

Human Trafficking and Child Welfare: A Guide for Child Welfare Agencies

Children and youth involved with the child welfare system are at heightened risk for experiencing human trafficking. Therefore, child welfare agencies must be at the forefront of the response to and prevention of human trafficking.

This bulletin explores how agencies can support children and youth who have been exploited as well as those who may have risk factors for future exploitation. It provides background information about trafficking, including its scope, relevant legislation and initiatives, and strategies that agencies can implement to address the trafficking of children and youth in the United States.

Child Welfare Information Gateway developed [*Human Trafficking and Child Welfare: A Guide for Caseworkers*](#), a companion guide to this publication, to assist child welfare caseworkers in addressing human trafficking.

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BACKGROUND

Although human trafficking is by no means a new issue, in recent years public agencies have greatly strengthened their focus on its identification and prevention as well as on treatment for those who have experienced trafficking. The following sections provide information on the scope of the problem of human trafficking and its connections within the child welfare system.

Definitions and Terminology

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) (P.L. 106–386), as amended, defines “severe forms of trafficking in persons” as the following:

- **Labor trafficking** is 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.
- **Sex trafficking** is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act when a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion. Of note, while adults must be compelled to perform commercial sex by force, fraud, or coercion for it to be considered a severe form of trafficking in persons, this is not the case for children. By law, children under the age of 18 who engage in a commercial sex act or exchange sex for anything of value, including food or a place to stay, are victims of sex trafficking.

Although the terms “victim” and “survivor” are sometimes used interchangeably, this bulletin uses the term “victim” while still acknowledging the strength and resiliency of those who have experienced trafficking. We also use “child [and/or youth] who has experienced trafficking.” Those working directly with a person who has experienced trafficking should also consider how they wish to identify, using their preferred terms or pronouns or offering them a choice.

For more information about how States classify human trafficking, see Information Gateway’s [Definitions of Human Trafficking](#).

SCOPE OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The exact number of children and youth who have experienced human trafficking in the United States is unknown, and determining the number is difficult. The number varies widely from source to source, often due to differences in definitions and methodologies (Finklea et al., 2015). Challenges to data collection include the following:

- Those who experience trafficking not self-identifying due to factors including complex trauma, trauma bonds, and normalization of victimization
- Lack of screening mechanisms to identify victims, which leads to underreporting if trafficking is identified but reported as child abuse or sexual abuse

- Lack of services available after disclosure, which may lead to underreporting
- Individuals potentially not being identified if they talk to a professional who lacks a trauma-informed approach or if they fear talking to authorities, distrust service providers, or have been coached by their traffickers on what to say

For a more thorough discussion of data collection issues, see [Capturing Human Trafficking Victimization Through Crime Reporting](#), a final report from a U.S. Department of Justice grant.

While existing national data are not reliable indicators of the prevalence of human trafficking, and most service providers believe that available statistics underestimate the scope of the problem, there are various studies and organizations that provide a glimpse of how many children may be victims of human trafficking:

- The [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#) (2023) received reports for 10,360 potential cases of human trafficking in 2021, with minors being identified as the victims in 13 percent of labor trafficking cases and 28 percent of sex trafficking cases.
- In 2021, an estimated one in six of the more than 25,000 children reported to the [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#) (NCMEC) had experienced sex trafficking (NCMEC, n.d.).
- In fiscal year 2021, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) certified that 1,200 foreign national minors had experienced trafficking and were eligible for victims' services. Of those, a quarter had experienced sex trafficking, and 68 percent had experienced labor trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

Children and youth who experience human trafficking are diverse and include all races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses (Gibbs, Feinberg, et al., 2019). While females are often identified as more likely to experience trafficking, this could reflect limited recognition of males as victims (National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center, 2021). One research review concluded that demographic characteristics are not independent risk factors for trafficking (Choi, 2015). Foreign nationals of all genders, though, more often experience labor trafficking than sex trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2022). American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander women and girls may also experience more risk factors for trafficking (Administration for Native Americans, 2018). Additionally, a 2020 meta-analysis found a significant correlation between sexual exploitation and children and youth who show high levels of sexual risk taking, have multiple sexual partners, were exposed to child pornography, have a history of childhood sexual abuse, or have a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder (Laird et al., 2020).

