



# Child Sex Trafficking in the United States: Knowing the Facts

Child sex trafficking is a significant global public health issue and has become a topic of heated discourse within the United States over the past decade. Legally categorized as a form of child abuse and neglect by the Justice for Victims of Sex Trafficking Act in 2015, child sex trafficking and its prevention has become a high priority in the nation.<sup>1</sup> As Saprea strives to eradicate all forms of child sexual abuse and advocates for education and awareness on such issues, this brief aims to inform on the essential facts of child sex trafficking.

## THIS RESEARCH BRIEF EXPLORES:

- Child sex trafficking and how it differentiates from other forms of child sexual abuse.
- Risk factors that increase the likelihood of a child or youth being sex trafficked in the United States.
- How the issue of child sex trafficking aligns with our mission at Saprea.
- Interventions for parents, communities, and the media (Appendix A).

## DEFINITION

Child sex trafficking is a subset of human trafficking which the United Nations defined in 2004 as the **recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation.**<sup>2</sup> Put simply, child sex trafficking occurs whenever a minor is exploited into sexual activity for the gain or advantage of another person or group. However, the term trafficking can be misleading as such exploitation doesn't necessarily involve abduction or physical transport of a victim from one place to another. Similarly, exploitation can take many forms and may not always involve physical contact. Some common examples of sexual exploitation include **child pornography, pimping or prostitution, exchanging sex for basic necessities or other items, forced marriages, or involving children in sexual services or displays.** Whatever the form of exploitation, the dynamic generally involves an imbalance of power between the trafficker

and the victim, and oftentimes comprises of the victim being coerced into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial gain or increased status of the trafficker or facilitator.<sup>3</sup>

## PREVALENCE

While there's no denying that sex trafficking is a global issue that makes up the majority of human trafficking cases,<sup>4</sup> determining the actual prevalence of sex trafficking in the United States is challenging.<sup>5</sup> There is not presently any consensus accepted by academic studies, government reports, or NGOs on exactly how many children are domestically trafficked each year. The range of published estimates is rather dramatic— between 1,400 and over 2 million.<sup>6,7</sup>

The most concrete numbers relate to incident reporting. For example, of the 2,065 cases of suspected sex trafficking cases that were investigated between 2008–2010, about 40% involved commercial exploitation of a minor. The National Human Trafficking Resource Center disclosed that nearly 6,000 cases had been reported over the five-year period (2007–2012) and also had a substantial percentage of minor victims (40.69%).<sup>8</sup> Data published by the NHTRC from 2019 reported 8,248 situations of sex trafficking that included both adults and minors.<sup>9</sup> Another commonly cited figure comes from The National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking, which estimated in 2009 that between 100,000 and 300,000 children are victimized in prostitution each year.<sup>10</sup>

## WHO IS BEING TRAFFICKED?

While the number of youth who are exploited is difficult to assess, researchers *have* succeeded in identifying who is at greater risk of being exploited. These risk factors can be found at the individual level, relationship level, and societal level.

### INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Risk factors at a youth's individual level range from personal history to emotional and behavioral health to physical characteristics. For instance, females are more likely to be victims of trafficking, with the average of recruitment falling between 12 and 14 years old.<sup>11,12</sup> Females of color (specifically Black girls) are also at higher risk, likely a result of systemic challenges facing marginalized populations.<sup>12,13</sup>

In addition to gender, age, and ethnicity, another glaring risk factor is emotional well-being. Youth who suffer from **low self-esteem, low self-worth, depression, anxiety, and conduct disorder** are more vulnerable targets for sex traffickers.<sup>6,13,14</sup> This is especially true for youth who struggle with feelings of rejection and experience bullying or other forms of ostracization.<sup>15</sup> These feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem can influence the susceptibility of a child or youth to the manipulative behaviors of the trafficker, particularly during the grooming phase. Such vulnerability is a primary reason why sex traffickers commonly target youth who are already ostracized due to their race, sexual orientation, economic status, or trans identity.<sup>16</sup>

Among the most significant risk factors at the individual level are **prior experiences of victimization**. Many prostituted children have already experienced at least one type of abuse prior to being commercially exploited.<sup>12–16</sup> The trauma of sexual abuse, in particular, can greatly increase the odds of a child or youth being revictimized.<sup>13,15,17</sup> In fact, studies have found that a majority of sex trafficking survivors have self-reported a history of child sexual abuse prior to being sex trafficked, leading to polyvictimization.<sup>11,13</sup>

Additional risk factors at the individual level include untreated mental health problems, involvement in criminal activity, and high rates of **alcohol or substance abuse**.<sup>11,13,16</sup> The latter can play a critical role in impairing judgment, instigating dependent behaviors, and drawing youth into exploitative circles.<sup>13,16</sup>

