

Child Sex Trafficking in Kentucky

What it looks like and how to help

What is Child Sex Trafficking?

Human trafficking is modern day slavery. When anyone under 18 is solicited, advertised, or exploited through commercial sex, it is considered child sex trafficking. Commercial sex describes when sexual activity is traded for something of value; this could be money, drugs, or even shelter. The majority of the time, the trafficker is someone the victim knows and trusts.

Anyone can be a victim of human trafficking regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. However, research and survivor testimony has shown that traffickers target children who lack strong support systems.² This includes children who have experienced previous trauma and abuse and those marginalized by society, like LGBTQ+ youth, those in poverty, etc.

Child sex trafficking is an incredibly complex issue, and there are several different ways children are trafficked. Learning and understanding the different ways abusers traffic children can lead to opportunities for intervention.

Pimp-Controlled Trafficking

Pimp-controlled trafficking refers to when a child is trafficked by an unrelated individual. In these cases, the pimp is a predator who targeted that child and worked to develop an intentional, trusted relationship. The trafficker then uses that relationship as leverage to exploit the child.

Gang-Controlled Trafficking

Gang-controlled trafficking happens when a child is trafficked by a gang or a member of a gang. To coerce the victim, gang members attempt to scare the child into compliance by leveraging their organizational structure, inescapable network, and violent tendencies.

Family Trafficking

Family trafficking happens when a child is trafficked by a relative or a person the child considers family like a foster parent or “auntie/uncle.” For victims of family trafficking, the abuse can start as early as infancy, and the children grow up thinking rape and violence is just part of life.

Buyer-Perpetrated Trafficking

It is considered buyer-perpetrated trafficking when the child does not have an identified trafficker. In these cases, buyers directly exploit a child’s vulnerabilities by trading them necessities like money, food, and shelter in exchange for sexual exploitation.

Those who regularly work with children in our community are in a unique position to help fight child sex trafficking. It is not uncommon for children to think what is happening to them is normal and not understand they are being trafficked. It is up to the professionals and trusted adults in these children’s lives to educate themselves and recognize the signs, so they can intervene and get victims the help and support they need.

In Kentucky, 60% of all human trafficking victims are children.³

¹ National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. “Child Sex Trafficking.” Home, www.missingkids.org/theissues/trafficking. Accessed 03/03/2021.

² National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. “Child Sex Trafficking in America: A Guide for Child Welfare Professionals.” Accessed 03/03/2021.

³ Sauber, Deborah. “Human Trafficking.” Kentucky Department of Education, 4 Jan. 2021, education.ky.gov/school/sdfs/Pages/Human-Trafficking.aspx.

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What are the signs to look for?

It is crucial to recognize the indicators associated with human trafficking so you can intervene and help connect that child with the resources and support they need. Every case is different; this is not a comprehensive list of indicators and should not act as a checklist or assessment tool. If you observe any of these indicators, take that as an opportunity to start a conversation.

Physical Indicators

- Showing signs of physical or sexual abuse
- Untreated medical or dental issues/ STIs
- Appearing weak/malnourished
- Not in possession of their own identifying documents (i.e. license, passport, school ID)
- Sudden changes in their usual attire
- Multiple cellphones or apps providing multiple cellphone numbers
- Unexplained access to large amounts of cash pre-paid cards, or hotel keys
- Drug abuse or frequent use of “party drugs” i.e. Methamphetamine, MDMA, Ketamine, GHB

Behavioral Indicators

- Disconnected from family & friends
- Runs away from home or placement
- Chronic absence from school
- Regularly sleeps in class
- Avoids answering questions themselves let’s someone else answer for them
- Lies about age or identity
- Has secret profiles online
- References online escort ads
- Uses language or emojis often associated with prostitution, such as “Trick,” “The Life,” “The Game”

Never attempt to directly confront a suspected trafficker or rescue a suspected victim. This could put both your and the victim’s safety at risk.⁴ Please contact law enforcement or our 24-Hour crisis line: **800-226-7273**

Traffickers and the internet

Grooming doesn’t have to happen in person; it can happen online too. Every time an adult attempts to establish a relationship with a child to facilitate any form of sexual contact, it is considered grooming. Currently, traffickers worldwide, and right here in Kentucky, are taking advantage of how easy it is to connect with children online. This is a growing issue.

A report by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children found that there are approximately 750,000 sexual predators online at any particular moment. When a trafficker encounters a vulnerable child, they take their time building that child’s trust and loyalty. This process could last months or even years before they start sexually exploiting their victim.

In a world where we are all connected by the internet, every child is at risk. Starting age-appropriate conversations with your child about what they’re doing online and educating them on the tactics predators may use to engage with them is the most important thing you can do to keep your child safe.⁵ This should be an ongoing dialogue and not just a one-time conversation. Every time you play a video game or watch a YouTube video together is a great time to bring up the importance of internet safety. Knowledge is power. Help build your child’s self-confidence and prepare them for potentially dangerous online encounters.

Learn the signs. Stop the abuse.

⁴Blue Campaign. “Human Trafficking 101 for School Administrators and Staff.” US Department of Homeland Security. Accessed 03/31/2021.

⁵International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children. “Online Grooming of Children for Sexual Purposes: Model Legislation & Global Review.” The Koons Family Institute on International Law & Policy, 18 Sept. 2017.

⁶Shared Hope International. “Internet Safety Guide.” 21 Jan. 2021.