

Human Trafficking in **AMERICA'S SCHOOLS**

JANUARY 2021



What Schools Can Do To Prevent,
Respond, and Help Students To
Recover From Human Trafficking,
Second Edition



Disclaimer

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Office of Safe and Supportive Schools

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January 2021

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Companion Resource

Schools or districts currently utilizing multi-tiered systems of supports, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, are encouraged to also access [**Addressing the Growing Problem of Domestic Sex Trafficking in Minors Through Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports**](#). The resource, created as a complementary document to this guide, provides information on how to utilize existing multi-tiered strategies to help prevent domestic minor sex trafficking and provide assistance to student victims and their families in America's schools.

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Introduction

According to federal law, human trafficking is the exploitation of a person through force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of forced labor, commercial sex, or both. Victims of human trafficking include adults and children, both U.S. citizens and foreign nationals.

Of 22,326 trafficking victims and survivors identified through contacts with the National Human Trafficking Hotline in 2019, at least 5,359 were under age 18.¹ Many underage victims of human trafficking are students in the American school system. No community, school, socioeconomic group, or student demographic is immune. Cases of child trafficking are found in every area of the country—in rural, suburban, and urban settings alike.

Few crimes are more abhorrent than human trafficking, and few crimes are more challenging for communities to recognize and address. For many people, the reality of trafficking in their community is difficult to comprehend, let alone confront. Yet communities, including schools, are beginning to take proactive action against human trafficking. It is fitting that schools take on this challenge; of all social institutions, schools are perhaps the best positioned to identify and report suspected trafficking and connect affected students to critical services.

Schools can and should be safe places for students, and even more so for students whose lives are otherwise characterized by instability and lack of safety and security. Everyone who is part of the school community—administrators, school counselors, nurses, other mental health professionals, teachers, bus drivers, maintenance personnel, food service staff, resource officers, and other school community members—has the potential to be an advocate for children who have been exploited. First, however, school community members must learn the factors that make students vulnerable to trafficking and how to identify the warning signs.

The terms “victim” and “survivor” can be problematic for those affected by trafficking, and by using them in this resource, we do not mean to label or define anyone’s experience. Instead, we use them for clarity and to be consistent with language that is currently standard throughout the literature on this issue. In practice, educators are encouraged to be mindful of the power of these terms and to determine, in dialogue with students impacted by trafficking, how they prefer to be referenced.

Although they play a crucial role, school personnel cannot and should not address these complex issues alone. Effectively responding to human trafficking demands increased awareness and clearly defined policies, protocols, and procedures supported by collaboration with child protective services, social services, community-based service providers, and law enforcement (if appropriate).

This guide is intended to provide:

- ▶ awareness of the current prevalence of child trafficking and the forms it takes;
- ▶ information on risk factors and indicators of child trafficking;
- ▶ details about three prevention tiers and the implications for schools' role in addressing child trafficking;
- ▶ information on how professional development of school staff and prevention education for students and families can reduce the likelihood of trafficking; and
- ▶ details on how policies, protocols, and partnerships with other community sectors can help prevent trafficking.

“

A 15-year-old girl in Arizona attended a high school football game, where she met a friendly 20-year-old woman who began chatting with her. To the younger girl's surprise, the 20-year-old ran across the street to buy her a phone so they could keep in touch. The catch? The girl would need to repay the newly acquired debt by giving men “massages” in motel rooms.

–Trafficking Researcher

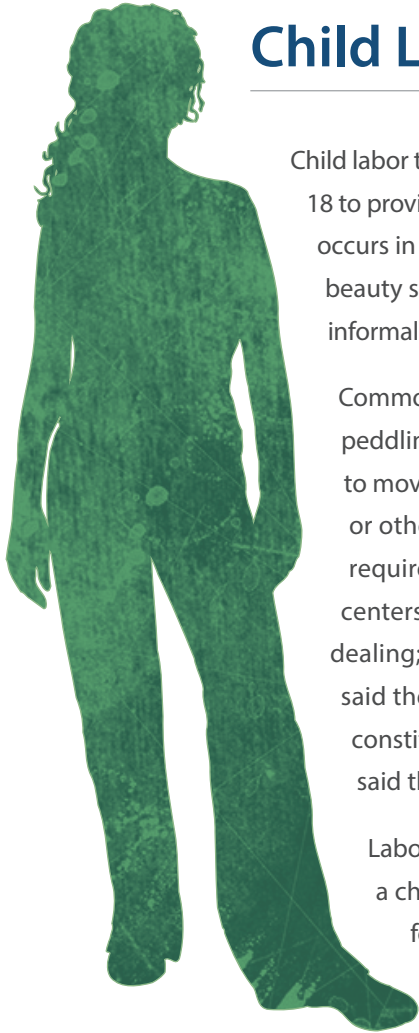
See [Tools for Educators](#), developed by the National Human Trafficking Resource Center, for examples of safety and trafficking assessment questions.

Child Sex Trafficking

Inducing a child under age 18 to perform a commercial sex act, *with or without* force, fraud, or coercion, is human trafficking. There are no exceptions. Children can never be responsible for or complicit in their own abuse. Sex trafficking can have devastating consequences for children, including long-lasting physical and psychological trauma, sexually transmitted infections, substance use disorders, unplanned pregnancy, and mental health problems, such as depression and suicidal ideation.² While everyone experiences trauma differently, survivors' stories share the common threads of manipulation and abuse.

