



National Center for Homeless Education  
Supporting the Education of Children and  
Youth Experiencing Homelessness  
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BEST PRACTICES IN HOMELESS EDUCATION BRIEF SERIES

## Sex Trafficking of Minors: What Schools Need to Know to Recognize and Respond to the Trafficking of Students

### INTRODUCTION

This brief provides educators with an overview of the issue of minor sex trafficking and suggests specific steps that schools can take to respond to signs of trafficking among its students. It also offers suggestions for how State Coordinators for Homeless Education<sup>1</sup> and local homeless education liaisons<sup>2</sup> can help guide their states' and school districts' efforts to address trafficking within schools. Youth experiencing homelessness are particularly vulnerable to being targeted for victimization through trafficking; because of this, educators working with homeless and other at-risk students should be well informed about the issue and effective ways to respond within schools. Briefs on additional topics pertaining to the education and well-being of children and youth experiencing homelessness can be accessed at <http://center.serve.org/nche/briefs.php>.

1 Under Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, all State Departments of Education must designate a State Coordinator for Homeless Education to carry out the duties of the position as outlined in the law [42 U.S.C. § 11432 (d)(3)].

2 Under Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, all school districts must designate a local homeless education liaison to carry out the duties of the position as outlined in the law [42 U.S.C. § 11432 (g)(1)(J)(ii)].

### REPORTING SIGNS OF TRAFFICKING AMONG STUDENTS

School personnel who suspect a trafficking incident should follow their school district's protocol for responding to such incidents. Schools that do not have an established protocol should consider adopting a formal protocol on how to recognize and respond to trafficking among students. See [Responding to Signs of Trafficking Among Students](#) below for more information.

In the absence of an established protocol, educators should contact the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) at 1-888-373-7888 to seek guidance. The NHTRC is a national, toll-free hotline available to respond to requests for assistance from anywhere in the United States 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, every day of the year. The NHTRC is a non-profit, non-governmental organization working exclusively on the issue of human trafficking. The NHTRC is not a government entity, law enforcement agency, or immigration authority.

School personnel never should attempt to confront a suspected trafficker or rescue a suspected victim. Doing so could put the safety of the confronter/rescuer and the victim at risk.

Adapted in part from *Human Trafficking 101 for School Administrators and Staff*, developed collaboratively by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Department of Education and available for downloading at <http://www.dhs.gov/awareness-training>.

## CONTEXT

Human sex trafficking is the most common form of modern-day slavery (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011). It is estimated that millions of people across the world are victimized through trafficking each year, many of whom are women and children being trafficked for sex (2011). According to the U.S. Department of Justice (as cited in Baldas, 2012), human trafficking is now the world's second most profitable criminal enterprise, sharing this position with the illegal arms trade, second only to the illegal drug trade. Many perceive trafficking as something that happens overseas or to foreign nationals, and/or as a crime that involves movement across state or national borders; the reality, however, is that trafficking affects both foreign nationals and U.S. citizens, and can occur within a victim's own community (Polaris Project, 2014b).

According to the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, U.S. schools are emerging as a potentially promising environment for a variety of trafficking prevention and intervention activities for the young people in their care (2013, p. 297). On an average of 180 days each year, most school-age youth spend six to eight hours in school. Given the regular interaction between students and educators, school personnel are positioned uniquely to recognize changes in behavior and appearance that may be indicative of trafficking involvement (p. 297). By playing a role in the prevention and interruption of the sex trafficking of minors, schools can help put an end to the physical, mental, and emotional trauma suffered by victimized students (p. 19).

## UNDERSTANDING SEX TRAFFICKING

### The Definition

According to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 ([TVPA], 78 U.S.C. §§ 7101–7113), the term sex trafficking is defined as, “the

recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act” [78 U.S.C. § 7102(10)]. The TVPA also defines the following terms that are important for understanding the trafficking of minors for sex:

- **Commercial sex act:** “Any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person” [78 U.S.C. § 7102(4)]
- **Severe forms of trafficking in persons:** “Sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age” [78 U.S.C. § 7102(9)]

It is important to note that if the person induced to perform a commercial sex act has not attained 18 years of age, the presence of force, fraud, or coercion is not needed for the act to be considered a crime; simply put, under federal law, a minor cannot consent to participating in sex trafficking. Further, youth may be considered trafficking victims regardless of whether they were transported to the exploitative situation, previously consented to work for a trafficker, or participated in a crime as a direct result of being trafficked (U.S. Department of State, 2013, p. 29).

### The Types

Sex trafficking can take many forms—including prostitution, pornography, stripping, escort services, and erotic massage—and may take place in a variety of venues, including:

- online through social networks and classified websites, such as Craigslist and Backpage;
- strip clubs;
- residential or commercial brothels;
- on the street via individual pimp- or gang-based prostitution;
- fake massage or nail parlors; and
- truck stops.

