



# Child Sex Trafficking Identification Resource

It is the responsibility of child-serving professionals to identify possible indicators of child sex trafficking instead of relying on the child for disclosure. Due to the sophisticated recruitment tactics, manipulation, trauma bonds, and threats used by traffickers and buyers, children are often unable to immediately disclose or recognize their own victimization.



[MissingKids.org](https://www.missingkids.org)

## Child Sex Trafficking

Under the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act,<sup>1</sup> child sex trafficking is defined as the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting a child under 18 years of age for the purpose of a commercial sex act.

This means that *any* child, 17 years of age or younger, who is involved in a commercial sex act, including prostitution, is a victim of sex trafficking. The commercial exchange can include, but is not limited to, money, food, shelter, and/or drugs. Regardless of whether or not the child has identified a trafficker that child is still a victim. A child is not able to consent to being bought or sold. Because state laws may differ in how child sex trafficking is defined, you should review your state laws to see what laws may be applicable.

## Recruitment

Technology has changed the way traffickers target and recruit children. Traffickers will often seize any available opportunity to seek out a potential victim including in-person tactics at malls, bus stops, walking to and from school, and outside of group homes. However, the majority of traffickers now recruit children online through social networking apps and sites and use the information obtained through these methods to relate to, and build trust with, children more quickly.

## Risk Factors<sup>2</sup>

While any child can be targeted by a trafficker, research has shown that traffickers often target children with increased vulnerabilities, including:

- Children who are chronically missing or who frequently run away (especially 3+ missing incidents);
- Children who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, especially if the abuse was unreported or unaddressed, or resulted in the child being removed from the home;
- Children who have experienced prior sexual assault or rape;
- Children with significant substance abuse issues or who live with someone who has significant substance abuse issues; and
- Children who identify as LGBTQ and/or have been kicked out or who have been stigmatized by their family.

## Indicators of Child Sex Trafficking Victims<sup>3</sup>

Some indicators to help law enforcement and other child-serving professionals determine if a child may be at-risk or is currently being recruited or exploited through possible child sex trafficking are listed on the next page. While *no single indicator* confirms the existence of child sex trafficking, several indicators combined can increase the likelihood that a child is being exploited or is actively being targeted and recruited.

<sup>1</sup> 22 U.S.C. § 7102(10) (originally enacted as Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, Pub. L. 106-386, § 103, 114 Stat. 1464, 1470 (2000) and amended by Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act of 2015, Pub. L. 114-22, § 108, 129 Stat. 227, 238 (2015)).

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, *Confronting Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States* 10 (2013); see also Linda A. Smith, Samantha Healy Vardaman, & Melissa A. Snow, *The National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: America's Prostituted Children* (2009).

<sup>3</sup> See International Association of Chiefs of Police, *Toolkit: Child Sex Trafficking: A Training for Frontline Officers* (2014); see also Smith, et al., *supra* note 2.

## Behavioral Indicators

- Child has significant change in behavior, including increased virtual behavior (e.g., online activity/profiles) or who associates with new groups of online friends/older friends;
- Child avoids answering questions or lets others speak for him or her;
- Child appears frightened, resistant, or belligerent to law enforcement;
- Child lies about his or her age and identity;
- Child looks to others before answering questions;
- Child does not ask for help or resists offers to get out of the situation (child does not self-identify as a victim);
- Child seems coached in talking to law enforcement;
- Child uses prostitution-related terms, such as "Daddy," "The Life," "The Game," and/or
- Child is preoccupied with "getting money" (e.g., displaying photos of cash).

## Physical Indicators

- Child has no identification (or ID is held by another person);
- Multiple children with unrelated adult male(s) or female(s);
- Child has sexual paraphernalia (such as bulk condoms or lubrication);
- Evidence of travel (child is living out of suitcases, at motels, or in a car);
- Child has a name or symbol tattooed, burned or branded onto his or her body, particularly when coupled with the child's reluctance to explain the tattoo or when the child's tattoo matches other children's tattoos;
- Child references traveling to other cities or states or is not from the current location; the child may also lack knowledge of his or her travel plans, destination, and/or his or her current location;
- Child has large amounts of cash or pre-paid credit cards;
- Child has hotel keys, hotel receipts or other items from hotel/motel;
- Presence of an overly controlling or abusive "boyfriend" or older female;
- Children recovered at hotels, street tracks, truck stops, or strip clubs;
- Child has multiple cell phones and/or electronic devices;
- Child has notebooks or slips of paper containing phone numbers, dollar amounts, names, or addresses;
- Child has items or an appearance that does not fit his or her current situation (e.g., a homeless or runaway child who has money, electronics, new clothes or shoes, and who has his or her hair or nails done);
- Child references online classified ads or escort websites (child-serving professionals are encouraged to research classified ads or escort websites as these sites change and are sometimes geographically specific);
- Child references traveling job opportunities (including modeling, singing and/or dancing in a music group or magazine sales crews); and/or
- Child has unaddressed medical issues or who goes to the ER or clinic alone, or with an unrelated female.



**CyberTipline**

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If you suspect a case of  
**CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING**,  
you can call **1-800-THE-LOST**® or  
make a report at [CyberTipline.org](https://www.cybertipline.org)

Of the more than **26,300** endangered runaways reported to NCMEC in 2019,



**1 out of 6** were likely child sex trafficking victims.