Children are trafficked by peers, family members, romantic partners, acquaintances, and strangers. Traffickers target children and adolescents for grooming, often over an extended period of time. Traffickers target vulnerable children, secure their trust, fulfill their needs, isolate them from potential support, and eventually exert total control over them, all the while working to normalize the abuse. Recruitment can and does occur everywhere—in school; at home, malls, sporting events, and parties; and in shelters and detention facilities—and is conducted both in person and online, where traffickers lure young people with the offer of friendship, romance, or jobs.³ When the trafficker has established sufficient control, children are sold at private parties, illicit massage businesses, hotel and

motel rooms, strip clubs, trade shows, truck stops, and other venues.⁴ Sex trafficking is inherently traumatic; at a minimum, survivors require educational and therapeutic aftercare services that are trauma informed.⁵



Child Labor Trafficking

Child labor trafficking is using force, fraud, or coercion to compel a child under 18 to provide involuntary labor or services. Child labor trafficking most often occurs in agricultural settings, factories, domestic workplaces, health and beauty services, restaurants, and small businesses, and is more common in informal settings or situations where employers cannot be easily monitored.⁶

Common scenarios for labor trafficking include traveling sales crews and peddling operations. In traveling sales crews, young people are recruited to move from city to city selling cheap goods, such as candy, magazines, or other trinkets for little or no pay.⁷ In peddling operations, they are required to solicit “charitable” donations on the street or in shopping centers.⁸ Another common form of forced labor involves coerced drug dealing; of 641 homeless youth interviewed for a large 2016 study, 7% said they had been forced to sell drugs, often for gangs. These reports constituted 81% of all instances of forced labor that youth in the study said they experienced.⁹

Labor trafficking is not always readily apparent. One indicator is when a child appears to be in the custody of a nonfamily member and is forced to perform work for that person’s financial benefit, or for the benefit of third parties whom the child may not even know. As in sex trafficking, labor traffickers keep victims under their control through fear, intimidation, and abuse.¹⁰ It is important to remember that child victims of labor trafficking also may be sexually abused or experiencing sex trafficking at the same time.

Trafficking Is Child Abuse

Despite the pervasiveness of child trafficking in the United States, many communities still deny it is a problem. Child trafficking victims are stigmatized and sometimes arrested as lawbreakers themselves. Often, they are shunted out of mainstream education settings to alternative placements, where they are thought to pose a risk to others. But awareness is changing. Increasingly, states and communities

recognize that trafficking is a widespread and insidious problem requiring a coordinated response. The evolving understanding that trafficking is child abuse has allowed educators, law enforcement, and social service providers to minimize judgment, provide wraparound services, prevent revictimization, and focus on the safety and well-being of students who have experienced trafficking.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 was a turning point in the nationwide shift toward rightfully seeing children who experience trafficking as victims. The TVPA defined sex and labor trafficking and said that inducing a child under 18 to engage in commercial sex is illegal regardless of whether force, fraud, or coercion is involved. No matter the scenario, the law and its subsequent reauthorizations made clear that children under age 18 should never be treated as willing accomplices in prostitution, pornography schemes, or any other act involving the commercial sale of sex.

Following on the federal legislation, states in recent years have enacted [“safe harbor” laws](#) that provide for the coordination of services to child trafficking survivors, decriminalize youth involvement in trafficking, and increase penalties for traffickers of children. Safe harbor laws vary from state to state and are continually evolving, but all are meant to ease the stigma, promote recovery, and offer therapeutic (rather than punitive) pathways for care.¹¹ The bottom line is that children who are being trafficked should *always* be treated as victims and that services are available to help schools support affected students.

Vulnerable Populations

Some young people are more vulnerable to being trafficked than others, and often one risk factor overlaps with and amplifies others. Particularly vulnerable groups of students tend to share histories of poverty, family instability, physical and sexual abuse, and trauma. Racial and ethnic minority students are more vulnerable to trafficking partly because they are more likely to experience poverty and its associated effects. The relationship between race and the risk of being trafficked is profound; in some jurisdictions, African American minors—most of them girls—represent 50% or more of all juvenile sex trafficking victims.¹² American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander girls are also much more likely to be sexually exploited than their non-native peers.^{13,14} Hispanics too are disproportionately affected by human trafficking, especially labor trafficking.¹⁵

Beyond these broad demographic groups just referenced, certain subpopulations of youth are at elevated risk for being trafficked. Particularly vulnerable groups are described next.

Runaway youth | Young people who run away from home are often fleeing abusive or neglectful situations. Despite their attempts to improve their circumstances, young people who leave home to couch-surf or live on the streets run the risk of severe exploitation. According to researchers, young people who run away from home more than once are far more likely than their

peers to drop out of school; dropping out of school, in turn, removes a student from healthy peers and adults and makes exploitation far more likely. While risk factors for running away include physical and emotional abuse and substance use, research has suggested that one of the most important factors for runaway youth who become involved in trafficking is having a much older boyfriend or girlfriend.¹⁶

Homeless youth | Few young people are as vulnerable to exploitation as unaccompanied homeless youth. Without the protection of an adult caregiver, homeless youth can be desperate to address their basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter. Homeless youth are vulnerable to labor traffickers because they need to support themselves and are often willing to take any job that is offered.¹⁷ A large 2016 study of runaway and homeless youth found that 14% of youth receiving services from homeless youth shelters had been trafficked for sex and 8% had been trafficked for labor. Some regional studies have found that up to 40% of homeless youth report trafficking experiences.¹⁸ The median age at which youth in the national study began being trafficked for sex was 16. Among homeless youth, 24% of those identifying as LGBTQ reported having been sold for sex or exchanged sex for food, shelter, or other basic needs.¹⁹

Young people who are or were in the child welfare system | By definition, children involved with the child welfare system have already experienced physical and emotional abuse and neglect.²⁰ Because of their painful histories, they are more likely than their peers to have complex needs and challenges. They can be particularly vulnerable to predators who seem to offer them love, care, and security. Researchers have found a strong correlation between chronic neglect and abuse, particularly sexual abuse, and later sexual exploitation.²¹

