



Human Trafficking: Implications for Adolescent Health Outcomes

June 2014

OVERVIEW

Human trafficking includes both forced labor and *commercial sexual exploitation*, also known as *sex trafficking*. The [Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2013](#) defines human trafficking as

- **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 **is under 18 years of age**; or
- the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.

Human trafficking occurs in many forms and locations, both domestically and internationally. This tip sheet focuses on **sex trafficking of minors** in the United States and the implications for adolescent sexual, physical, and mental health outcomes. It also includes multiple resources for providers who work with or on behalf of youth and who need more information about sex trafficking.

Sex acts included in this definition may include prostitution (whether street-based, advertised online, or arranged through escort services or as outcalls) as well as performances in pornographic materials, bars, strip clubs, or parties. A commercial sex act is one in which anything of value is exchanged, including money, drugs, clothing, shelter, or food, regardless of whether the exchange benefits the young person or a third party (Finklea et al. 2011). As suggested by the definition above, any minor engaged in commercial sex is considered to be trafficked regardless of whether the acts are considered forced or voluntary. Thus, youth engaged in “survival sex” (see page 3) are eligible for services intended for victims of trafficking.

It is also important to note that when minors are trafficked for sexual purposes, evidence of force or coercion is not necessary for traffickers to be prosecuted. The [Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2013](#) establishes legal protections for trafficked individuals, as well as guidelines for enhancing state and local efforts to combat trafficking, ensuring interagency coordination, and expanding reporting.

WHO IS AT RISK?

Risk factors for being trafficked for sexual acts include any set of experiences that might lead to greater emotional or physical vulnerability, such as a history of abuse or neglect, dating violence, low self-esteem, homelessness, poverty, foster care placement, and undocumented immigration status. Youth of all sexual orientations and gender identities, from a variety of racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds are at risk for sex trafficking (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2013).

Traffickers prey upon youth who are vulnerable. They may pose as boyfriends who offer a loving, committed relationship. They may offer hope for a better life, including employment in modeling or other career opportunities. Traffickers also use other youth as *recruiters* to lure or help abduct girls into trafficking. They use psychological manipulation, deception, coercion, or force to isolate victims from family and friends; assume control of victims' actions; and *groom* the victim to perform sexual acts with others (Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation [CAASE], n.d.; U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2007; HHS, 2013). Youth may also engage in sex acts as a means of surviving on the street, sometimes with the involvement of someone who arranges transactions, looks out for their safety, and possibly benefits financially (Curtis et al., 2008).

Children as young as 11 years of age have been trafficked in the United States. Females are more frequently identified as trafficked, but males and transgender youth are also vulnerable. Estimates of the numbers of youth involved in trafficking are difficult to generate due to underreporting and the existence of well-organized, underground trafficking networks (U.S. Department of State, 2013). Between 2008 and 2012, the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC), received 5,982 reports of cases involving sex trafficking specifically. This likely represents only a small fraction of the total number of youth trafficked each year. It is important to be aware that youth who are trafficked for general labor purposes also face an increased risk and comorbidity of sex trafficking or sexual exploitation (NHTRC, 2013).

WHAT ARE THE WARNING SIGNS?

One of the challenges in identifying both survivors and traffickers is that the latter often physically and psychologically manipulate and intimidate the former into secrecy. Some persons who are trafficked do not initially realize the extent of the manipulation and may not identify as *victims* (HHS, 2013). Others may protect their traffickers even if they wish to seek help. Although there are no tell-tale signs that a person is being trafficked for sexual purposes, the following may be indications (Polaris Project, 2011; DOE, 2007):

- shows signs of physical, emotional, sexual, or mental abuse, neglect, or malnourishment;
- has a “boyfriend” who is much older;
- has inconsistencies in his/her story, does not know his/her whereabouts or address, or appears confused;
- is accompanied by an older male or female who speaks for them (i.e., does not allow the person to speak for him/herself);
- has tattoos he/she may be hesitant to show or explain, including words that indicate ownership, such as *daddy*, *daddy’s girl/boy*, *padrote*, *production*, the name of the trafficker, or a bar code;
- displays unusual anxiety, fear, or inhibition around law enforcement;
- is resistant to seeking or receiving basic medical services;
- has not received medical care for infection or injuries.
- has recurrent sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or numerous previous pregnancies;
- talks about engaging in developmentally unusual or inappropriate sexual behaviors or practices;

- is frequently absent from school or inconsistently attends activities; and
- resides with a group of youth who are frequently escorted or transported by an unrelated adult.

HOW DOES SEX TRAFFICKING INFLUENCE ADOLESCENT HEALTH OUTCOMES?

Reproductive health risks are especially high for trafficked youth. High numbers of unprotected sexual encounters mean that these youth are unable to prevent STIs or pregnancy, and a lack of access to services prevents them from seeking testing, treatment, or other care related to these outcomes (HHS, 2013). Trafficked youth also face an increased risk of multiple mental and physical health problems that may compound one another, including the following (HHS, 2013):

- unwanted or forced pregnancy;
- forced abortions;
- HIV/STI exposure;
- psychological abuse and trauma;
- physical abuse;
- depression;
- post-traumatic stress reactions;
- rape and sexual assault;
- substance use and abuse;
- malnutrition;
- self-inflicted harm (e.g., cutting);
- suicide; and
- homicide.

A Note about Adolescent Pimping and Survival Sex

One study that examined peer-to-peer pimping documented the phenomenon of high school boys who *groom* and then *turn-out* girls. The boys give the girls affection, commitment, and gifts in exchange for their compliance in performing sexual acts with other boys or men for monetary gain. In this study, some of the girls involved, as well as their peers, did not recognize such relationships as abusive, which prevented them from seeking help. One interesting finding was that some girls perceived transactional sex that was not “pimp-controlled” to be a potentially legitimate source of income for a young woman (Anderson et al., 2014).

