



CHILD SEX
TRAFFICKING
IN AMERICA:

A Guide for Child Welfare Professionals



WHAT IS CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING?

Under the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act¹, any child under 18 years of age, who is exploited through commercial sex where something of value – such as money, drugs or a place to stay – is given for sexual activity, is a victim of child sex trafficking. Child sex trafficking is a high priority issue at the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, especially because these children are often currently missing and actively being exploited.

Children in the care of social services are disproportionately vulnerable to sex trafficking. In 2019, 16 percent of the endangered runaways reported as missing from a foster care or group home placement to NCMEC were identified as likely child sex trafficking victims.

KNOW THE WARNING SIGNS

Some indicators may include:

- A HISTORY OF RUNNING AWAY OR CURRENT STATUS AS A RUNAWAY;**
- Large amounts of cash, multiple cell phones or hotel keys;**
- Tattoos or branding related to money or ownership and/or the child is unwilling to explain;**
- Signs of current physical abuse and/or multiple sexually transmitted diseases;**
- Presence of, or communication with, a controlling older boyfriend or girlfriend;**
- Gang involvement, especially among girls;**
- Travel to other states or staying at hotels when he or she runs away.**

FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS

New federal laws have been enacted in response to the increased awareness of and attention to the prevalence of sex trafficking victimization among system involved youth.

- Under the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act's definition of an abused and neglected child was amended to include sex trafficking victims irrespective of the relationship of the abuser to the child.² Further, to be eligible for CAPTA funding, states must ensure that child welfare professionals are trained to identify, assess and provide comprehensive services to child sex trafficking victims.
- The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act includes a requirement that all states implement policies and procedures to identify, document and determine appropriate services for victims of trafficking.³ It also requires that state social service agencies report any children who go missing from their care to both law enforcement and NCMEC or risk losing their state's eligibility for federal funding under Title IV-E of the Social Security Administration Act.⁴

These efforts increase the ability to locate and return missing children to safe places. For more information regarding NCMEC's work to address child sex trafficking and children missing from care, please visit [CMFC.MissingKids.org](https://www.missingkids.org).

¹ 22 U.S.C. § 7102(10) (originally enacted in 2000 and later amended by Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act of 2015).

² 42 U.S.C. § 5106g (the amended definition took effect in May 2017).

³ 42 U.S.C. § 671(a)(9).

⁴ 42 U.S.C. § 671(a)(35).

Child welfare professionals should play a critical role in preventing, intervening in, and providing a comprehensive service response to victims of child sex trafficking.

PREVENTION

Perpetrators of sex trafficking often target children in state care, using their vulnerabilities to manipulate them. Professionals working with children in care can help prevent victimization by providing education about the dangers of sex trafficking and by challenging myths and misconceptions that glamorize commercial sex. This includes having conversations with them about online safety and how traffickers/pimps use social networking sites and apps to mask not only their appearance but also their true intentions while recruiting new victims.

INTERVENTION

Child sex trafficking victims often do not self-identify as victims and frequently do not disclose their abuse because of fear, shame or loyalty to their abuser(s). As a result, it is likely that many child welfare agencies are already serving child sex trafficking victims who have not yet been identified as such. It is not the responsibility of a child to recognize that he or she is being victimized. Child welfare professionals should know the warning signs and ask questions if something doesn't seem right, especially for children who may have run away as they are at higher risk.

If a child runs away from care, it is important that the professionals who interact with the child express relief when the child is found and concern for the child's well-being while he or she was missing. Also, asking non-judgmental questions about how the child took care of himself or herself while he or she was missing, while noting any red flags or changes in behavior, can help reveal potential victimization.

RESPONSE

If a child displays multiple red flags or discloses abuse through sex trafficking, child welfare professionals should have an established response plan in place that includes engaging specialized services to assist with further assessment and support.

Unfortunately, **TRAFFICKERS** and those who seek to exploit children are also aware of the increased vulnerabilities of children in care. They may **MANIPULATE** children, and it is not uncommon for them to force children to recruit others in schools or group homes. Child-serving agencies should be aware of these tactics so they can have an early identification and response plan in place.

Even if a child believes that he or she chose to engage in his or her exploitation, it's important to remember that the **CHILD IS A VICTIM**, and an adult or perpetrator is exploiting the child's vulnerabilities.

As such, there is no such thing as child prostitution, and that phrase should never be used when referring to child sex trafficking.

CHILDREN MISSING FROM CARE

WHAT TO DO IF A CHILD IN CARE GOES MISSING*

24-Hour Hotline

1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678)

[CMFC.MissingKids.org/Missing](https://www.cmfc.org/missing)

This secure method allows the most convenient, rapid, web-based access to enter a missing child report, 24/7.

* Anytime a child is missing, the child's legal guardian should immediately call law enforcement and then the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children at 1-800-THE-LOST®



Of the nearly 26,300 runaways reported to NCMEC in 2019, **1 in 6** were likely victims of child sex trafficking.