Young people who are or have been in the juvenile justice system | There is a bidirectional association (i.e., young people may move in either direction) between involvement in the juvenile justice system and the likelihood of experiencing sex trafficking. A study of 86 state-involved youth in Washington State with confirmed or suspected histories of being trafficked found that 75% had been in juvenile detention at least once; the average number of episodes in detention was 9.2.²² Sometimes, detentions are a consequence of an arrest for prostitution; other times, factors such as poverty, mental health issues, substance abuse, and homelessness make young people more vulnerable to arrest. Youth who are arrested may in turn be exposed to adult criminals who abuse them, amplifying their trauma.²³

Students who drop out of school | Dropping out of school is both a risk factor for trafficking and a consequence of it. Juveniles and adults who become involved in the commercial sex trade are more likely than their peers to have a history of interrupted school activity, including school dropout.²⁴ A 2018 study of homeless youth found that those who had been trafficked for sex were 72% more likely to have dropped out of school than homeless youth who had not been trafficked, leading researchers to conclude that graduating from high school is a protective factor for youth.²⁵



Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities or differences | Students with cognitive disabilities or developmental delays are particularly vulnerable to trafficking. Research has found that students with disabilities are often unable to say “no,” can’t easily read the intentions of friends or “romantic partners,” and do not understand the dangers involved in running away. When they realize they are in trouble, they often feel trapped, but cannot find a way out.²⁶

LGBTQ youth | Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth experience high rates of bullying, assault, and sexual abuse. Up to 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ, and LGBTQ youth are up to seven times more likely to experience acts of sexual violence.²⁷ LGBTQ youth who are forced out of their homes by unaccepting families or communities are at high risk of violence, and can be easy prey for pimps or acquaintances who offer help in exchange for sex. Sometimes, the structure of such relationships is quasi-familial, where youth report being coerced into commercial sex by a seemingly caring “house parent.”²⁸

Unaccompanied migrant youth | Minor refugees or immigrants who are in the United States without their parents have often experienced significant loss and turmoil before and during their journey to the United States and may face more in the months after they arrive. Even short-term separation between parents and children can increase the likelihood of conflict when families are reunified. In the meantime, teens who are placed with nonfamily sponsors or caregivers are at risk for abuse, homelessness, and trafficking.²⁹ Ironically, migrant youth coming to the United States may be forced by the journey itself into labor trafficking because they may have to pay off the debt they or family members incurred to get to the United States.³⁰

Migrant and seasonal workers | Children and teens traveling with or without their families as part of seasonal agricultural work crews are easy to exploit. These young people may be U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, undocumented immigrants, or citizens of other countries working under temporary work visas. Whatever their situation, they tend to travel from place to place and work in relative isolation, sometimes for crew leaders willing to ignore child labor and education laws.³¹