### RELATIONSHIP LEVEL

At the relationship level, one of the leading causes to a youth being victimized by sex trafficking is a **dysfunctional home life**. This may include a lack of familial support, lack of parental supervision, and insecure parental attachments.<sup>14,17</sup> Such instability may be due to parental illness, financial strain, substance abuse, domestic violence, neglect, and other forms of maltreatment.<sup>14,16</sup> Not only does a lack of support in the home ensure a youth is more vulnerable to the emotional security provided by a sex trafficker, but it also increases the chances of the youth running away from their current living situation and becoming more reliant on illegitimate sources of income.<sup>11,17,18</sup>

A lack of secure relationships and parental support also extends to children and youth who have been placed in group homes, detention centers, or child protective services.<sup>11,16</sup> A significant portion of sex trafficked youth have a history of involvement with **child welfare services and foster care**.<sup>17,18</sup> Similar to youth in destabilized home environments, youth in these systems commonly lack support networks and healthy attachments, which increases their vulnerability to the psychological coercion and manipulation of a trafficker.<sup>16</sup> In fact, one study showed that even when the basic needs of a minor were met, the lack of an attentive adult in that minor's life played a role in their victimization.<sup>19</sup>

### COMMUNITY LEVEL

While sex trafficking occurs across all regions, communities, and demographics, there are a number of factors that put certain populations at more risk. **Poverty** is among the most notable components linked to child sexual trafficking.<sup>14,16</sup> Children and youth who are at a socioeconomic disadvantage not only struggle with financial instability but also with unsafe housing, minimal education, and limited opportunities for legitimate employment. These risks become especially salient for youth who are marginalized due to their **race, ethnicity, or gender**.<sup>6,12,16</sup>

Within these impoverished and marginalized populations, youth who are deprived of their basic needs or perceive those needs as being threatened are at a heightened risk of resorting to “survival sex,” or sex that is driven by a desperation to survive. In these instances, youth are motivated by promises of economic gain or essential provisions such as food, clothing, and shelter.<sup>11,14</sup> Many youths who are vulnerable to sex trafficking also struggle with feelings of **displacement, forced migration, unsafe housing, and homelessness**.<sup>11,6</sup>

## WHO IS TRAFFICKING AND “SOLICITING”?

While the risk factors linked to an individual being sex trafficked are numerous and varied, not a lot is known about the risk factors that increase the *likelihood of an individual becoming a trafficker*.

One common characteristic, however, is the trafficker having a personal connection to or relationship with the young person they are exploiting. Sadly, as is the case with the larger landscape of child sexual abuse, **children who are being sexually exploited know their trafficker in the majority of cases**. While many may believe that sex trafficking is perpetrated by those involved in transnational organized crime, research suggests three specific groups who are most often responsible for a child's exploitation: a family member, a peer, or a significant other.<sup>11,12,14,16</sup> One study suggested mothers were most likely to traffick their daughters,<sup>20</sup> and another study highlighted the involvement of boyfriends gaining the trust of a partner, only to demand “repayment” for their support by demanding the partner enter into sexual exploitation.<sup>11,16</sup> In other studies, victims were recruited by peers, either as a mechanism for meeting basic needs (“survival sex”), or to maintain good standing with pimps or traffickers. In many of these instances, the victims will engage in the orchestrated transactions out of fear, obligation, or loyalty to their trafficker.<sup>11,13</sup>

Ultimately, each of these exploitative transactions are perpetuated by **demand**. Research and case studies describe the business strategies at play, including the forums that exist for traffickers to share information and strategies for building and maintaining their operations.<sup>21</sup> The “solicitors” involved in these transactions fall into a wide range of ages, demographics, and races. Studies show that they come from all walks of life and socio-economic status, but more often than not they are a little more affluent as they are able to participate in a transaction that often includes some sort of financial or material exchange and may even involve sex tourism.<sup>22</sup>

## WAYS TO HELP

A variety of systemic issues contribute to the continuation of child sex trafficking, and Saprea seeks to resolve some of those issues. As with other forms of child sexual abuse, one of the most prevalent factors that places a child at risk of being sex trafficked is the lack of stability in the home.<sup>14</sup> Many survivors have cited the lack of a caring adult in their family as a significant contributor to being victimized by sex trafficking.<sup>12</sup> To this end, Saprea strives to confront child sex trafficking by strengthening families and parent-child relationships through our online and community resources. These resources include developing awareness, skill sets, and self-efficacy among parents, as well as helping them build their child's capability and social skills. Such tools will ensure a child or teen is a more difficult target for sex traffickers.

