



## Child Sex Trafficking: What You Might Not Know

**Children of all genders are exploited through child sex trafficking, not just girls.**

- While most identified victims of child sex trafficking are girls; boys, gender expansive, gender fluid, non-binary, and transgender youth are also trafficked.

**Trafficking is not the same as smuggling.**

- Human smuggling involves illegally moving someone across a national border; it represents a crime against a country. The person being smuggled generally enters into the agreement with a smuggler voluntarily and the business transaction ends when the new country is reached. Human trafficking, on the other hand, does not require any movement at all.
- It is sometimes true, however, that smugglers take advantage of the vulnerability of individuals they are smuggling to coerce or force engagement in commercial sex or labor as a condition of passage or entry.

**Trafficking happens in the United States.**

- Sex trafficking has long been misunderstood as a crime that only happens in “other countries” and/or to people from other countries. While it does happen internationally, sex trafficking occurs among all socioeconomic classes, races, ethnicities, and genders and in urban, suburban, land based nations and other tribal communities, and rural communities across the U.S. and includes both foreign nationals and domestic citizens.

**There does not have to be a trafficker facilitating or benefitting from the sex act.**

- Put simply, if a buyer exchanges, or promises to exchange, something of value (e.g., money, drugs, etc.) with a youth under 18 for a sex act, it is child sex trafficking. The commercial exchange can occur between just the two individuals.
- If there is a third-party (e.g., trafficker) who receives the benefit, both the purchaser and the facilitator are committing a child sex trafficking offense and the child is a victim of that crime.

**In addition to money, sex with a child can be exchanged for other things of value.**

- Child sex trafficking takes place when “something of value” is exchanged (or promised) for a sex act. While the exchange of money is frequently involved, non-monetary items (e.g., food, housing, drugs, etc.) are often promised and/or given to a youth or someone else.

**Youth can be commercially sexually exploited in many different ways, not just through penetrative intercourse.**

- While it is true that sexual intercourse and other types of physical sexual contact may be commercial sexual exploitation, other forms of exploitation may include engaging a youth in sexually explicit performances (e.g., stripping and sexual dancing) in exchange for something of value and trading sexually explicit photos and videos of youth. It may also occur online, such as in paid live-stream sex acts.

**Many youth in trafficking situations are first recruited or introduced by a peer, who may also be a victim.**

- Traffickers may force youth to recruit and train other youth by using threats of harm and/or reducing daily quotas of buyers. The peer recruiter who may be of any gender, may use means similar to that of a trafficker (e.g., inviting to parties, giving them gifts, etc.).
- Other youth, especially among the runaway/youth experiencing homelessness population, may introduce a vulnerable peer to commercial sex simply to share a strategy for meeting basic needs.

**Women can be sex traffickers and buyers of child sex.**

- The sex trafficking industry, both selling and purchasing, is not exclusively male. Women also traffic and purchase sex with children.

**Parents, caregivers, and relatives sometimes traffic their children.**

- The reasons family members sell their children for sex are varied. Some may be acting with intent to exploit their children for money. Others may themselves have vulnerabilities (e.g., homelessness, poverty) that prompt them to traffic their children to meet their family's basic needs. Parents and caregivers who are addicted to substances may receive illicit drugs in exchange for sex acts with their child. Exploitation may be intergenerational.

**LGBTQ+ youth are especially vulnerable to being trafficked.**

- An individual's gender identity and sexual orientation alone do not cause them to be trafficked. LGBTQ+ youth are vulnerable to being trafficked due to rejection by family, caregivers, and friends, and discrimination in education and employment that limits safe alternatives for meeting basic needs.
- LGBTQ+ youth are at disproportionate risk for sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. In a nationwide survey of over 600 homeless youth aged 17-25, 24% of LGBTQ youth had engaged in some form of commercial sex (for example sex in exchange for shelter, food, money or something of value, or being sexually exploited by a third party), compared to 12% of non-LGBTQ youth.<sup>1</sup>
- Transgender youth are at more risk due to even greater experiences of rejection, marginalization, and employment discrimination, as well as specific associated medical needs, including hormone treatment or surgery.

