

# Child Sex Trafficking in America: A Guide for Parents and Guardians

## What is **Child Sex Trafficking**?

**Child sex trafficking** is one of the most common types of **commercial sexual exploitation**. Child sex trafficking is a high priority at the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), because these children are often currently missing and actively being exploited. Child sex trafficking victims include girls, boys, and LGBTQ youth. Victims could be anyone – your daughter, neighbor, or nephew. Knowledge and awareness are key in keeping your loved ones safer.

According to the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act **sex trafficking** is defined as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purposes of a commercial sex act.”<sup>1</sup> Children who are exploited through commercial sex are viewed as victims of **severe forms of trafficking in persons**, which is 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 has not attained 18 years of age.”<sup>2</sup> A **commercial sex act** is “any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person.”<sup>3</sup>

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

Traffickers target vulnerable children and lure them into sex trafficking using physical and psychological manipulation, and sometimes they may resort to 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 or 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, foster parents, friends, gangs, trusted adults, or “boyfriends,” who profits from the selling of a minor to a buyer.

## **Victims** are

**Targeted** – Pimps are predators who seek out vulnerable victims. While any youth can be targeted by a pimp, runaways or children experiencing trouble at home are especially vulnerable. Traffickers know these children have emotional and physical needs that are not often 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.

**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 causes the child to truly believe the pimp cares for his or her well-being. Coupled with physical control this can make a victim feel trapped and powerless to leave. This “trauma bond” is difficult to break and specialized intervention and services are often necessary.

## Statistics

- In 2014, 1 in every 6 endangered runaways reported to NCMEC was likely a victim of child sex trafficking.
- Traffickers are increasingly using social networking apps and sites to target and recruit children.



<sup>1</sup>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).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

## Is someone you know a **victim**?

Each time a child runs away his or her chance of being targeted increases. 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. Also, shame and guilt often keep victims silenced. If something does not seem right, ask questions! Establishing an ongoing, open and non-judgmental dialogue with children is critical to building trust that can create space for prevention and intervention.

## Some signs and **vulnerabilities** to look for

- History of sexual abuse. Traffickers will work to identify any vulnerability in a young person's life and use that to both create a closer bond and maintain future control.
- History of running away or current status as a runaway.
- Signs of current physical abuse and/or multiple sexually transmitted diseases.
- Unstable home life and/or involvement in the child welfare or foster care system.
- Inexplicable appearance of gifts, clothing, or other costly items that does not fit the child's situation. 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 friends or boyfriends are not always the caring individuals they appear to be.
- Substance abuse of harder drugs. Pimps may also target youth with significant drug addictions as well as 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.

***"With the young girls, you promise them heaven, they'll follow you to hell," ... a pimp convicted of child sex trafficking.***

I. 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 and who they are interacting with on the Internet is a VERY important step in keeping your child safer.

If something does not seem right, **ask questions!**

When a child goes missing, the legal guardian should **immediately** call law enforcement and make a report. Next, call the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678). Taking the extra step to report missing children to NCMEC ensures that all available resources are being employed to assist in the identification and recovery of that child.

If you suspect a case of child sex trafficking, contact the **National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®** at 1-800-843-5678 or visit [www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com)