

The Prostitution of Children in America: A Guide for Parents and Guardians

What is **Child Sex Trafficking**?

Sex trafficking is one of the most common types of **commercial sexual exploitation**, a global problem that could be happening right in your neighborhood. The commercial sex industry victimizes girls, boys, and transgendered youth. Victims could be anyone – your sister, neighbor, or nephew. Knowledge and awareness are key in keeping your loved ones safe.

According to federal law sex trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act.¹ A person induced to perform such an act who is younger than 18 is a victim of child sex trafficking.

How does a **child** become a **victim**?

Pimps and traffickers target vulnerable children and lure them into prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation using psychological manipulation, drugs, and/or violence. Any child may be vulnerable to such a person who promises to meet his or her emotional and physical needs. Often traffickers/pimps will create a seemingly loving and caring relationship with their victim in order to establish trust and allegiance. This manipulative relationship tries to ensure 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 **pimps**?

Pimps, also known as traffickers, can be anyone, including family members, friends, trusted adults, or “boyfriends,” who profits from the exchange of the sexual use of a minor by another.

Victims are

Targeted – Pimps are predators who seek out vulnerable victims, particularly runaways or children experiencing trouble at home. They know these children have emotional and physical needs they perceive are not being met and use this to their advantage. Pimps find victims at a variety of venues such as in social-networking websites, shopping malls, and schools; on local streets; or at bus stations. While pimps often target children outside of their family, a family member may also prostitute a child.

Tricked – Pimps are willing to invest a great deal of time and effort in their victim to break down a victim’s 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, viewing their pimp as a caretaker and/or boyfriend.

Traumatized – A pimp’s use of psychological manipulation (causing the child to truly believe the pimp loves and cares for his or her well-being) coupled with physical control (threats, violence, or drug addiction) can make a victim feel trapped and powerless to leave. This “trauma bond” is difficult to break and long-term treatment and counseling for victims is required.

Despite the seriousness of the problem, the incidence of commercial child sexual exploitation is difficult to measure. Empirical research has not conclusively defined the scope of the problem today. Below, however, are some significant findings from past studies.

Statistics

- Pimps prey on victims as young as 12 to 14 years old.²
- One study estimates as many as 325,000 children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico are at risk each year for becoming victims of sexual exploitation.³
- A history of physical and sexual abuse is often common among victims.⁴
- One study estimates 30% of shelter youth and 70% of street youth are victims of commercial sexual exploitation. They may engage or be coerced into prostitution for “survival sex” to meet daily needs for food, shelter, or drugs.⁵

¹*Victims 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).

²*National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: America’s Prostituted Children*. Washington, D.C.: Shared Hope International, 2009, page 30.

³R. Estes and N. Weiner. *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico*. University of Pennsylvania, 2001, page 144.

⁴*National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking*, op. cit., n 2., page 31.

⁵*Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico*, op. cit., n. 3, page 131. J. Greene, S. Ennett, and C. Ringwalt. (1999) “Prevalence and correlates of survival sex among runaway and homeless youth.” *American Journal of Public Health*. 89(9) page 1406.

Is someone you know a **victim**?

Each time a child runs away his or her chance of being targeted increases. Also youth being controlled by a trafficker or pimp frequently do not reveal their victimization because of the severe control their trafficker has over them, both physically and psychologically. If something does not seem right, ask questions! Establishing an ongoing dialogue with children is critical to protecting them.

Some signs and **vulnerabilities** to look for

- History of emotional, sexual, or other physical abuse. Children with such a background could fall prey to this form of victimization again.
- History of running away or current status as a runaway. Traffickers know runaways are in a vulnerable situation and target places such as shelters, malls, or bus stations frequented by such children.
- Signs of current physical abuse and/or sexually transmitted diseases. Such signs are indicators of victimization, potentially sex trafficking.
- Inexplicable appearance of expensive gifts, clothing, or other costly items. Traffickers often buy gifts for their victims as a way to build a relationship and earn trust.
- Presence of an older boy- or girlfriend. While they may seem “cool,” older boyfriends are not always the caring men they appear to be.
- Drug addiction. Pimps frequently 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. Girls who are involved in gang activity can be forced into prostitution.

“With the young girls, you promise them heaven, they’ll follow you to hell,”... a pimp convicted of child sex trafficking.⁶

⁶I. Urbina. “For Runaways, Sex Buys Survival.” *The New York Times*. October 26, 2009, page 3.

How to keep your child **safer**

One of the most important things you can do to protect your child is to create an environment in which he or she feels comfortable talking with you. Open **communication** is key. Share the dangers of sex trafficking with your children and encourage them to alert you when they feel uncomfortable in any situation.

Often trafficking victims have experienced victimization in the past, and many times this has been inflicted by individuals close to the victim. Do you trust the people with whom your child interacts? **Knowing** whom your children are with at all times is crucial to protecting their safety.

When your daughter or son is online, do you know which sites they are visiting and with whom they are communicating? Taking the time to **monitor** what your children do on the Internet is an important step in keeping your child safer.

If something does not seem right, **ask questions!** Establishing an ongoing dialogue with children is critical to protecting them.

If you suspect a case of commercial child sexual exploitation or sex trafficking of children, contact the **National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®** at 1-800-843-5678 or visit www.cybertipline.com

or

the **National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC)** at 1-888-373-7888.

For additional information and resources about Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Human Trafficking, please visit the **Innocence Lost National Initiative** at <http://www.fbi.gov/innolost/innolost.htm>.