## The Numbers

Gathering reliable data about the number of young people involved in minor sex trafficking within the United States is challenging for a number of reasons, including:

- **Criminal element**  
Under federal law, sex trafficking is a crime. As such, trafficking operates covertly, making it a difficult enterprise on which to gather comprehensive data (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2013, p. 41).
- **Definitional issues**  
Efforts to define minor sex trafficking in the United States are characterized by disagreement. For example, some researchers and practitioners believe that a third-party exploiter is necessary for a situation to be considered sex trafficking, while others do not (p. 49).
- **Methodological issues**  
Even when setting aside definitional issues, there is the issue of unit of measurement. Data on sex trafficking of minors can be measured in any number of ways: by incident, by number of victims, by number of victimizations, etc. (pp. 49-50). As such, compositing available data from varied sources can prove challenging, as the data often are not collected using equal metrics.

Despite these and other data-related challenges, the following statistics provide a starting point for understanding the extent of minor sex trafficking in the United States:

- According to the Polaris Project, an estimated 100,000 children are traded for sex in the United States each year (2014a).
- According to Congressional testimony by Ernie Allen, President of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children:
  - » The number of 10- to 17-year-olds involved in commercial sexual exploitation in the United States each year likely exceeds 250,000, with

60% of these victims being runaway, throwaway or homeless youth (U.S. House of Representatives, 2010, p. 4).

- » As many as one third of teen runaway or throwaway youth will become involved in prostitution within 48 hours of leaving home (p. 7).

In spite of current variations in data, it is clear that thousands of young people are victimized through sex trafficking in the United States each year.

## The Dynamics

At the heart of trafficking, including the trafficking of minors for sex, is a dynamic of exploitation. Traffickers use a myriad of manipulative, coercive, and deceptive practices to recruit and control their victims. As detailed in the *Human Trafficking Power and Control Wheel* (Polaris Project, 2010), traffickers use the following tactics to enslave their victims:

- coercion and threats;
- intimidation;
- economic, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse;
- isolation;
- denying, blaming, and minimizing; and
- using privilege (e.g. treating the victim like a servant).

## The Traffickers

A sex trafficker is someone who recruits, harbors, transports, provides, or obtains a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act. Traffickers have many faces—male or female, foreign national or U.S. citizen, “respectable businessperson” or “thug”—but are motivated by the singular goal of profit. While anyone can be a trafficker, including someone with whom a youth has had no previous contact or relationship, frequently the victim knows the trafficker. Traffickers often are family members; family friends; or “boyfriends” who initially pretend to love and

provide for the youth, but later, through overt force or psychological manipulation, prostitute the youth (Covenant House, 2013, p. 6).

Examples of potential sex traffickers include

- intimate partners,
- family members,
- pimps,
- gangs and criminal networks, and
- brothel and fake massage business owners and managers (Polaris Project, 2014c).

### The Victims

Traffickers purposefully prey upon vulnerable and marginalized populations. While it is true that any child or youth can become a trafficking victim, some form of vulnerability tends to be the common thread among trafficking victims (Polaris Project, 2014d). According to a 2013 report from Covenant House (p. 6), risk factors for victimization through sex trafficking include

- homelessness;
- prior childhood abuse;
- the lack of any caring, supportive adult in a youth's life; and
- the lack of education or any means to earn an income.

Additional risk factors may include being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), and having a history of being systems-involved (e.g., juvenile justice, criminal justice, foster care) (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2013, p. 78). Traffickers specifically seek to recruit youth with these risk factors.

In a testament to the exploitative nature of trafficking, homeless youth receiving Covenant House services in New York City explained how traffickers loiter in areas where homeless youth are known to gather, tell the youth that the shelters are full, and then offer them a place to stay instead of sleeping on the streets (p. 6). As can be imagined, traffickers do not provide a place to stay without some form of payment,

## HOMELESSNESS AS A RISK FACTOR

Of the many factors that may increase a young person's vulnerability to sex trafficking, homelessness is widely considered to be the most direct contributor (Estes and Weiner, 2001, as cited in the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2013, p. 85). This is partially due to the fact that homeless youth experience a range of risks that are not experienced by at-risk housed youth. Homelessness puts young people at an especially high risk for involvement in sex trafficking not only because street life makes these youth more vulnerable to victimization, but also because youth homelessness frequently is a result of other risk factors, such as family poverty, family dysfunction, and mental illness (pp. 86-87).

often rendered through the provision of sexual services. Traffickers also recruit at other locations where vulnerable youth may congregate, including schools, malls, parks, and even protective shelters and group homes (Shared Hope, 2012).

