



Child Sex Trafficking: Experiences of Youth Who Have Been Trafficked

Often, youth who have been sex trafficked have experienced multiple traumas and adversities in their lives. This includes trauma and adversity prior to being trafficked that often contributed to their vulnerability, as well as experiences while being trafficked. Even after identified as having been trafficked, youth may face many challenges. It is helpful for professionals to be aware of these experiences and their impact on youth.

Prior to Being Trafficked

- Child sexual abuse
- Exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) and community violence
- Traumatic loss and separation from caregivers (e.g., death, incarceration, separation due to migration or for substance abuse, mental health or medical treatment)
- Involvement with Child Protective Services (CPS)
- Foster care placements
- Involvement with Juvenile Justice System
- Multiple caregiver and placement transitions
- Educational disruptions
- Homelessness, including family homelessness, rejection/removal by caregivers and “running away” from home or placement
- Impaired caregiving (e.g., substance abuse, mental illness, disability)
- Expectations of caring for, and providing monetarily for, family members due to impaired caregivers, vulnerable siblings, etc.
- Exposure to familial trafficking or peers involved in commercial sex trade

While Being Trafficked

- Sexual violence, multiple sexual contacts with different purchasers in a short time, sexual contact without contraceptive, barrier, condom
- Unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and other untreated medical conditions
- Physical violence by purchasers and exploiters/facilitators, witnessing violence to others
- Community or gang related violence, witnessing homicides
- Betrayal by caregivers and other trusted individuals believed to support and protect (e.g., romantic partners, peers, fellow gang members)
- Poor sleep hygiene, inadequate nutrition, medical neglect of chronic conditions requiring medication management or regular contact with healthcare providers
- Substance use (forced as a method of control or used as a method of coping with trafficking experiences)
- Significant emotional abuse, coercive control, including degradation by traffickers and purchasers
- Bullying by peers
- Isolation
- Separation from traditional supports of family and community
- Forced to inflict harm on and/or exploit or recruit others into exploitation
- Dual exploitation (e.g., potential crossover with labor trafficking)

After Being Trafficked

After youth are identified and are no longer being trafficked, they may continue to experience challenges and adversities:

- Arrest and detention
- Placement transitions (often multiple)
- Threats and/or fear of harm by former exploiters
- Contact by exploiters and purchasers
- Efforts to reengage into trafficking by traffickers and/or peers
- Educational disruptions
- Isolation and shame
- Difficulties integrating in to social settings
- Lack of access to resources
- Loss of community support
- Bias and discrimination by professionals and other adults, caregivers, and peers
- Medical conditions (e.g., STIs, pregnancy)
- Difficulty accessing employment and other financial supports

Despite these adversities, youth are resilient and can cope with difficult experiences in many ways. It is important to note that even if youth who are being or have been trafficked have any of the experiences noted above, they may not view these experiences as traumatic.