**Historical and cultural terms, such as “pimp,” “madam,” and “john,” and pop-culture representations and imagery of commercial sex minimize and misrepresent harm.**

- Popular culture has given slang names to individuals who exploit and sell other humans for profit. Over time, these terms have made their way into common language and, unfortunately, cast tacit approval for their behavior. The selling of a child for sex is a crime.

**Child sex trafficking may appear “consensual” or to be a “choice” especially when there isn't a third-party trafficker.**

- Overt force and/or coercion by the trafficker is often not apparent to others. In fact, youth may not perceive they are being exploited. Some youth who are trafficked perceive themselves to be in a romantic or caretaking relationship with their trafficker, while others may view their trafficker as a valued friend or an “equal business partner.”
- Traffickers may meet youth's emotional, psychological, and physical needs that have not received from others. What looks like a willful solicited act may actually be the outcome of the youth having few or no other options for having their needs met.

**“Age of consent” laws do not apply to engagement in commercial sex acts.**

- While states may have laws about age of consent for sex acts, per federal law, youth under the age of 18 cannot legally consent to commercial sex acts.

**Youth who have been trafficked are not “bad” kids and are not to blame for their exploitation.**

- Youth who engage in risky and/or antisocial behaviors such as substance use, truancy, and aggression may become labeled as “troubled” or “bad.” However, these behaviors are often related to prior childhood adversity and trauma, and represent efforts to adapt to dangerous situations; they do not reflect an inherently flawed character. High-risk behavior may put children at risk for exploitation, but does not cause the trafficking or justify exploitation by others.

**Youth who have been trafficked in the past are at high risk of experiencing trafficking again.**

- There are many reasons why youth may be vulnerable to revictimization. Many conditions that contributed to their initial exploitation persist despite intervention and social supports. Stigmatization and feelings of shame and isolation, in particular, may increase their vulnerability.
- Similar to victims of intimate partner violence, some youth may have strong, yet unhealthy, attachment to their trafficker, while others are compelled to return to exploitation (with or without a trafficker) out of other unmet needs. Regardless of the reason, those who experience exploitative conditions are often doing so with few or no other options.

**Enjoying sex does not cause or justify sexual exploitation.**

- Sexually active youth are sometimes perceived as having caused their own victimization. Engaging in and enjoying sexual activity does not in any way cause youth to go out seeking to be sexually exploited or deserve to be exploited. Stereotypes of youth being trafficked include being “fast,” “easy,” or hypersexual are extremely harmful. Discussing principles of healthy sexuality and the promotion of sexual health conversations are especially important to address these misperceptions.

**Traffickers use a wide range of techniques to recruit and control their victims. Kidnapping for the purposes of trafficking is not as common as it is portrayed in the media.**

- These stereotypes may in fact interfere with child serving professionals identifying child sex trafficking and intervening appropriately.

**Although youth may be detained to keep them safe from revictimization, there is no research showing that detention reduces their long-term risk. Furthermore, incarceration may cause additional harm.**

- For many youth, being detained by law enforcement continues the experience of limited basic freedoms and control that characterizes exploitation.
- Although detainment can separate a youth from their trafficker, there is significant concern that immediate and long term physical and emotional safety are compromised.
- Detaining youth can sometimes increase their risk of physical, sexual, or emotional harm. Examples of harm include physical violence, exposure to negative peer behaviors and continued exploitation through peer recruitment, restraining, isolation, and punitive practices that are not trauma-informed.
- These experiences contribute to youths’ lack of faith in child serving systems, leaving them vulnerable to further exploitation.

**Resources**

- **Sexual Health and Trauma**  
<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/sexual-health-and-trauma>
- **Why Youth Return to Trafficking**  
In Development
- **NCTSN Trafficking Webpages**  
[www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/trafficking](http://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/trafficking)
- **Human Trafficking Rumors**  
<https://polarisproject.org/human-trafficking-rumors>



**Suggested Citation**

Garrett, R., Kinnish, K., Blacker, D., Greenbaum, V.J., Wozniak, J., and Grady, J.B. and Child Sex Trafficking Collaborative Group. (2021). Child sex trafficking: What you might not know. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.