## WARNING SIGNS OF INVOLVEMENT IN SEX TRAFFICKING

Learning to recognize the signs that a youth may be being trafficked for sex is the first step in identifying victims. While the following indicators aren't necessarily proof of trafficking involvement, they may serve as red flags of possible victimization (A21 Campaign, n.d.; U.S. Department of Homeland Security [DHS], n.d.; Shared Hope, 2012):

- unexplained school absences;
- an abrupt change in attire, behavior, or relationships;
- the presence of an older "boyfriend";
- travel with an older male who is not a guardian;

- the sudden presence of expensive material possessions;
- chronic running away;
- homelessness;
- signs of psychological coercion, such as depression, anxiety, and/or an overly submissive attitude;
- the youth's lack of control over his/her schedule, money, and/or proof of identification;
- signs of physical trauma, including bruises, cuts, burns, and/or scars;
- tattoos or other branding marks;
- poor health, as evidenced by sexually transmitted diseases, malnutrition, and/or serious dental problems; and
- substance abuse or addictions.

#### RESPONDING TO SIGNS OF TRAFFICKING AMONG STUDENTS

The volume of interaction between students and school personnel places educators in a strategic position to recognize signs of trafficking involvement. Further, over the years, the educational role of schools has extended beyond academic subjects to include efforts to educate young people about issues related to healthy physical and emotional development, such as promoting physical activity, increasing alcohol and drug awareness, and preventing bullying and adolescent dating violence (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2013, pp. 297-298). This broad educational purview places schools in the unique position of being able not only to train personnel to recognize and respond to signs of trafficking among students, but to help educate students themselves about the dangers of trafficking.

To assist schools in responding to the issue of trafficking, NCHE recommends the following strategies:

- **Train school personnel to recognize and respond to the signs of trafficking.**

For school districts to respond effectively to signs of trafficking among students, school personnel first must understand the issue of trafficking and be able to recognize signs of possible trafficking involvement. School districts should incorporate the issue of human trafficking into professional development opportunities offered to district and school employees. Many organizations and agencies provide training and technical assistance resources at no charge. For more information, see [Additional Resources](#) below or contact the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) at <http://www.polarisproject.org/what-we-do/national-human-trafficking-hotline/the-nhtrc/overview>.

- **Develop and implement a trafficking protocol.**

Importantly, the Institute of Medicine and

#### THE VULNERABILITY OF UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS YOUTH

As defined by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. §§11431-11435), unaccompanied homeless youth are youth who are experiencing homelessness while not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian [42 U.S.C. § 11434a (6)]. These youth may be especially vulnerable to being recruited into sex trafficking. Not only are these youth dealing with the many challenges and risks associated with homelessness, including a lack of safe and stable housing, a lack of money with which to meet basic needs, and possible exposure to the dangers of the street; but they are facing these difficulties without the support of a caring and involved parent or guardian. School districts should be aware of the particular vulnerability of this and other at-risk student groups and ensure that these students' needs are represented in any district response to the issue of minor sex trafficking.

National Research Council underscore the fact that the sex trafficking of minors is a form of child abuse; and yet, most school districts lack an organized response to the issue (2013, p. 305). Because schools are responsible for the health and safety of their students, and because schools may serve as recruitment sites for the sex trafficking of minors, school districts have a responsibility to recognize and respond to signs of trafficking among their students (p. 305).

Establishing specific protocols and policies for school personnel to follow when the sex trafficking of minors is suspected or disclosed is an important first step in ensuring that school districts respond to this important issue in a thoughtful and effective manner. To this end, school districts can use existing policies and protocols for addressing other forms of child abuse to guide their efforts in establishing a trafficking protocol, or can build on the work of other school districts that have served as pioneers in this area. School districts likely will want to collaborate with other agencies, such as law enforcement and child welfare, in developing a protocol to respond to trafficking in a comprehensive way. A sample protocol, developed by Grossmont Union High School District (California), can be accessed at <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/webinar/csec-protocol.pdf>.

When developing protocols and policies, it should be communicated clearly that minor sex trafficking is an act of abuse. As such, minors who are trafficked for sex should be treated as victims and not criminals (p. 3).

- **Offer a prevention curriculum to students.**

As part of broader efforts to teach students about issues related to physical and emotional health and safety, school districts should offer a developmentally appropriate trafficking prevention curriculum to students. Evidence suggests that engaging the population affected by an issue (in this

case, young people) can be valuable and effective (p. 316). See [Additional Resources](#) below for links to sample materials and curricula that are appropriate for a student audience.

## THE ROLE OF STATE COORDINATORS AND LOCAL LIAISONS

Under Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. §§11431-11435), the primary piece of federal legislation related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness, every State Department of Education must designate a State Coordinator for Homeless Education (State Coordinator) and every school district must designate a local homeless education liaison (local liaison). State Coordinators and local liaisons oversee the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act within their states and school districts, respectively.

