

Human Trafficking and Children: A Fact Sheet

The human trafficking of children is defined as a crime involving the exploitation of a minor through the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain labor or a sex act. In the United States anyone under the age of 18 years old is considered to be a minor. It is estimated that the human trafficking enterprise is the third most profitable criminal activity in the United States, generating roughly \$32 billion dollars a year.ⁱ This number is problematic because it demonstrates how capitalism plays a role in making people vulnerable to exploitation by encouraging the sale of individuals for profit. Human trafficking is a growing global issue that can be difficult to address because it includes several different forms of abuse and exploitation. Traffickers often employ coercive and deceptive behavior including the use of fear tactics, false promises, and manipulation to lure vulnerable youth and exploit families.ⁱⁱ The lack of resources and economic opportunities available to impoverished groups make individuals from those communities among the most vulnerable to human trafficking. Poverty, racism, and systematic inequities also contribute to the exploitation of children and families. For this reason, it is important that organizations work to promote policies and programs that prevent human trafficking before it occurs using a multi-layered approach to supporting children and families. Programs that promote economic justice for families are necessary in order to address these disparities.

Researchers and other professionals involved in anti-human trafficking believe that the data collected about the number of minors affected by this issue is inaccurate primarily due to underreporting and a lack of information about what constitutes human trafficking. Human trafficking is a multifaceted issue involving the violation of human rights. Due to under-reporting traffickers are often able to exploit children and their families in a vicious cycle of abuse. The scope of the data listed in this fact sheet includes multiple forms of violence committed against children, minors, youth, and/or young people under the age of 18 years. Non-gendered language such as, “they, them, and their” will be used throughout this fact sheet to promote a more inclusive approach except in direct quotations when a specific gender is discussed.

Definition of Human Trafficking

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 defines human trafficking into two components:ⁱⁱⁱ

1. **Labor Trafficking:** 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.
2. **Sex Trafficking:** The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act, in which the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age. In cases of sex trafficking involving individuals under the age of 18, coercion does not need to be present for the act to legally constitute sex trafficking.

How Labor Trafficking Affects Children

- An individual does not need to be moved across borders to be trafficked. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 does not require an individual to be transported from one location to another for a crime to fall within the definition of trafficking. People can literally be trafficked from within their own homes into prostitution or performing forced labor or services.^{iv}
- Since labor trafficking is illegal and enforced as a crime it is difficult to gauge the number of individuals impacted by this type of violence. However, it is estimated that approximately 600,000 to 800,000

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individuals are trafficked annually across international borders worldwide and approximately half of these individuals are younger than age 18.^v

- According to the International Labor Organization, the global number of children involved in child labor is roughly 152 million, accounting for almost one in ten children worldwide.^{vi}
- Child labor can take place within the family unit. In fact, it is estimated that more than two-thirds of all children in child labor work as contributing family laborers.^{vii}
- Child labor has negative consequences on children's health and well-being. The International Labor Organization estimates that nearly 73 million children are working in hazardous working conditions that directly endanger their health, safety, and moral development.^{viii}
- It should be noted that child labor trafficking can, and often will overlap with child sex trafficking. The International Labor Organization estimates that 22% of the 20.9 million people affected by forced labor are also engaged in forced sexual exploitation.^{ix}

How Sex Trafficking Affects Children

- Oftentimes children are criminalized for acts of violence committed against them. It is estimated that children who experience sexual abuse are 28 times more likely to be arrested for prostitution at some point in their lives than children who have not been sexually abused.^x
- The National Human Trafficking Hotline received reports for 10,949 potential cases of human trafficking in 2018, with 4,945 of those cases involving minors.^{xi}
- In a study that looked at whether victimization in childhood increased the likelihood of suicide attempts in adulthood it was found that adults who were victims of childhood sexual abuse were more likely to attempt suicide.^{xii}
- In a study among female sex workers, 1 out of every 4 women entered the sex trade as minors. Women who entered the sex trade as minors were 3 times more likely to develop HIV versus women who entered the sex trade as adults.^{xiii}
- In a study consisting of trafficking survivors, 72% of the sample met diagnostic criteria for depression. The most common reported symptoms of depression included sleep disturbance, depressed mood, and feelings of guilt and worthlessness.^{xiv}

Children and Families Vulnerable to Human Trafficking

- Young people who migrate and particularly those who migrate across international borders are vulnerable to exploitation. This is especially true when their immigration status is unclear, they have no money, and they are cut off from their natural support systems.^{xv}
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) youth who experience homelessness are at higher risk for sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. It is estimated that only 20% of homeless youth are LGBTQ in the United States, but of that 20%, more than half are exploited through sexual prostitution. This rate is much higher than the 33% of heterosexual homeless youth who are at risk for sex trafficking.^{xvi}
- LGBTQ youth are up to five times more likely than heterosexual youth to be victims of human trafficking, due to increased susceptibility that comes with feelings of rejection and/or alienation that are often experienced by LGBTQ youth.^{xvii}
- Black and Native American youth disproportionately experience acts of violence in their communities. A national survey revealed that more than half of Black, Hispanic, and Native American adolescents had witnessed violence in their lifetime.^{xviii}

