

# Child Sex Trafficking: A Fact Sheet for Juvenile Justice Professionals



Child sex trafficking (CST) is a severe form of child abuse and trauma that affects youth in many critically important ways. Youth who are being trafficked or are at risk of being trafficked may seek help from Juvenile Justice (JJ) professionals. Judicial officers, prosecutors, defense attorneys, probation officers, and others in the juvenile justice professions play a central role in identifying vulnerable youth and responding effectively to ensure their well-being.

## 1

### What is Child Sex Trafficking?

Child sex trafficking is defined as the giving or receiving of anything of value (money, shelter, food, clothing, drugs, etc.) to any person in exchange for sex with someone under age 18. Force, fraud, or coercion are not required under federal law, nor is it required that a third party facilitates or benefits from the exchange, although these elements are often present. The following are examples of youth who experienced sex trafficking and are involved in the justice system:

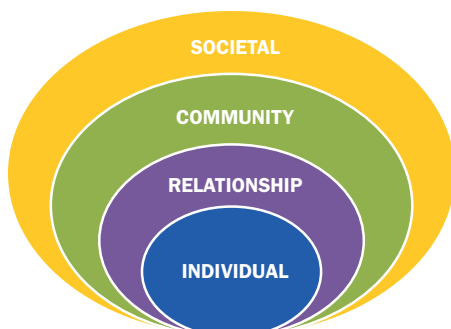
Commonly used related terms include: domestic child sex trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation and domestic minor sex trafficking.

- A 14-year-old girl is arrested and prosecuted for driving a stolen vehicle. Investigators discover that a car dealer allows her to “borrow” vehicles from time to time in return for sexual acts and nude photographs. When she refused to meet him, he reported the car stolen.
- A 16-year-old transgender youth is arrested for property destruction after a fight with their mother, who does not accept their gender identity. The youth acknowledged their sexual exploitation by older males to secure shelter, food, and other basic needs since their mother kicked them out of the home.
- A 15-year-old high school athlete who has been living with his coach's family is arrested for assaulting the coach. Upon his arrest, the youth reports he was tired of his coach, who has been taking him after practices to have sex with other men for money.

## 2

### Who is at Risk of Child Sex Trafficking?

Sex trafficking occurs among youth from all socioeconomic classes, races, ethnicities, and gender identities, in urban, suburban, and rural communities, across the U.S. However, some youth may be at heightened risk due to a complex interplay of individual, relationship, community, and societal factors.



**Societal:** Sexualization of children, gender-based violence, strict gender roles, homophobia and transphobia, tolerance of the marginalization of others, lack of awareness of child trafficking, lack of resources for youth who have been exploited, social injustice, structural racism, and tolerance of community and relationship violence.

**Community:** Under-resourced schools and neighborhoods, community violence, community social norms, gang presence, commercial sex in the area, transient male populations in the area, poverty, and lack of employment opportunities.

**Relationship:** Friends/family involved in commercial sex, family dysfunction, intimate partner violence, caregiver loss or separation, poverty, and unemployment.

**Individual:** Abuse/neglect, systems involvement (child protection, juvenile justice), experiencing homelessness/having run away, LGBTQ+ identity, intellectual and/or developmental disability, truancy, unmonitored/risky internet and social media use, behavioral or mental health concerns, substance use, unaccompanied migration.

# 3

## Trauma and Child Sex Trafficking

Many children who have experienced sex trafficking have also experienced multiple traumas. This includes early traumatic events that may have contributed to trafficking vulnerability (e.g., child sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect, traumatic loss and separation, exposure to family and community violence), as well as traumatic events while being trafficked (e.g., sexual violence, physical assault, witnessing violence against others). As a result of these experiences, youth who have experienced sex trafficking often have significant trauma-related symptoms, including difficulties:

- Regulating emotions and behaviors (e.g., A police officer grabs a youth's arm to get her attention and she explodes in anger).
- Establishing healthy relationships including recognizing safe and unsafe people (e.g., A youth readily responds to overtures of friendship from a peer in detention, who manipulates her into dangerous and exploitative situations).
- Maintaining focus, attention, or concentration on tasks (e.g., A youth is reminded of a past trauma when the courtroom is quiet; he creates a disruption to distract from his thoughts).
- Developing positive self-concept and self-esteem (e.g., A youth exerts little effort in school because her first sexual abuser and current exploiter told her she's "stupid and only good for sex.").