As previously noted, of the many factors that may increase a young person's vulnerability to sex trafficking, homelessness is widely considered to be the most direct contributor (Estes and Weiner, 2001, as cited in the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2013, p. 85). As the lead homeless education contact, State Coordinators and local liaisons can play a critical role in guiding efforts to respond to the issue of human trafficking in schools. Following are specific steps that State Coordinators and local liaisons can take to contribute to their states' and school districts' response to human trafficking:

- Find out if your state and/or school district has an established protocol for responding to suspected incidences of trafficking among students. If so, incorporate information about the protocol into trainings provided to state education department and school district personnel. If not, approach department or district leadership about convening a working group to explore the issue of trafficking and develop an organized

response.

- Incorporate information about the issue of human trafficking and the vulnerability of homeless youth to trafficking involvement in trainings provided to department and district personnel. See [Additional Resources](#) below to assist you in your efforts.
- Target training and awareness efforts to school personnel who may be particularly likely to recognize signs of trafficking among students, including:
  - » school enrollment personnel, who may notice behavior that raises red flags from non-relative adults present at the time of enrollment;
  - » school nurses, who may notice the physical manifestations of trafficking involvement among students; and
  - » school counselors, who may be more likely to work with at-risk students and/or become aware of circumstances that may indicate trafficking involvement.

See [Warning Signs of Involvement in Sex Trafficking](#) above for more information.

## CONCLUSION

Given the profitability of the crime of human trafficking, and the broad-reaching and anonymous communication capacity provided through the internet, a savvy and strategic response to the issue by human services agencies; law enforcement; and all sectors of federal, state, and local government is and will continue to be warranted. Schools are positioned uniquely and strategically to engage school personnel and students in a coordinated and effective response. Building on existing efforts to equip school personnel to protect the safety and well-being of students in their care and to equip students to make safe and healthy choices about their physical and emotional well-being, schools can play an important role in our nation's response to the crime of the sex trafficking of minors.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### General Information

- [FindYouthInfo.gov Trafficking of Youth Webpage](http://findyouthinfo.gov/youth-topics/trafficking-of-youth) | <http://findyouthinfo.gov/youth-topics/trafficking-of-youth>
- [The A21 Campaign](http://www.thea21campaign.org/) | <http://www.thea21campaign.org/>
- [The National Human Trafficking Resource Center \(NHTRC\)](http://www.polarisproject.org/what-we-do/national-human-trafficking-hotline/the-nhtrc/overview) | <http://www.polarisproject.org/what-we-do/national-human-trafficking-hotline/the-nhtrc/overview>
- [The Polaris Project](http://www.polarisproject.org/) | <http://www.polarisproject.org/>
- [The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Anti-Trafficking in Persons \(ATIP\) Program](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/anti-trafficking) | <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/anti-trafficking>

### Training and Technical Assistance

- [NHTRC's Access Training Webpage](http://www.polarisproject.org/what-we-do/national-human-trafficking-hotline/access-training) | <http://www.polarisproject.org/what-we-do/national-human-trafficking-hotline/access-training>
- [The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Blue Campaign](http://www.dhs.gov/end-human-trafficking) | <http://www.dhs.gov/end-human-trafficking>

### Student Materials and Curricula

- [The A21 Campaign's \*Bodies Are Not Commodities\* High School Curriculum](http://www.thea21campaign.org/content/usa-curriculum/) | [www.thea21campaign.org/content/usa-curriculum/](http://www.thea21campaign.org/content/usa-curriculum/)
- [The Not for Sale Campaign's High School Curriculum](http://www.notforsalecampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/NFSHighSchoolCurriculum.pdf) | <http://www.notforsalecampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/NFSHighSchoolCurriculum.pdf>
- [The Prevention Project](http://richmondjusticeinitiative.com/prevention-project/) | <http://richmondjusticeinitiative.com/prevention-project/>

- TeachUNICEF’s Child Trafficking Curriculum | <http://teachunicef.org/explore/topic/child-trafficking>

## Recommended Reading

- *Human Trafficking 101 for School Administrators and Staff* | <http://www.dhs.gov/awareness-training>
- *Human Trafficking of Children in the United States: A Fact Sheet for Schools* | <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/oshs/factsheet.html>

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Every state is required to have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, and every school district is required to have a local homeless education liaison. These individuals will assist you with the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your State Coordinator is, visit the NCHE website at [http://www.serve.org/nche/states/state\\_resources.php](http://www.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php).



For more information on the McKinney-Vento Act and resources for implementation, call the NCHE Helpline at 800-308-2145 or e-mail [homeless@serve.org](mailto:homeless@serve.org).

**Local Contact Information:**