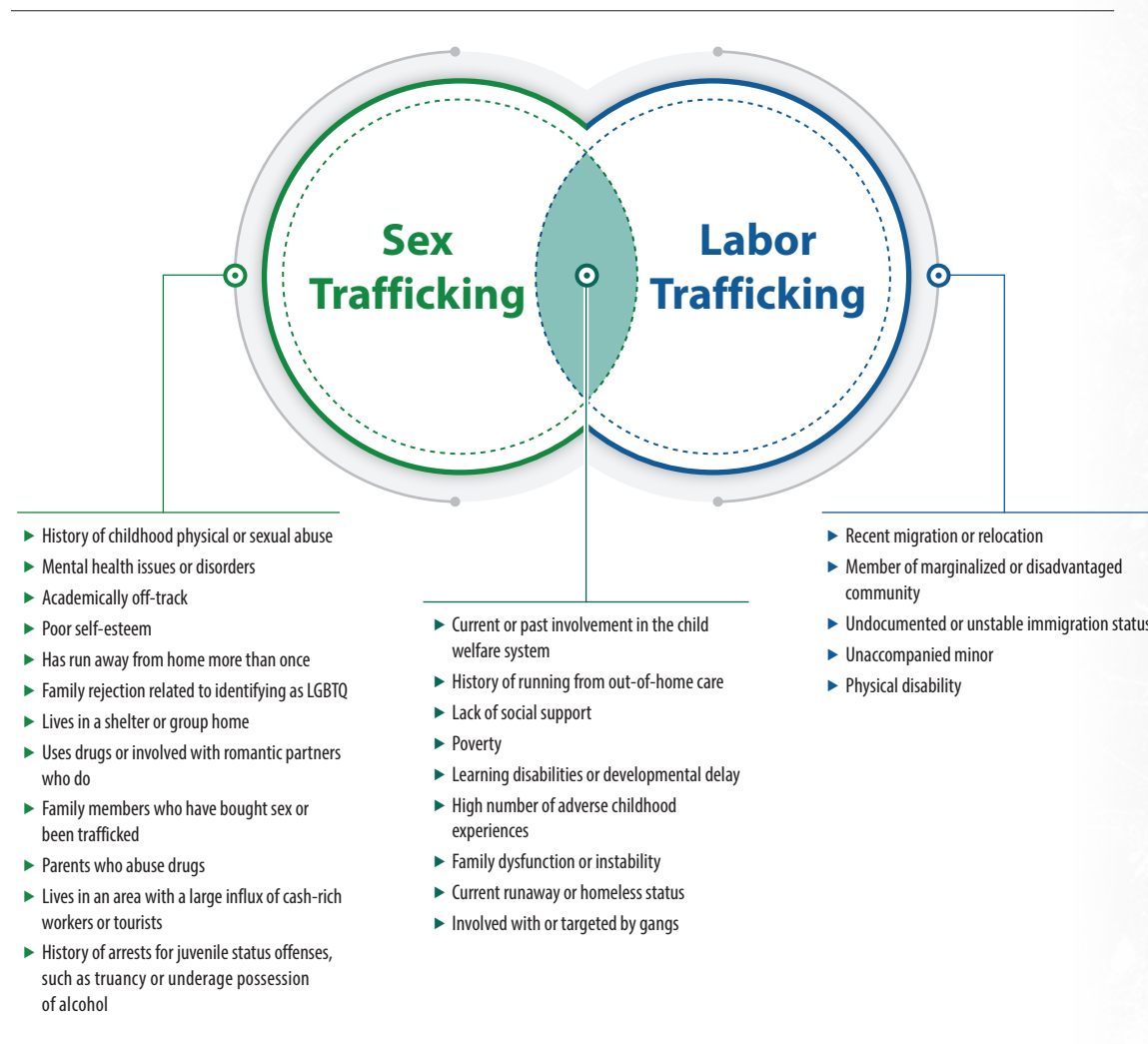
Risk Factors

Although there is no standard profile of a child trafficking victim, several risk factors make certain children more susceptible (see Figure 1).³² Researchers have found that sex traffickers often target children and youth with a history of maltreatment, sexual abuse, low self-esteem, and minimal social support. Children and youth at risk of labor trafficking share many of the same risk factors; children who have recently migrated or relocated are at a heightened risk. It is important to remember that absence of these risk factors does not mean any particular child is *not* being trafficked. No two cases are precisely alike, and school staff



should work hard to overcome any stereotypes they may harbor about the appearance of victims or traffickers. Risk factors common to both groups are in the middle column.

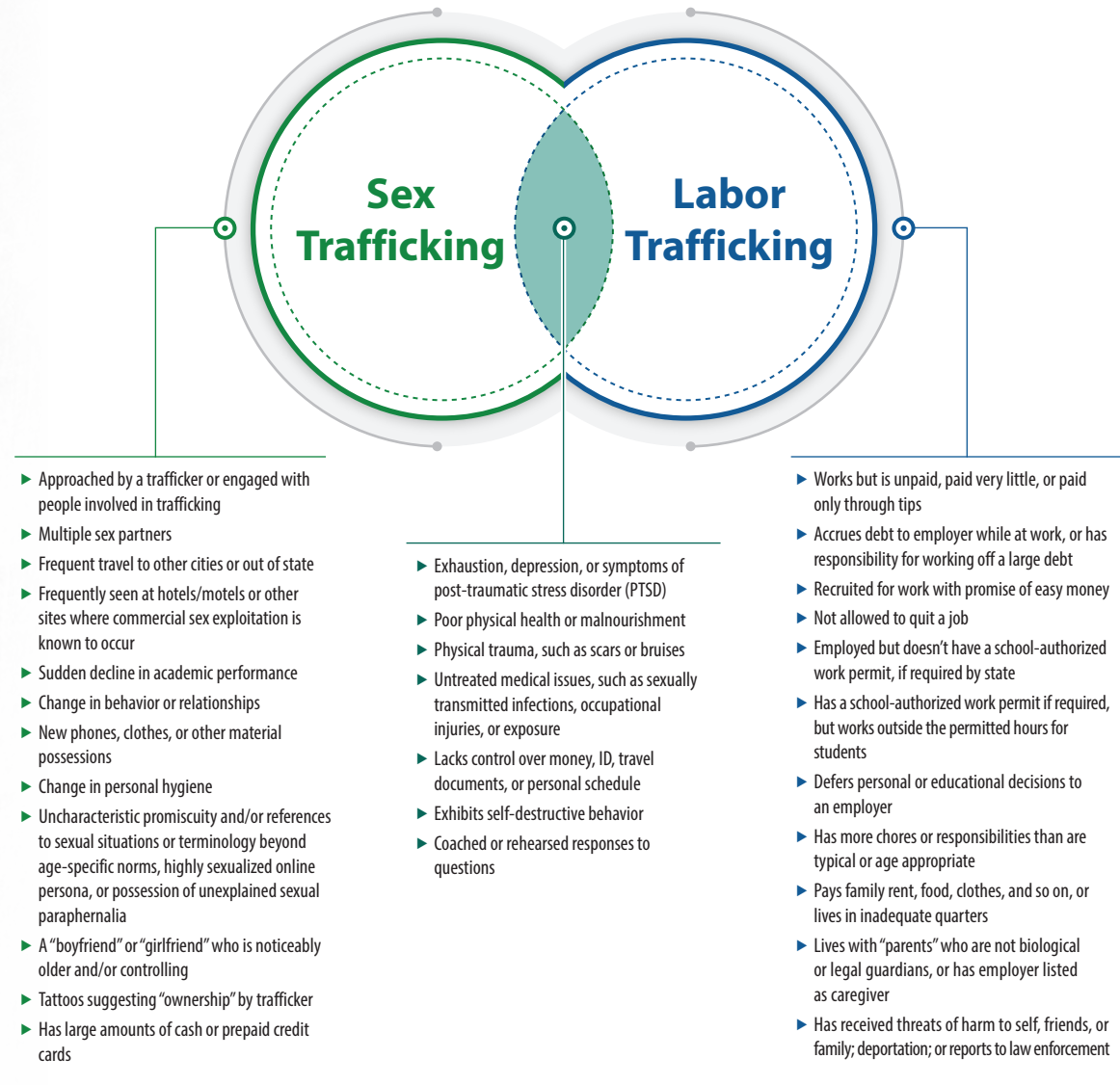
Figure 1. Risk Factors for Child Sex and Labor Trafficking



Indicators

Common indicators of sex and labor trafficking are listed in Figure 2.³³ Note that while the two sets of indicators are not identical, they do overlap; indicators are present among both sex and labor trafficking victims in the center of the figure.

