

Child Sex Trafficking: Signs, Risk Factors, and Tips to Keep Kids Safe

What may not be readily apparent in the frequent news stories about sex trafficking is how many of the youth who fall victim have a connection to out-of-home care. In this tip sheet, we take a deeper look at what sex trafficking is, how youth involved in out-of-home care may be vulnerable to sex trafficking, and indicators or signs that your child may be involved. In addition, we have included information about what we can all do to combat sex trafficking and keep our children safe.

What is Child Sex Trafficking?

As stated in the Federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act, child sex trafficking includes the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting a child under 18 years of age for the purpose of a commercial sex act. The average age of a sex trafficking victim is 13 years old.



The United States Department of Justice has some general facts, including:

- Approximately 1,400 individuals were arrested at the federal, state, and local levels on the specific charge of sex trafficking a minor, with an increasing number arrested each year.
- The average age of the traffickers in

federal prosecutions was 28.5 years old. Roughly three-quarters of them were male. Nearly all were U.S. citizens.

- Federal prosecutions of child-only sex trafficking cases increased by 17% from 2019 to 2020, and children made up 69% of victims in newly charged sex trafficking cases in 2020.
- Looking at federal trafficking cases prosecuted in 2020, just over half of the victims were children, with victim ages ranging from 4 to 17 years old when they were exploited, with an average age of 15 years old. 89% of child victims in active sex trafficking cases were between 14 and 17 years old.
- 45.1% of victims knew their trafficker prior to becoming a victim.

More detailed reporting regarding statistics specific to Wisconsin can be

found in this [2018 report by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families](#).

It may be easy to think that the problem of sex trafficking exists only in big cities or urban areas, but the fact is that this epidemic has filtered into suburban and rural communities, as well. According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, in 2021 alone, there were 166 Wisconsin youth identified as victims of trafficking.

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While Milwaukee is a known hub for sex trafficking, Wisconsin has documented cases of human trafficking in all 72 counties. Green Bay, Appleton, and Racine have seen a rise in reported incidents in the recent past. In 2017, Brown County officials arrested 16 people in a sex trafficking sting. A 2016 report from the National Human Trafficking Hotline shows increases in potential trafficking locations in Milwaukee, Madison, Fond du Lac, La Crosse, Eau Claire, Wausau, Green Bay, and Sheboygan, among other areas of the state.

What to Be Aware Of

It's frightening to know that any child can become a victim of sex trafficking. However, there are risk factors and indicators that you can make yourself aware of to see if your child may be more susceptible to becoming a victim. Children who are in out-of-home care or are homeless, unfortunately, meet most of the risk factors, such as:

- Having feelings of low self-esteem or self-worth
- Having experienced childhood sexual abuse
- Youth who are chronically missing or run away
- Youth who do not feel loved by their parents or caregivers—birth family, foster family, or adoptive family.

LGBTQ youth are also at higher risk of being targeted for sex trafficking. Additionally, having a family history of substance abuse, lack of positive social support, loss of a parent or caregiver, poverty, and neglect are also risk factors. These factors often go hand in hand with the reasons children enter the foster system or are available for adoption. According to the National Foster Youth Institute, 60% of all child sex trafficking victims have histories in the child welfare system. All children are at risk for sex trafficking, but there are increased odds for children in care or who have been adopted.

Most youth begin to seek out their identities when they reach their early teen years. We know that this search for identity is often heightened for children who were adopted or who spent time in the foster care system. In the search to find themselves, you may start to see some of the behaviors that have been mentioned, such as running away, defiance, expressing feelings of being unloved or unwanted, and an increasing need to feel accepted. Characteristics such as these may mean a higher risk of becoming victims of sex trafficking. Traffickers seek out youth who are vulnerable and who can be easily groomed and controlled, youth who are often trying to find a place where they fit in or someone to accept them. Traffickers may also use peers who are already involved to groom and recruit classmates who may be at a higher risk. The promise of cell phones, clothing, shoes, a place to stay, drugs, alcohol, and other things may all be ways to lure victims in. However, eventually, all those things need to be “paid back,” and that is when youth are introduced to sex work as a repayment.

There are some indicators that you can be aware of in order to better protect your child from the risks of the sex trafficking industry.

- Watch for changes in your child's behavior, such as in their online activity. You may see new profiles or online friends. Your child may lie about their identity, name, or age online.
- Be mindful of your child avoiding answering questions about their behavior or activities or allowing others to speak on their behalf.
- Seeking constant approval from others is also a behavioral indicator, in addition to your child acting as if they have been coached or are frightened or hostile when having to engage with authority.
- Your child may reject help or stop coming to you when they need help.

In addition to behavioral indicators, there are

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also several physical signs that may give you an insight into sex trafficking. Those include:

- A group of minors who surround themselves with unrelated adult males who seem to be overly controlling or abusive towards them.
- The presence of minors at hotels and truck stops.
- A stash of birth control, such as large quantities of condoms or lubrication, as well as hotel and pre-paid cards, multiple cell phones, or large amounts of money hidden in your child's room.
- Be aware of any notebooks or pieces of paper that may have phone numbers, addresses, names, or dollar amounts written on them.

Please keep in mind that no one indicator confirms that your child is involved in sex trafficking; however, multiple indicators may increase the likelihood that your child might be involved.

Next Steps

Awareness is key when it comes to this epidemic in our society. These activities are going on in every community, large and small, and in every part of the state and country. Awareness, too, of the risk factors and possible indicators may also help prevent further involvement. Talk openly and often with your children; reframe the “stranger danger” conversations that you may have had when they were younger. You might even reach out to other community organizations and schools in your neighborhood to share information, tips, and resources. Some traffickers may be so bold as to hang around places like community centers and schools as a means of recruiting new victims.

Additionally, you can learn more by reviewing the work of the Wisconsin Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force or organizations such as Exploit No More, Lacey's Hope Project, and Polaris, which

operates the National Human Trafficking Hotline. These organizations' sole goals are to create awareness and help schools, communities, hotels, and hospitals set up protocols and procedures on what to do for prevention, as well as assist victims. There are additional resources included at the end of this tip sheet. If you have any questions or want to speak with someone about this topic further, we encourage you to reach out to one of the organizations listed or to the Wisconsin Family Connections Center for help and support.



Resources

Training From [*Champion Classrooms*](#)

- [What to Do When You Think It Might Be Sex Trafficking: Sex Trafficking and Youth](#)

Additional Resources

- [National Human Trafficking Hotline: Wisconsin](#)
- [Building an Effective Response to Sex Trafficking in Wisconsin](#)
- [Wisconsin Child Sex Trafficking and Exploitation - Indicators and Response Guide](#)
- [10 Things You Can Do Today to Help Fight Human Trafficking](#)
- [How Do I Know?](#)
- [National Policy Council Amplifies Guidance for Child Welfare Agencies in Preventing Human Trafficking in Foster Care](#)
- [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#)