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- The Center for Disease and Control Prevention estimates that roughly half of Native women in the United States have experienced sexual violence at least once in their lifetime (49%).^{xxix} Historical trauma, poverty, and violence against Indigenous communities contribute to making these groups more susceptible to acts of violence.
- Traffickers prey on children who experience feelings of low self-esteem and minimal social support. These characteristics are highly prevalent among children experiencing homelessness or those who are in the foster care system who have limited social support.^{xx}
- Youth in the foster care system are overrepresented in sex trafficking cases. In a survey conducted in 2010, it was reported that 59% of the 174 juveniles arrested on prostitution charges were all in the foster care system.^{xxi}
- Children who experience abuse are more likely to be victims of human trafficking. In a survey administered to 273 adult survivors of sex trafficking, 44.6% reported experiencing childhood sexual abuse and 40.9% reported experiencing emotional abuse as children.^{xxii} This demonstrates the link between childhood abuse and human trafficking across the life span.
- Children with disabilities are at an increased risk for being physically, emotionally, and sexually abused due to cognitive, social, and emotional deficits.^{xxiii}
- Family dysfunction, concerns about immigration status, and poverty, are all risk factors for making families and their children vulnerable to human trafficking.^{xxiv}

The Role of Technology in Recruiting Children

- It is estimated that 76% of sexual transactions with underage girls start on the Internet, and that 2 million children are subjected to prostitution in the global sex trade.^{xxv}
- In a survey administered to youth who were victims of sex trafficking, 70.4% of participants reported the use of technology playing a role in their being recruited for sex trafficking.^{xxvi}

Promoting Protective Factors

A goal of prevention is to increase children's protective factors and to improve upon strengths that already exist in the child or their environment. Promoting children's protective factors, especially for children who are vulnerable to human trafficking, can help ensure that they function well at home and reduce the risk of negative outcomes later on in their lives. A protective factor acts as a positive buffer to the child and can be promoted at the individual, relationship, community, and societal level. Preventing human trafficking before it occurs aligns with the Public Health Model by highlighting a four-level ecological approach to enhancing children's protective factors.

Examples of protective factors that promote children's well-being include:

- **Nurturing and Attachment:** Agencies should work to raise awareness about promoting safe, stable and healthy relationships and environments for children to thrive in.^{xxvii}
- **Promoting Caregiver Capacity:** Agencies should partner with parents and caregivers to promote services that increase their understanding of their children's development.^{xxviii}
- **Establishing Social Connections:** Creating a healthy connection to a caring and positive adult can help develop children's social emotional skills.^{xxix}

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- **Support for Families:** Combatting human trafficking requires a multi-layered approach of prevention with the community at large.^{xxx} Agencies should partner with vulnerable children and families to develop comprehensive programs that are tailored to meet each family's individual needs.^{xxxi}

Adopting Policies that Protect Children and Families

- Nations should work to adopt legislation that strengthens the protection of children and families in compliance with international obligations: All legislation should include promoting prevention and enhancing children's protective factors.
- States should work to adopt safe harbor laws. A comprehensive safe harbor law prevents minors under the age of 18 years of age from being criminalized for prostitution and directs juvenile sex trafficking victims to specialized services.^{xxxii}
 - The following states direct juvenile sex trafficking victims to specialized services: Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Texas.
 - The following states protect minors from criminalization for prostitution: Connecticut, District of Columbia, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Vermont.
 - Safe Harbor Laws allow states to adopt legislation that not only protects children from acts of violence but shifts society's attitudes on how to respond to and treat children who are impacted by human trafficking. Although safe harbor laws increase children's protection, they are oftentimes met with resistance by the general public due to misconceptions about who is deserving of protection and who is not. It is important to recognize that safe harbor laws vary across states and can always be improved to better serve children and their families. Because Safe Harbor laws are not universal there are inconsistencies in the way these laws are implemented and carried out across individual states.^{xxxiii}
- Being able to effectively address human trafficking will require a paradigm shift within the larger justice system towards shifting the belief that children involved in human trafficking are victims rather than criminals. Organizations should work to offer trainings and technical assistance to law enforcement, prosecutors, judges, and businesses about identifying and responding to the human trafficking of children.^{xxxiv}
- Due to the various needs children and families have, agencies should work to develop state, national, and international initiatives, policies, and laws that encourage cross-sector collaboration and partnerships when working with individuals and families impacted by human trafficking.

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