Figure 2. Indicators of Child Sex and Labor Trafficking



The indicators in Figure 2 are common in sex and labor trafficking situations. It is important to remember, however, that some students who have been trafficked won’t show any of these signs. In fact, some students affected by trafficking see school as a safe haven where they can participate in normal peer activities and excel in their academic work.

Whether or not strong indicators of trafficking are present, identifying students being exploited can be difficult because students may not readily acknowledge their circumstances. Students may be

- ▶ reluctant to disclose the abuse due to shame or fear,
- ▶ still under the control of their trafficker, or
- ▶ unable to recognize themselves as a victim.³⁴

Knowing that students may find disclosure difficult underscores the need to provide specialized trafficking training to school personnel, especially personnel most likely to see red flags or most in contact with groups of students at higher risk because of their job functions (e.g., specialized instructional support personnel).

Trafficking in Urban, Suburban, and Rural Areas

Labor trafficking of minors occurs everywhere—in restaurants, factories, and construction sites; in traveling peddling operations that move from town to town; and in farms, orchards, and other agricultural settings.

However, little research has been conducted on how sex trafficking of minors differs across urban, suburban, and rural communities. A 2014 study found more similarities than differences in child sex trafficking across the types of settings. Minors in all cases tended to have the same risk factors: poverty, instability, compromised parenting, and substance abuse within the family. Instead, differences between the settings were found primarily in the views of child welfare and youth-service professionals, who in rural areas are less likely to believe trafficking is a serious problem or be trained in identifying and treating trafficking victims.³⁵

Far from being immune to trafficking, rural places have characteristics that can make trafficking both harder to recognize and address. In rural areas, long distances between homes doesn't guarantee safety but does mean that services and supports to victims may be less accessible. Rural poverty and fewer jobs can make young people and their families more willing to trade sex for money or drugs, and in small close-knit communities, traffickers may be familiar faces, making disclosure of abuse especially complicated.³⁶ At the same time, traffickers can find small cities and towns attractive places to operate, given that residents and even local enforcement may tend to underestimate the threat of trafficking.

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For me, if in my early years teachers would have reported the abuse and neglect I was receiving from my parents, I would have possibly been less susceptible to my trafficker later on in my teens. The sexual and physical abuse as a child left me vulnerable. It literally groomed me for the experience. I was so numb from my previous abusive experiences that the trafficking experiences didn't seem so painful.

—Trafficking Survivor

Impact on the Student and the Learning Environment

Shared priorities and beliefs influence the climate of a school community and have an effect on student learning, achievement, and behavior. A safe learning environment is imperative for overall student success, but overall student safety is jeopardized when some students are being exploited and victimized, particularly if the trafficker is using a student to recruit other students or is connected to student social circles.

Because of the abuse associated with child trafficking, many victims experience severe physical, emotional, and psychological trauma. The symptoms of trauma can impact the learning experience of students and may manifest as depression, anxiety, difficulty learning, aggression, or truancy.³⁷

Disruptive behavior or sudden changes in academic performance should be considered a red flag that points to an underlying problem. If the student has risk factors for trafficking, or if there are clear indications of trafficking, then a specially trained school counselor or licensed clinical social worker should investigate, protect the student from further harm, report as required by state law or regulation, and determine whether there are campus-wide impacts.



Preventing Child Trafficking at the School Level

One effective way to combat child sex and labor trafficking is to treat it as a public health problem.

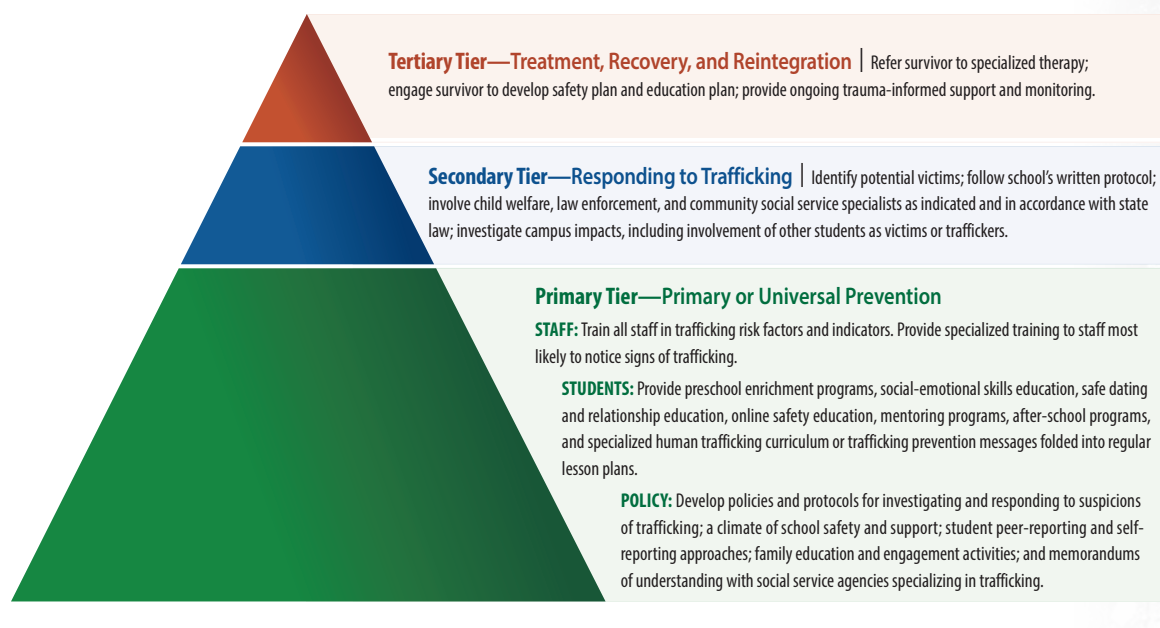
As noted, certain systemic, family, and individual risk factors make some students more vulnerable to traffickers. By identifying and addressing the “upstream” determinants of human trafficking, such as domestic violence, substance use, and poverty, communities can help reduce the number of students who will face it.³⁸ When trafficking does occur, schools and their community partners can work to intervene, bring perpetrators to justice, and offer affected students evidence-based supports so they can resume their lives and achieve their full potential.