Another risk factor that Saprea seeks to resolve is the vulnerability of children or teens with a history of sexual abuse. Given that many instances of child sex trafficking are a form of revictimization, Saprea strives to interrupt this cycle by providing parents with resources that not only help them protect their children from sexual abuse, but help them respond to abuse that has already occurred. Research shows that when parents respond effectively to a child who has been sexually abused, the likelihood of that child being revictimized—whether by a sex trafficker or another type of sexual abuser—significantly decreases.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, when parents are more educated on how to raise capable children and to foster resilient parentchild relationships through emotional support and open communication, society as a whole can move one step closer toward eradicating child sex trafficking and its impacts.

## APPENDIX A—RECOMMENDED INTERVENTIONS

### PRIMARY MESSAGING TO PARENTS

#### 1. Believe you can make a difference.

- a. Learn more about the risk factors of a child becoming sexually exploited so that you can be better informed on how to effectively reduce those risk factors.
- b. Raise awareness among the parents and community members in your life by sharing accurate, evidence-based information on child sex trafficking.
- c. Know that, as with all forms of child sex abuse, your example and support as a parent can significantly reduce the likelihood of your child being sexually exploited.

#### 2. Model trust and communication.

- a. Initiate parent-child communication that is open, consistent, and includes difficult topics like sexual literacy.
- b. Educate your child or teen on the specifics of sex trafficking. Explain that sexual exploitation can be initiated by a friend, family member, or significant other and that it doesn't always pertain to physical contact.
- c. Set and maintain consistent family boundaries and check-ins that apply within the home, outside the home, and in online spaces.
- d. Help build your child's sense of self-worth through quality family time, engaged conversations, and your own example of self-worth.

### PRIMARY MESSAGING TO COMMUNITIES

#### 1. Raise awareness on the issue of child sex trafficking.

- a. Teach classes to those in your community about the facts of child sex trafficking and how to reduce the risk in your neighborhood.
- b. Collaborate with other community leaders and influencers on how to best spread accurate and useful information about child sex trafficking to parents and caregivers in your area.
- c. Learn what common myths or misplaced fears surrounding child sex trafficking are most prevalent in your area and help communicate research-based data and education that will dispel those myths.

#### 2. Raise funds to help reduce the risk of child sex trafficking.

- a. Donate to organizations that are taking innovative steps to stop sex trafficking, both in your local area and nationwide:  
[saprea.org](https://www.saprea.org)  
[thorn.org](https://www.thorn.org)  
[unicefusa.org](https://www.unicefusa.org)
- b. Host a volunteer event, campaign, or fundraiser to raise funds that will help support the eradication of child sex trafficking.
- c. Donate to homeless shelters, group homes, foster homes, and foster care closets in your area.

### PRIMARY MESSAGING TO MEDIA

#### 1. Develop media that accurately depicts the issue of child sex trafficking.

- a. Understand the facts about child sex trafficking and the audiences who would be most impacted by learning those facts.
- b. When delivering content related to child sex trafficking, avoid sensationalism, politicized bias, and inaccurate or exaggerated data.
- c. Understand the common myths or misunderstandings about child sex trafficking and deliver content that helps dispel those myths.

#### 2. Develop media that reduces the stigmatization surrounding sex trafficking victims.

- a. Refrain from portraying victims of child sex trafficking as criminals, prostitutes, or other harmful stereotypes, particularly victims of marginalized communities and ethnicities.
- b. When recreating or portraying scenarios of child sex trafficking, be intentional about capturing the imbalance of power between the trafficker and the victim.

## APPENDIX B—KEY STATISTICS AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### KEY STATISTICS

- The National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking estimated that between 100,000 and 300,000 of American minors are victimized through sex trafficking each year.<sup>10</sup>
- Sex trafficking accounts for approximately 70–80% of human trafficking in the United States.<sup>15</sup>
- Most victims of child sex trafficking engaged in their first commercial sex act between ages 14 and 17.<sup>8</sup>
- In 2016, 70% of reported sex trafficking cases in the United States involved female victims.<sup>12</sup>
- In one study, 62.7% of child sex trafficking victims were victimized by a member of their family, with 45.8% reporting their trafficker to be a parent or guardian.<sup>14</sup>
- 87% of youth who are sex trafficked have experienced sexual abuse prior to being trafficked.<sup>13</sup>
- Low socioeconomic status is among the highest risk factors for a child or youth to be victimized by sex trafficking.<sup>16</sup>
- Black females between the ages of 16–18 are at a higher risk of being sex trafficked.<sup>12</sup>
- A multi-state evaluation of outreach programs to victims of sex trafficking found that more than one-third of the clients had previous involvement with child welfare agencies and juvenile justice systems.<sup>24</sup>
- The International Labour Office estimates that the annual global profits from forced sexual exploitation total 99 billion USD.<sup>25</sup>
- One out of every six runaways reported to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® in 2014 was likely a victim of sex trafficking.<sup>26</sup>
- Youth who were trafficked as minors had more than 5 times the odds of running away from home prior to entering the sex trade, after controlling for other risk factors and demographics.<sup>8</sup>