For some runaway and homeless youth, transactional sex may be the only perceived tool for survival. It is common for traffickers to approach youth within days of a youth becoming homeless (CAASE, n.d.; HHS, 2013), but homeless youth are also likely to engage with other youth to determine means for survival. In this manner, homeless youth may help each other engage in transactional sex without actually identifying as pimps (Curtis et al., 2008).

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

Those working with or on behalf of youth can provide assistance and support to youth who have been trafficked and to reduce rates of trafficking.

To Help Survivors

One of the most effective ways to help those who have been trafficked is to act as a resource for information and support. Try to observe the following guidelines (American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, 2013; Clawson, Salomon & Goldblatt Grace, 2008; Polaris Project, 2011):

- Apply a trauma-informed approach when working with survivors.

- Seek support from providers trained in working with abused youth.
- Listen and refrain from judging or giving advice.
- Help youth secure safe housing and a way to meet their basic needs (i.e., food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education, job training).
- Respect youth and allow them to tell their story in their own words.
- Understand that it is common for there to be discrepancies in the stories youth tell.
- Understand that it is common for youth to use coping mechanisms such as downplaying the extent of their abuse.
- Avoid pressuring youth to report their trafficker.
- Avoid contacting someone’s family unless given permission.
- Act appropriately according to age of the youth and your own mandated reporter status.
- Develop a referral system to other service providers, such as anti-trafficking organizations, general and reproductive health care, mental health care, and educational and vocational services. Ensure that all youth will receive “youth friendly” service when referred to agencies within your network.

To Prevent Future Trafficking

Educate yourself, youth, and your community about the many forms of violence against women and sexual exploitation, in addition to sex trafficking. The Resources section on the following page provides many useful sources of information, including books, videos, and organizations working to prevent trafficking. Specific actions you can take include the following (CAASE, n.d.; Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2013):

- Incorporate education about the prevention of sex trafficking into existing pregnancy prevention programming. This might include helping young people distinguish between healthy and unhealthy relationships, identify signs and situations that may place them at risk for sexual exploitation, recognize recruitment tactics used by traffickers and pimps, and know how to access resources for support if they are concerned about exploitation in their own or friends’ lives.
- Because the roots of sex trafficking lie in attitudes regarding gender violence in general, educate young men about gender violence, masculinity, and sexual oppression. Raise awareness about the negative impact that all forms of sexual exploitation have on men, women, and transgender people.
- Become educated about trafficking networks and warning signs in your community. Contact the NHTRC if you notice something suspicious.
- Set up a local task force to coordinate efforts between youth advocacy organizations, welfare and mental health services, health care centers, law enforcement, juvenile justice, and schools.
- Build community awareness among businesses targeted and used by traffickers, such as bars, cantinas, taxi drivers, tattoo artists, hotels and massage parlors.
- Organize community awareness events for community members in general.
- Get youth involved in awareness-raising projects and campaigns in your school, organization, or community.



RESOURCES

To report a tip on suspected trafficking activity or seek support for a potential victim:

National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC)

www.traffickingresourcecenter.org

1-888-373-7888

Text INFO or HELP to BeFREE (233733)

Organizations addressing sex trafficking in the United States

Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE): <http://caase.org>

Girls Education and Mentoring Services (GEMS): www.gems-girls.org

Polaris Project: <http://polarisproject.org>

(See Resources page for Tools for Service Providers; Potential Trafficking Indicators; State-by-State Resources)

The SAGE Project: <http://sagesf.org/>

Organizations addressing gender-based violence from a male involvement perspective

CAASE: <http://caase.org/prevention>

Futures Without Violence: <http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/>

Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP): <http://www.jacksonkatz.com/aboutmvp.html>

White Ribbon Organization: <http://www.whiteribbon.ca/front-page/it-starts-with-you/>

More viewing

Very Young Girls (DVD): <http://www.gems-girls.org/gems-shop#very-young-girls-dvd>

Violence Against Women: It's a Men's Issue, Ted Talk by Jackson Katz:

https://www.ted.com/talks/jackson_katz_violence_against_women_it_s_a_men_s_issue

More reading

Confronting Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States (Report):

www.iom.edu/sextraffickingminors

"Corporate Sponsored Pimping Plays Role in U.S. Human Trafficking" (Article):

<http://thegrio.com/2010/01/11/corporate-sponsored-pimping-plays-role-in-us-human-trafficking/>

Girls Like Us by Rachel Lloyd (GEMS) (Book): <http://www.amazon.com/Girls-Like-Us-Fighting-Activist/dp/0061582050>

Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes Resource Guide for Community Organizers and Educators:

http://www.bhurt.com/uploads/Bhurt_BBR_Resource_Guide.pdf

Human Trafficking and the Super Bowl (Brief): <http://www.njhumantrafficking.org/#!super-bowl-2014-fact-sheet/c1unm>

Men Who Buy Sex with Adolescent Girls: A Scientific Research Study: <http://prostitutionresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/The-Schapiro-Group-Georgia-Demand-Study-1.pdf>

Curricular and educational resources

GEMS "CSEC 101" Training: <http://www.gems-girls.org/get-trained/training-curriculum>

CAASE Prevention Curriculum: <http://caase.org/prevention>

CAASE Workshops: <http://g.virbcdn.com/f/files/18/FileItem-270049-WorkshopsForStudents.pdf>

10 Things Men Can Do to Prevent Gender Violence (Jackson Katz): <http://www.jacksonkatz.com/wmcd.html>

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