutional challenges. While policing improvements and judicial assertiveness show promise, persistent high numbers of missing persons and trafficking incidents signal that intensified, multi-sector action remains essential to safeguard Delhi's most vulnerable populations.

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