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Thorn.org <https://www.thorn.org/child-trafficking-statistics/>
- Polaris Project <https://polarisproject.org/child-sex-trafficking/>
- Missing Kids <https://www.missingkids.org/theissues/trafficking>
- Human Trafficking Hotline <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/training-resources/referral-directory>
- ECPAT-USA <https://www.ecpatusa.org/child-trafficking>
- Understanding and Addressing Trauma and Child Sex Trafficking—The National Child Traumatic Stress Network [https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2018-07/Understanding\\_and\\_Address\\_Trauma\\_and\\_Child\\_Trafficking.pdf](https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2018-07/Understanding_and_Address_Trauma_and_Child_Trafficking.pdf)

## APPENDIX C—GLOSSARY

### Commonly Used General Synonyms for Trafficking and Exploitation

Sex trafficking CSE, CSEC, CSEY (Commercial sexual exploitation of children/youth) Domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) Sex trade

**Exploitation** occurs when a person takes advantage of another person, unethically or unjustly for one's own ends.

**Facilitators** are individuals or businesses that are complicit in or benefit from the commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors. Examples of facilitators include limousine and taxi drivers, hotel and motel operators, landlords, and advertisers, among others. While facilitators enable and support commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors—actively or passively—they are not the purchasers or sellers of sex with minors.

**Human trafficking** is defined by the US Department of Homeland Security as using of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act. Traffickers might use violence, manipulation, or false promises of well-paying jobs or romantic relationships to lure victims into trafficking situations.

### Pimps

A variety of terms—including traffickers, exploiters, and pimps—are used to describe individuals who exploit children for financial or other gain. While the word pimp originally was used to describe an individual who sells prostitutes, its meaning and use have evolved. It is also important to note that traffickers and exploiters come in many forms; they may be family members, intimate partners, or friends, as well as strangers.

**Polyvictimization** is a paradigm for understanding the cumulative effects of repeated exposure to traumatic life events. This paradigm is useful when referencing trafficking because most often there are several events of trauma that occur for trafficked persons.

### Exploited Child, Not Child Prostitute

Some victims of commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking are referred to as child prostitutes, juvenile prostitutes, or adolescent prostitutes. Prostitution is illegal in nearly all jurisdictions in the United States, and individuals who engage in prostitution are considered criminals. Therefore, the terms child prostitute, juvenile prostitute, and adolescent prostitute suggest that prostituted children are criminals; that is, victims and survivors of commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking may be viewed as willing participants in an illegal activity.

At Saprea our view is that these young people should be recognized as victims and not as criminals. Our broader vision is that commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking are forms of child sexual abuse. We also note the legal conundrum that exists when patterns of exploitation begin when an individual is under 18, but persist after the child has reached the legal age of majority. Our mantra: "Exploitation is exploitation, regardless of age, but especially abhorrent when these patterns are targeted at children and youth."

**Sex tourism** can be loosely defined as individuals planning travel around the purposes of engaging in sexual activity.

**Sex work** occurs when consenting adults make an informed choice to engage in the provision of sexual services (such as pornography, exotic dancing, prostitution, etc.) in exchange for payment.

**Solicitors and purchasers** are individuals who pay for sex with minors and thus represent the demand for commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors. These individuals may actively seek to purchase sex with underage individuals or may be unaware of or uninterested in their age. Solicitors and purchasers often are referred to as "johns."

**Survival sex** includes having sex with someone to get money, food, a place to stay, drugs, or something else a young person wants.

**Transnational organized crime** occurs where criminal activity is conducted over multiple sovereign borders. Sex trafficking has long been perceived by many of the general public as falling primarily in this realm, however several organizations have aimed to bring awareness to the narrowness of this fallacy.

### Victims or Survivors

The terms victim and survivor both are used to refer to minors who are commercially sexually exploited or trafficked for sexual purposes. These terms don't have to be mutually exclusive as the terms could be applied to the same individuals at different points along a continuum. For example, the term victim indicates that a crime has occurred and that assistance is needed. Being able to identify an individual as a victim, even temporarily, can help activate responses—including direct services and legal protections—for an individual. Whereas the term survivor has therapeutic value and may extend more appropriately as the displacement increases between the events of abuse and efforts of recovery.

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