

Child Sex Trafficking in America: A Guide for Child Welfare

What is Child Sex Trafficking?

Child sex trafficking is one of the most common types of **commercial sexual exploitation**. Child sex trafficking is a high priority at the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) because these children are often currently missing and actively being exploited. Child sex trafficking victims include girls, boys, and LGBTQ youth.

According to the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act **sex trafficking** is defined as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purposes of a commercial sex act.”¹ Children who are exploited through commercial sex are viewed as victims of **severe forms of trafficking in persons**, which is sex trafficking “in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, **or** in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age.”² A **commercial sex act** is “any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person.”³ Therefore, any youth who is under 18 and exploited through commercial sex where something of value – such as money, drugs or a place to stay – is traded for sexual activity, is a victim of sex trafficking, even if no third party trafficker is involved.

How does a child become a victim?

Traffickers target vulnerable youth and lure them into sex trafficking using physical and psychological manipulation, and sometimes they may resort to violence. Children within the care of child welfare are particularly vulnerable to traffickers who target and take advantage of the emotional and physical needs of these youth. Often traffickers/pimps will create a seemingly loving or caring relationship with their victim in order to establish trust and allegiance. This manipulative relationship ensures the youth will remain loyal to the exploiter even in the face of severe victimization. These relationships may begin online before progressing to a real-life encounter.

Who are the traffickers?

Traffickers, also known as pimps, can be anyone, including family members, foster parents, gangs, trusted adults, or “boyfriends,” who profits from the selling of a minor to a buyer.

Victims are

Targeted – Traffickers are predators who seek out vulnerable victims. While any youth can be targeted by a trafficker, runaways, children in state care or children experiencing trouble at home are especially vulnerable. Traffickers know these children have emotional and physical needs that are not often being met and use this to their advantage. They target victims at a variety of venues that provide access to youth such as social networking websites, shopping malls, schools, and at bus stations.

Tricked – Traffickers are willing to invest a great deal of time and effort in their potential victim to break down their natural resistance and suspicion – buying them gifts, providing a place to stay, promising a loving relationship – before revealing their true intent. Frequently victims do not realize the deceptive nature of their trafficker’s interest in them, until it is too late.

Traumatized – A pimp’s use of psychological manipulation causes the youth to truly believe the pimp cares for his or her well-being. Coupled with physical control this can make a victim feel trapped and powerless to leave. This “trauma bond” is difficult to break and specialized intervention and services are often necessary.

Statistics

- In 2014, 1 in every 6 endangered runaways reported to NCMEC was likely a victim of child sex trafficking.
- Of the missing children reported to NCMEC who are also likely child sex trafficking victims, 68% were in the care of child welfare when they went missing.



¹Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 [United States of America]. Public Law 106-386 [H.R. 3244]. 28 October 2000. Section 103(9).

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

Is a child on your caseload a **victim**?

Youth being exploited frequently do not disclose their victimization. If something does not seem right, ask questions! Establishing a non-judgmental dialogue with youth is important to building trust that can create space for prevention and intervention. Each time a youth runs away his or her connection to safer individuals decreases and many youth report trading sexual activity to meet a basic need. Often times this is referred to as “survival sex” and if the youth is under 18 years old, it is considered child sex trafficking. These youth are at an increased risk of being targeted by a trafficker.

Some signs and **vulnerabilities** to look for

- History of sexual abuse;
- History of running away or current status as a runaway;
- Signs of current physical abuse and/or multiple sexually transmitted diseases;
- Unstable home life such as a youth who is living with an unstably housed family member or family member with a significant substance abuse issue;
- Youth with involvement with the child welfare or foster care system;
- Inexplicable appearance of gifts, getting hair/nails done, clothing, or electronics such as cell phones that do not fit the youth’s situation;
- Presence of or communication with an older boy- or girlfriend;
- Youth with significant substance abuse. Traffickers may target youth with drug addictions as well as use drugs to lure and control their victims;
- Withdrawal or lack of interest in previous activities. Due to depression or being forced to spend time with their pimp, victims lose control of their personal lives;
- Gang involvement, especially among girls;
- Travel to other states or staying at hotels during a run incident.

“With the young girls, you promise them heaven, they’ll follow you to hell,” a pimp convicted of child sex trafficking.

I. Urbina. “For Runaways, Sex Buys Survival.” *The New York Times*. October 26, 2009, page 3.

How to keep children **safer**

Workers within child welfare can play several very important roles in addressing child sex trafficking:

Prevention

One of the most important things you can do to protect youth is to make them aware. Share the dangers of sex trafficking with youth and challenge myths and misconceptions that glamorize commercial sex. Talk with youth about online safety and how traffickers/pimps are using internet apps and social networking sites to start a conversation, identify needs/vulnerabilities, make false promises and begin the recruitment process. These sites are used by traffickers to mask their appearance and true intentions during recruitment.

Intervention & Access to Services

When a youth is recovered or returns from a run incident it is important that the legal guardian express relief that the child has been found and concern for the child’s well-being while they were missing. Asking non-judgmental questions about how the child took care of themselves while they were missing while noting red flags or changes in behavior can help reveal potential victimization. Recognizing that youth are rarely able to see signs of grooming and are even less likely to disclose victimization once it has begun makes it imperative that professionals open the door for these concerns and conversations. Also, once these concerns have been recognized engaging specialized services can assist with further assessment and support.

When a child goes missing, the legal guardian must **immediately** call law enforcement and make a report. Next, call the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678). Taking the extra step to report missing children to NCMEC ensures that all available resources are being employed to assist in the identification and recovery of that child.