*"I feel looked down upon and demeaned for things I didn't even choose. [People ask] 'Why didn't you run away from that guy if he was so bad?' They can't see that I'm attached, and I love him no matter what, and I don't even know why."*

– a CST survivor, on not asking for help

*"Survival instinct drives us to appear to be resilient. 'If I look weak, then I am weak.'"*

– a CST survivor, on not asking for help

# 4

## What Juvenile Justice Professionals Need to Know

JJ professionals play a critical role in identifying vulnerable youth, as well as ensuring effective support of survivors in the JJ system. These professionals should be aware:

- Youth who have been trafficked have high rates of entry into, and even criminalization by, the justice system.
- While some detention centers may conduct screening, youth are rarely asked by lawyers, judges, and legal service providers about their trafficking experiences and rarely spontaneously disclose about having been trafficked.
- Youth who have experienced trafficking often experience adverse cumulative legal consequences. These may include:
  - punishment for behaviors that are trauma related.
  - secure confinement in detention centers (under the belief that the youth will be "safer.")
  - unsuccessful completion of probationary terms due to lack of appropriate resources and/or insufficient program services.
- Juvenile Justice settings (e.g., court rooms, detention centers) can be intimidating spaces. Trauma-informed JJ environments, where all professionals understand CST, use appropriate language when speaking with and to youth who have experienced trafficking, and prioritize physical and psychological safety, will aid in tailoring services, and supports for youth.
- Youth's negative experiences in the JJ system may adversely impact their willingness to participate in law enforcement's efforts to investigate their victimization experiences, as well as their engagement in other support services.

**Youth who have experienced CST may be affected in multiple areas of functioning, including:**

**MENTAL HEALTH:** post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and self-injury, substance use problems, dissociation.

**PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL HEALTH:** pregnancy (wanted or unwanted), sexually transmitted infections (STIs), physical injuries, poor dental health, chronic physical ailments, other health conditions arising from chronic trauma.

**EDUCATION:** problems with attention, concentration, and learning; frequent absences, behind grade level, and low literacy; unidentified learning disabilities, disconnection from school system

**ECONOMIC:** limited vocational skills, unemployment, criminal record, limited life skills

**LEGAL:** arrest, detention, criminal record

**SPIRITUAL AND COMMUNITY LIFE:** disconnection from and/or rejection by others, isolation from peer group, alienation from mainstream society, lack of belief in humanity; crisis of faith

## What Juvenile Justice Professionals Can Do

Juvenile justice professionals are essential to a collaborative, trauma-informed, multidisciplinary response to youth who have experienced CST. They play a vital role in protecting the rights and liberties of this vulnerable population within the judicial and service continuum.

These professionals can:

- Develop an awareness of trauma and its impact on youth who have been trafficked and their families.
- Become thoroughly knowledgeable about sex trafficking-related state and local laws governing each jurisdiction.
- Create a trauma-responsive, culturally sensitive environment in all JJ settings.
  - Create safety for the youth, both physical and psychological.
  - Focus on establishing rapport and connection with each youth and implementing services that are tailored to their individual needs.
  - Shift perspective from “What is wrong with you?” to “What has happened to you?”
  - Recognize the harmful impact of racism and racial disproportionality, intersectionality of gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, and homophobia/transphobia.
  - Create a collaborative community of public defenders, pro bono attorneys, child welfare professionals, law enforcement, education professionals, therapists, and survivor mentors who can help meet the needs of youth and families impacted by CST.
  - Attend to youth’s developmental level and chronological age when identifying and providing services.
  - Tailor educational services to youth’s individualized needs (i.e., if the youth has been out of school for a period of time, consider alternative schooling).
- Be aware of other resources, partnerships, and services in your community in order to:
  - Connect youth and families with therapists who specialize in providing trauma-informed, evidence-based mental health treatments.
  - Ensure appropriate and timely, trauma- and CST-informed medical care and sexual health services.

*“I already experienced a lot of abuse and trauma. It seems ‘normal’ to be asked to do these things in this way. It doesn’t bother me.”*

– a CST survivor



## Resources

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- NCTSN BENCH CARD for the Trauma-Informed Judge  
[https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//nctsn\\_bench\\_cards\\_for\\_the\\_trauma\\_informed\\_judge.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//nctsn_bench_cards_for_the_trauma_informed_judge.pdf)
- Essential Elements of a Trauma-Informed JJ System  
[https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//essential\\_elements\\_trauma\\_informed\\_juvenile\\_justice\\_system.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//essential_elements_trauma_informed_juvenile_justice_system.pdf)
- Think Trauma: A Training for Working with Justice-Involved Youth  
<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/think-trauma-training-working-justice-involved-youth-2nd-edition>
- Trauma-Informed Resource for Prosecution Involving Juveniles  
<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/trauma-informed-resource-for-prosecution-involving-juveniles>
- Complex Trauma: In Juvenile Justice-System Involved Youth  
<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/complex-trauma-juvenile-justice-system-involved-youth>
- Trauma and the Environment of Care in Juvenile Institutions  
[https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//trauma\\_and\\_environment\\_of\\_care\\_in\\_juvenile\\_institutions.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//trauma_and_environment_of_care_in_juvenile_institutions.pdf)

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The Child Trafficking Collaborative Group would like to extend a special thanks to the survivor advocates who helped develop this fact sheet. Your contributions are greatly appreciated and instrumental in educating others about the experiences and needs of youth who have been trafficked.

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According to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), child sex trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or solicitation of a person under the age of 18 for the purpose of a commercial sex act (22 U.S.C. §7102 (9)(a) (4) (10) (2013). Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a commonly used related term.