A framework for trafficking prevention is shown in Figure 3. It is based on the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ paradigm for trafficking prevention, which outlines primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention tiers, as well as multilevel approaches to violence prevention developed by

the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).³⁹ The CDC treats all forms of violence as connected and deeply rooted in poverty and inequality. Individuals who experience one type of violence are more likely to experience other types, and certain factors are known to predispose individuals to being victims, perpetrators, or both. The CDC describes multiple, complementary, evidence-based violence prevention strategies meant to be carried out across social systems and levels, including within schools.

The primary or universal tier involves creating environments and fostering skills in children that prevent victimization. The secondary tier focuses on identifying victims, preventing further harm, and offering immediate help. The tertiary tier addresses long-term support to those affected by trafficking.

Figure 3. What Schools Can Do To Prevent, Interrupt, and Help Students Heal From Trafficking



Primary Tier: Primary or Universal Prevention

Primary prevention stops violence before it occurs. As Figure 3 indicates, primary prevention strategies include strengthening and creating healthy relationships, reducing risks within the students' environment, and increasing buffers to violence. Efforts to teach social-emotional skills and create a safe school climate fall into this tier, as do skills-based human trafficking curricula or prevention messages delivered directly to students. The intentional building of relationships between schools and community-based mental health providers as part of the Tier 1 strategy provides a stronger basis for victim and survivor support in higher tiers. Primary prevention provides the greatest opportunity to change outcomes for large numbers of children.

Since 2013, Prince William County Public Schools (Virginia) has delivered 90-minute lessons on human trafficking to middle and high school students. Afterward, students are invited to privately identify themselves or friends as possible trafficking victims. The students can then meet privately with a social worker who assesses their needs and helps them get the care they need. Between 2013 and 2020, 939 students came forward, 253 of whom were identified as having been sexually assaulted, groomed, or victims of trafficking. Forty-one of the students who requested meetings simply wanted more information—an encouraging fact as prevention is one goal of the program.

Schools or districts currently utilizing multi-tiered systems of supports, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, are encouraged to also access [Addressing the Growing Problem of Domestic Sex Trafficking in Minors Through Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports](#). The resource, created as a complementary document to this guide, provides information on how to utilize existing multi-tiered strategies to help prevent domestic minor sex trafficking and provide assistance to student victims and their families in America's schools.

Secondary Tier: Responding to Trafficking

Work in this tier involves identifying and responding to suspicions of human trafficking. All school staff should receive basic training in child trafficking, its prevalence and dynamics, and its risk factors and indicators. Some school personnel, by virtue of their connection to students, should be trained more intensively. Those staff include front desk staff, bus drivers, assistant principals, school counselors, social workers, attendance officers, dropout prevention officers, special education teachers, and school nurses. Many organizations offer human trafficking training for educators. One source is [SOAR for School-based Professionals](#), an online training developed by the Office on Trafficking in Persons.

Tertiary Tier: Treatment, Recovery, and Reintegration

In this tier, schools and social service providers help survivors recover from trafficking and resume their education if it was interrupted. Young people affected by trafficking need substantial and ongoing social-emotional and mental health support, and schools can help coordinate and deliver it. This tier is often overlooked by schools because, in many cases, trafficking survivors are quickly referred to alternative education settings or independent study programs. Schools make these referrals for a number of reasons. They may not understand how they can support trafficking survivors. School administrators may fear survivors will recruit other students into trafficking or will exhibit serious behavioral problems. If a student has been out of school for a long time, then they may be so far behind academically that they would be in classes with much younger students. All these issues may make a referral to alternative settings seem ideal.

Sometimes, such settings can be helpful. Alternative educational programs tend to have small teacher-to-student ratios, special teacher and counselor training, and high levels of collaboration with community partners—all supports that survivors may require. Referring trafficking survivors to other settings does not always serve them well, however. Referring a student to a GED program, for instance, risks removing them from the healthy peer and adult interactions that could support their recovery in a more traditional school setting.

It is important to recognize that every case of human trafficking is unique, and recovery does not follow a neat trajectory. In many cases, students affected by trafficking have already been shifted into alternative settings because of behavioral issues—issues likely stemming from trafficking and the circumstances that made them vulnerable to trafficking initially. Their trafficking histories may only be discovered after the move to the alternative setting. But whether students remain in their home schools or are in an alternative school or a GED program, schools can and should play a central role in reintegrating students into the educational environment through such actions as coordinating care and helping them finish their education. Systems addressing trafficking thoroughly, including the reintegration of students, do the following:

- ▶ Establish policies, protocols, and procedures that guide the responses to human trafficking cases among students.

