



# Child Sex Trafficking in America: A Guide for Child Welfare Professionals

## What is Child Sex Trafficking?

**Child sex trafficking (CST)** is a form of child abuse that occurs when any child under 18 years of age is advertised, solicited or exploited through commercial sex where something of value – such as money, drugs or a place to stay – is exchanged for sexual activity. The item of value can be given to or received by any person including the child.

Traffickers can be anyone who profits from the selling of a child for sex to a buyer, including family members, foster parents, gangs, and perceived trusted adults or romantic partners. In some cases, there is no identified trafficker, and it is the person buying sex from the child who is exploiting the child's vulnerabilities. For instance, if a child runs away, a buyer may exploit the child's need for food and shelter offering to provide that in exchange for sex.

## Child Sex Trafficking and Children in Care

Child welfare professionals play a critical role in preventing, intervening in, and providing a comprehensive service response to victims of child sex trafficking. Data and lived experience of survivors has revealed children in the care of social services are disproportionately vulnerable to sex trafficking. Perpetrators commonly target and recruit youth who have already experienced a disrupted home life and childhood sexual abuse.

19%

of the children reported missing to NCMEC in 2023 who left from the care of social services were likely **victims of child sex trafficking**.

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 they were missing. Asking non-judgmental questions about how the child took care of themselves while they were missing, and noting any red flags or changes in behavior, can help reveal potential victimization.

## Familial Trafficking

When investigating child abuse and maltreatment it is important for child welfare professionals to be aware children may be trafficked by a family member or multiple members of their household. NCMEC has limited information regarding statistics or prevalence of familial trafficking because these children are less likely to be reported missing. In many of these cases the "typical" red flags associated with child sex trafficking may not apply since the child and family may attempt to maintain an outward appearance of normalcy. If the child does seek help and they are not believed, their trafficker will know, and their safety may be at risk. For these reasons, some familial trafficking survivors express serious concerns about who will take care of them and whether anyone will believe them, if they do tell.

## Federal Requirements

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 (CAPTA)** definition of an abused and neglected child was amended to include sex trafficking victims irrespective of the relationship of the abuser to the child.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

NCMEC provides specialized support and guidance on reporting children missing from care to NCMEC. For more information regarding NCMEC's work to address child sex trafficking and children missing from care, please visit [NCMEC.org/CMFC](https://www.ncmec.org/cmfc)

1 42 U.S.C. § 5106g (the amended definition took effect in May 2017).

2 42 U.S.C. § 671(a)(9).

3 42 U.S.C. § 671(a)(35).

## Indicators

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 important to remember that it is not the responsibility of a child to recognize that he or she is being victimized and ask for help. It is up to the professionals and trusted adults in these children's lives to better recognize the signs associated with child sex trafficking so they can intervene and help them get the support they deserve. Some risk factors include:

- Chronically runs away from home or placement (especially 3+ missing incidents)
- Unexplained access to large amounts of cash, prepaid cards or hotel keys
- Tattoos or branding related to money, matching those of other known trafficking victims or the child is unwilling to explain
- Significant changes in behavior, including their online activity
- Close association with an overly controlling adult
- In possession of material goods inconsistent to the child's access to money or socioeconomic status

## NCMEC Assistance for Child Welfare Professionals

The Child Sex Trafficking Recovery Services Team (RST) provides specialized support and resources to child welfare professionals, foster parents and law enforcement who are working with victims of child sex trafficking. RST Resource Specialists provide expert knowledge and guidance on promising practices in trauma-informed response by making connections to statewide and local specialized child sex trafficking resources. RST Resource Specialists are prepared to assist in the development of intentional, trauma-informed, and victim-centered plans which has been proven to build rapport, increase opportunities for youth engagement, and reduce trauma responses.

In many situations due to the trauma and manipulation from the trafficker, survivors will feel as if they are responsible for their own victimization. In some cases, even defending their abuser. It's important to remember to meet survivors where they are at in understanding their victimization while also ensuring their rights and access to services as a victim of a crime are honored. Identification is a very important step but it is often only the beginning of an incredibly difficult road to healing for survivors. For assistance please reach out to [RecoveryServices@ncmec.org](mailto:RecoveryServices@ncmec.org).



- References traveling to other cities or states, while missing or lack of knowledge or their current whereabouts
- References online escort ads, dating websites/apps
- Uses language or emojis often associated with prostitution, such as "Trick," "The Life," "The Game"
- Recovered at a hotel, street track, truck stop, strip club or other location known for commercial sex

### 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)**

[NCMEC.org/CMFC](https://www.ncmec.org/CMFC)

\* Per federal law 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®

NCMEC is excited to offer free, online trainings specifically for **you!** Child Welfare professionals play an important role in the response to children missing from care and child sex trafficking. Navigating federal requirements, providing services, and engaging with survivors can be challenging. NCMEC is here to help!



#### Courses:

- Child Sex Trafficking: Understanding Running Behavior and Trauma-Informed Youth Engagement (1 NASW CEU)
- Child Sex Trafficking Legislation: What it Means for You
- Reporting Children Missing from Care: How NCMEC Can Support You
- NCMEC Resources for Child Welfare Professionals



**1 in 6** of the more than **28,800** missing children reported to NCMEC in 2023 were likely victims of CST.