

What Is Human Trafficking?

Human trafficking is modern-day slavery and involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to exploit a person for labor or commercial sex. Any minor, that is anyone under the age of 18, who is induced to perform a commercial sex act is a victim of human trafficking according to U.S. law, regardless of whether there is force, fraud, or coercion.¹

- Every year, millions of men, women, and children are trafficked in countries around the world – including the United States. Many of these victims are lured with false promises of financial or emotional security; and they are forced or coerced into commercial sex (prostitution), domestic servitude, or other types of forced labor.
- Increasingly, criminal organizations such as gangs are luring children from local schools into commercial sexual exploitation or trafficking.

Human trafficking is different from human smuggling.

Human smuggling involves bringing (or attempting to bring) a person into a country in violation of immigration or other laws. Human trafficking is the exploitation of a person for sex or labor. Human trafficking does not require movement or transport across borders – the exploitation is what makes the person a victim.

1. Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA), Pub. L. No. 106-386, § 103(8)(A), 114 Stat. 1470 (2000), 22 U.S.C.A. § 7102(8)(A).

Who Are the Victims? Who Is at Risk?

Victims of trafficking can be any age, race, gender, or nationality, including U.S. citizens.

- Trafficking victims can be men or women, boys or girls, U.S. citizens or foreign nationals. Human trafficking can involve school-age youths, particularly those made vulnerable by unstable family situations, or who have little or no social support. The children at risk are not just high school students – studies show that the average age a child is trafficked into the commercial sex trade is between 11 and 14 years old.
- Traffickers may target young victims through social media websites, telephone chat-lines, and after-school programs, on the streets, at shopping malls, in clubs, or through other students who are used by the traffickers to recruit other victims. In fact, a person can be trafficked without ever leaving his or her hometown.
- Child trafficking can take a variety of forms, including commercial sexual exploitation (prostitution) or forced labor. Those who recruit minors for the purpose of commercial sex are violating U.S. anti-trafficking laws, even if no force, fraud, or coercion was involved.

Did You Know?

- Each year, as many as 100,000–300,000 American children are at risk of being trafficked for commercial sex in the United States.
- The average age a girl enters the commercial sex trade is 12–14 years old. For boys, it's even younger – just 11–13 years old.

How Do I Identify Human Trafficking?

Human trafficking often can go unnoticed, even by individuals interacting with a victim on a regular basis. Recognizing the “red flags,” or indicators, can help alert school administrators and staff to a human trafficking situation. While no single indicator is necessarily proof of human trafficking, recognizing the signs is the first step in identifying potential victims.

Behavior or Physical State:

- Does the student have unexplained absences from school, or has the student demonstrated an inability to attend school on a regular basis?
- Has the student suddenly changed his or her usual attire, behavior, or relationships?
- Does the student suddenly have more (and/or more expensive) material possessions?
- Does the student chronically run away from home?
- Does the student act fearful, anxious, depressed, submissive, tense, or nervous and paranoid?
- Does the student defer to another person to speak for him or her, especially during interactions with school authority figures (this may include an adult described by the student as a relative, but also may be a friend or boyfriend/girlfriend)?
- Does the student show signs of physical and/or sexual abuse, physical restraint, confinement, or other serious pain or suffering?
- Does the student appear to have been deprived of food, water, sleep, medical care, or other life necessities?
- Is the student in possession of his or her own identification documents (e.g., student identification card, driver’s license, or passport), or does someone else have them?

Social Behavior:

- Does the student have a “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” who is noticeably older?
- Is the student engaging in uncharacteristically promiscuous behavior, or making references to sexual situations or terminology that are beyond age-specific norms?
- Does the student appear to be restricted from contacting family, friends, or his or her legal guardian?

These indicators are just a few that may alert you to a potential human trafficking situation. You can use this information to help recognize relevant suspicious behavior(s) and take appropriate action.

What Should I Do?

If you suspect that a person may be a victim of human trafficking, please call the Homeland Security Investigations Tip Line at 1-866-347-2423 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with over 300 languages and dialects available) or submit a tip online at www.ice.gov/tips.

You also may call the National Human Trafficking Resource Center at 1-888-373-7888 to get help or connect with a service provider in your area. The center is not a law enforcement or immigration authority and is operated by a non-governmental organization. The center is one of several resources available. Reference to the center is not intended to imply an endorsement of the organization by the federal government.

Non-law enforcement personnel should never attempt to directly confront a suspected trafficker or rescue a suspected victim. Doing so could put both your and the victim’s safety at risk. By immediately informing law enforcement of your suspicions, you may be able to safely assist in the recovery of the victim and the dismantling of the trafficking operation.

School administrators and staff who suspect a trafficking incident should follow their school district’s established protocol for such matters. Schools that do not have such procedures in place should consider adopting a formal protocol on how to identify the indicators and report suspected cases to law enforcement. Your protocol should be developed in collaboration with school district leadership; federal and/or local law enforcement; mental health, child welfare, or victim services providers; and other appropriate community partners.