- ▶ Ensure that all protocols, procedures, and services for students who have experienced trafficking are trauma informed and student led. Students' wishes should always be honored to the greatest extent possible, and they should be supported in making whatever decisions they feel enhances their safety and helps them achieve their short- and long-term goals.
- ▶ Develop memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with community partners that specialize in sex and labor trafficking. If specialists do not exist locally, schools should consider establishing an MOU with a sexual assault service provider or child advocacy or assessment center.
- ▶ Coordinate with trauma-informed specialists in the community to make sure the student is receiving the care they need and follow up on a weekly or monthly basis to check on the student's progress. Understand that helping students heal may require coordinating with a wide range of professionals in the community involved in the student's life, including probation officers, pretrial advocates, child welfare case workers, and others.
- ▶ Help coordinate payment for treatment if funds for those purposes are made available by the state, county, or city in which the student lives.
- ▶ Check directly in with students, and their families if appropriate, either in person or by phone regularly. Schedule appointments in advance and let the student and their caregivers dictate the frequency of interaction.
- ▶ Confer regularly with school-based social workers, psychologists, or counselors who can monitor the student and make sure they're staying on track academically and socially. Even students who are making progress may experience occasional setbacks; in those cases, the school counselor can work with teachers to temporarily adjust the student's workload and provide additional support as necessary.
- ▶ Ensure any behavioral issues the student exhibits in school are addressed from a trauma-informed perspective.
- ▶ Realize students who have experienced trafficking do not usually recruit other students. If the school has a good reason, based on observable facts, to believe recruitment is a concern, they can take action to mitigate those risks. Actions could include monitoring student social media for concerning behavior (as some schools are already doing to address bullying behavior); identifying a key staff member (e.g., school counselor or social worker) to address the specific concerns related to recruitment; and developing clear policies and procedures that allow for school schedules that reduce the potential interaction of students who could be recruiting and those being targeted for recruitment.

If the budget allows, a full- or part-time dedicated district-level specialist can perform these central coordinating, case management, and monitoring activities to ensure focused, consistent services across schools. Local human trafficking task forces may have already established multidisciplinary teams that can share these tasks or even



Some school personnel, by virtue of their connection to students, should be trained more intensively. Those staff include front desk staff, bus drivers, assistant principals, school counselors, social workers, attendance officers, dropout prevention officers, special education teachers, and school nurses.

take the lead. Otherwise, school-based counselors, psychologists, nurses, and other relevant staff can manage much of the work internally. Remember that school-based trafficking response teams should include attendance officers because they are often the first to notice that a student is struggling.

Community Partnerships

Child trafficking is a community issue, and no organization or sector can effectively combat it alone. To prevent the trafficking of children, community members first need to admit the problem exists and then commit to educating other community members about it. Responding to child trafficking also means equipping leaders with the resources to have an authentic dialogue about the issue in their neighborhoods, jurisdictions, constituencies, or school districts and giving these leaders the tools to work toward solutions. That dialogue must include addressing the demand side of trafficking, such as support for community-led efforts to reduce victimization of youth, in addition to direct interventions to reduce trafficking.

Historically, law enforcement agencies and probation departments were the primary systems addressing the complex needs of survivors of child sex trafficking. Through sting operations, crackdowns on gangs, and curfew sweeps, a law enforcement agency would be the first agency to interact with a sex trafficking victim. Today, child welfare systems and programs serving runaway and homeless youth are elevating their responses to child trafficking and thus are invaluable frontline partners to schools. Other important partners are trafficking prevention organizations, domestic violence agencies, child advocacy or assessment centers, parent groups, and university researchers. It is strongly recommended that each community and tribal jurisdiction develop cross-system mechanisms and infrastructure for collaboration among public agencies and other stakeholders, while building upon the structures, processes, and relationships already in place.

By involving a cross-section of organizations and stakeholders, schools will create safer campuses and increase the chances for academic, social, and psychological student success. These same partners should work collaboratively to develop a comprehensive prevention and awareness program targeted at students and parents and to establish protocols for responding to suspicions of trafficking and providing services to victims.

Several examples of cross-sector collaborations have emerged in recent years. In San Diego, California, for example, the district attorney's office and county school superintendent partnered to develop a public-private collaborative focused on making human trafficking education and prevention training available to public schools.⁴⁰ Trainers at the district level teach human trafficking awareness to personnel in schools throughout the county, and some schools deliver a trafficking prevention curriculum to students in designated grade levels. Foundations and businesses in the collaborative underwrite the costs of the curriculum.

In Florida, the first state to mandate that all students in K–12 receive trafficking prevention education, schools are working to fold prevention messages into the health curricula they already use. The Florida Department of Education and Florida Department of Health partnered to conduct a trafficking awareness survey of school health personnel and develop annual trainings for school nurses. The Florida Department of Education produces trainings, presentations, and resources for other school staff, parents and caregivers, and students, often in coordination with antitrafficking nonprofit organizations.

School Policies and Protocols To Combat Trafficking

Schools have several responsibilities regarding child trafficking. To be effective, they should (a) increase staff awareness and educate staff on the nature of trafficking and on which youth are most vulnerable to it, (b) increase parent and student awareness of the risks and realities of trafficking, and (c) develop district or schoolwide policies and protocols for identifying and supporting trafficking victims.

Basic training on trafficking risk factors and indicators should be provided to school personnel, particularly those who work with students in higher-risk groups, or staff who, by virtue of their positions, are most likely to notice red flags. These school staff include school counselors, bus drivers, special education teachers, attendance officers, and school nurses. It is imperative that school personnel understand trauma-informed practices and how to apply them in situations where students who are victims of trafficking may be struggling with fear, shame, and embarrassment. Suspending judgment and remaining open-minded is critical to creating a trusting relationship in which vulnerable students feel safe to confide and seek support. In this context, keep in mind that counselors or other designated trained specialists may need to meet with a student several times before the student feels comfortable sharing information.

In most cases, classroom teachers or other teaching staff who are concerned about a student should *not* question the student directly. Instead, they should take their suspicions to the designated counselor or social worker who will investigate the issue per school protocol.



Policies | Effective school policies should require that a trained counselor or licensed clinical social worker engage with the student to gather more information; staff may use a formal assessment tool if the school opts to use one. Police and local child welfare officials should be notified immediately when indicated, per school protocol. (Note that in some states, child welfare officials cannot help unless the perpetrator is a family member.) Once a child victim is identified, it is imperative that all responding providers coordinate intervention and support for the victim and assess whether other students on campus have been impacted.

Human trafficking policies should relate to each of the three prevention tiers in Figure 3. Policies might address the following:

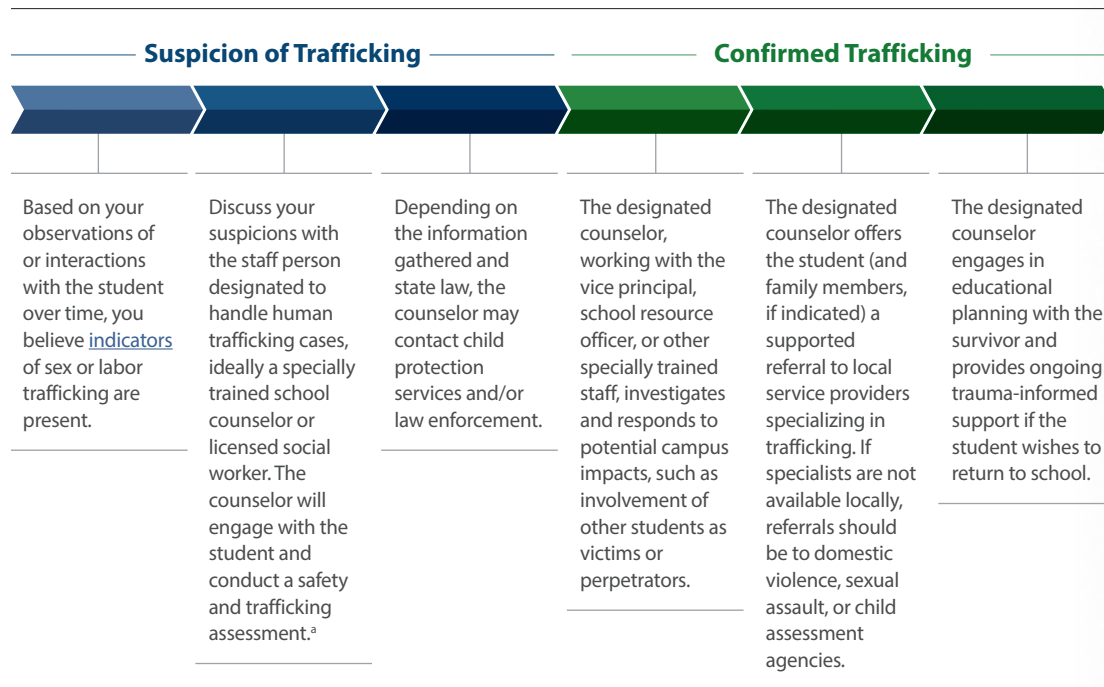
- ▶ Establishing social-emotional learning and positive school climate practices
- ▶ Engaging in a group discussion process with parents and school staff to develop a consensus that child trafficking is a serious problem that requires a systemwide response
- ▶ Offering trainings that address implicit bias and challenge common myths, both within and outside the school community, about how child trafficking looks and who can be involved in it
- ▶ Training for all staff on risks and indicators, and key staff more intensively
- ▶ Incorporating age-appropriate lessons or messages about human trafficking
- ▶ Training parents and youth on the forms that child trafficking takes and how to avoid risk
- ▶ Ensuring campus security
- ▶ Partnering with community law enforcement and social service providers that are expert in child trafficking, where appropriate
- ▶ Developing and training staff on protocols for reporting suspected child trafficking
- ▶ Creating separate policies and protocols for students who have reached the age of majority (therefore considered an adult), according to state law
- ▶ Establishing safety plans and ongoing education plans with student trafficking survivors
- ▶ Establishing procedures to obtain assurance that external services contracts (e.g., cleaning, building security, food service) are not exploiting their staff in ways that would constitute labor trafficking

Protocols | To be ready to assist children affected by trafficking, school districts should consider developing a protocol similar to that used for reporting child abuse or sexual assault. Protocols may be simple frameworks or more elaborate decision



trees that walk school staff through many possible contingencies. Regardless of its complexity, any protocol’s central purpose should be to guide school staff in responding to both suspected and confirmed cases of trafficking and should take into account individual states’ mandating reporting requirements. A sample protocol appears in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Sample Protocol for Responding to Suspected Child Trafficking in Schools



^a See [Tools for Educators](#), developed by the National Human Trafficking Resource Center, for examples of safety and trafficking assessment questions.

For another type of protocol specific to sex trafficking, see [this example](#), from San Diego.

Resources and Support

For the latest information on resources and support available from the U.S. Department of Education to support your ongoing efforts to prevent, intercede, and eliminate human trafficking in America’s schools, visit the [Department’s human trafficking webpage](#). In addition to nonfederal organizations leading efforts to address trafficking, numerous departments of the federal government are engaged in these efforts. All relevant resources and supports are available at this site.

Terms and Definitions

3P's | The three levels of the U.S. government's response to human trafficking as described in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000. The 3P's are protection of victims, prevention of trafficking, and prosecution of perpetrators.

Child | A person under the age of 18 unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier. A child may be referred to as a juvenile or minor.

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) | Refers to a range of crimes and activities involving the sexual abuse or exploitation of a child for financial benefit or in exchange for something of value. CSEC is often used interchangeably with child sex trafficking, although some instances of CSEC might not meet the federal legal definition of sex trafficking.

Labor trafficking | The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion, for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery (*22 USC § 7102*).

Safe harbor laws | State legislation designed to decrease or eliminate punitive measures for minors involved in commercial sex and improve their access to therapeutic services.

Sex trafficking | The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purposes of a commercial sex act, in which that 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 (*22 USC § 7102*).

Trafficking survivor | An individual in the process of recovering from the trauma of trafficking.

Trafficking victim | An individual currently experiencing trafficking.

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