INTERSECTION OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND CHILD WELFARE

A background of abuse and other trauma—coupled with the impermanence of foster care or congregate care—can make children in out-of-home care especially vulnerable to trafficking. Research has found links between out-of-home placements and an increased vulnerability to human trafficking and sexual abuse (Reid et al., 2017; Gibbs, Henninger, et al., 2018).

Traffickers may specifically target children in (or who have run away from) foster care because of their increased vulnerability and work to exploit the fact that these children may not have their familial, emotional, or basic needs met (Amaya et al., 2021). Traffickers may promise to meet those needs—at times employing psychological manipulation and financial incentives—and then use persuasion, violence, drugs, or physical control to retain and exploit them. It is important to acknowledge the grooming that occurs as predators work to create emotional bonds with the child or youth under their control. Past or current sexual abuse can make children and youth particularly vulnerable to abuse by traffickers and predators since abuse may normalize certain sexual behaviors. Children who have experienced multiple out-of-home placements may also have increased vulnerability if they develop an understanding that they play a role in making money for others (e.g., through foster care payments).

It is difficult to estimate how many people who have experienced trafficking have also had involvement with the child welfare system, but several studies show a strong connection. For example, in 2021, an estimated 19 percent of the children reported to NCMEC as missing from foster care experienced sex trafficking (NCMEC, n.d.).

The Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act (JVTA) modified the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) in 2015 to require that child welfare agencies report, to the maximum extent practicable, the number of children who are victims of sex trafficking to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). (For more information on JVTA's amendments to CAPTA, see the "Federal Legislation Regarding Human Trafficking" section of this bulletin.) States began reporting these data to the NCANDS beginning in Federal fiscal year (FFY) 2018. The most recent data—from FFY 2020—suggest that 0.2 percent of all children experiencing maltreatment in the United States experienced sex trafficking, with 88.6 percent of sex trafficking victims identifying as female and 10.9 percent as male (Children's Bureau, 2022b).

FEDERAL LEGISLATION AND INITIATIVES

The Federal Government has been highly involved in directing a coordinated response to human trafficking. In recent decades, several major pieces of legislation have been enacted. Additionally, the White House and Federal departments and agencies have undertaken collaborative and individual efforts to support people who experience human trafficking and bolster the Federal response.

FEDERAL LEGISLATION REGARDING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The TVPA, as amended, was the first comprehensive piece of Federal law to address human trafficking (TVPA, 2000). The TVPA laid the foundation for various prevention, protection, and prosecution strategies regarding human trafficking. Key provisions from the TVPA and its reauthorizations include the following:

- The establishment of definitions of trafficking and identifying trafficking as a Federal crime
- The creation of the [Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons](#) at the U.S. Department of State and the [President's Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons](#) (PITF)

- Restitution for victims
- Programs to prevent trafficking and to protect and assist victims
- Training requirements for frontline workers in certain industries
- Strengthened prosecution and punishment of traffickers

In 2014, additional legislation—the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (PSTSFA) (P.L. 113–183)—was enacted. It requires title IV-E agencies to develop policies and procedures to identify, document, and determine appropriate services for children under the placement, care, or supervision of a child welfare agency who are vulnerable to experiencing or who are experiencing sex trafficking. It also outlines several reporting requirements, such as providing information on children identified as sex trafficking victims to law enforcement within 24 hours, providing the total number of children who are victims, and providing the number of children in foster care who are victims.

In 2015, JVTa further established Federal requirements and protections related to human trafficking by modifying CAPTA. Specifically, JVTa requires that CAPTA State plans include provisions related to identifying and assessing reports involving children and youth who are suspected or known to have experienced sex trafficking and provisions on training for child protective services (CPS) workers to identify and serve children and youth who are affected. (For more information on training requirements, see this bulletin's "Training for Agency Staff and Partners" section.) JVTa also requires State child welfare agencies to report the number of children and youth determined to have experienced sex trafficking to HHS. Finally, the legislation expanded the CAPTA definition of "child abuse and neglect" and "sexual abuse" to incorporate child sex trafficking.

The Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act of 2022 (P.L. 117–348) was signed into law on January 5, 2023. This law reauthorizes and amends TVPA. Additionally, the law amends title IV-E plan requirements to require regular communication and details when reporting missing or abducted children to law enforcement and NCMEC. This may include, for example, sharing information pertaining to the child or youth's recovery and circumstances related to the recovery and providing a photo, description of physical features, and endangerment information, such as pregnancy status, prescription medications, or suicidal tendencies.

For a comprehensive discussion of the PSTSFA and JVTa and key provisions, including State laws defining human trafficking as child abuse and neglect, see the following publications:

- [Definitions of Human Trafficking](#) (Information Gateway)
- [Responding to Child Victims of Human Trafficking](#) (Information Gateway)
- [Report to Congress: The Child Welfare System Response to Sex Trafficking of Children](#) (HHS Administration for Children and Families [ACF])
- [Identifying and Addressing Human Trafficking in Child Welfare Agencies: Final Report](#) (HHS, ACF, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation)

Federal Guidance About Human Trafficking Laws

The following Program Instructions (PIs) and Information Memoranda (IMs) provide guidance from ACF about legislation related to human trafficking:¹

- [ACYF-CB/FYSB-IM-14-01](#): Provides guidance on services for youth under age 18 who run away from foster care and come into contact with runaway and homeless youth programs
- [ACYF-CB-IM-14-03](#): Provides basic information on the PSTSFA, including title IV-E plan changes, new case plan requirements and definitions, additions to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, modifications to the Family Connection grants and John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood, and reauthorization of the Adoption and Guardianship Incentive Program
- [ACYF-CB-PI-14-06](#): Provides instruction on some of the changes to the title IV-E plan requirements resulting from the PSTSFA that were effective as of September 29, 2014
- [ACYF-CB-IM-15-05](#): Informs States of the enactment of the JVTA and provides basic information on changes to the CAPTA grants to States for child maltreatment prevention and treatment programs, including changes to the definition of child abuse and neglect
- [ACYF-CB-PI-15-07](#): Provides instruction on the changes to the title IV-E plan requirements as a result of the PSTSFA that were effective as of September 29, 2015, and later
- [ACYF-CB-PI-17-05](#): Provides guidance to States on action they are required to take to receive their allotments for FFY 2018 authorized under subparts 1 and 2 under title IV-B; section 106 of CAPTA; and the Chafee program, including educational and training vouchers
- [OTIP-FS-16-01](#): Outlines the process to obtain an HHS Certification Letter for an adult foreign national victim of trafficking
- [OTIP-FS-16-02](#): Explains the Interim Assistance/Eligibility Letter process to secure assistance for a minor foreign national victim of trafficking

¹ As of the release of this bulletin, the HHS Children's Bureau is drafting a PI to provide additional guidance on the Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act of 2022. Children's Bureau policy issuances can be found on its [Laws & Policies webpage](#).

FEDERAL INITIATIVES REGARDING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The White House and other Federal offices have developed—both independently and collaboratively—initiatives, programs, and workgroups to help set the foundation for the Federal response to human trafficking.

White House and interagency efforts. To increase efforts to combat human trafficking, cabinet departments—with direction from the current and previous Presidential administrations—have strengthened their commitments, established an interagency task force, introduced several new

initiatives, and emphasized partnerships (White House, 2021). Since the White House first prioritized an interagency response to human trafficking in 2012, several Federal partnerships to address human trafficking have emerged, including the following:

- [PITF](#): Is a cabinet-level entity consisting of 20 agencies across the Federal Government that coordinates Federal policies to combat trafficking and address law enforcement, victim protection, public awareness, research, and international diplomacy
- [Senior Policy Operating Group](#): Ensures a whole-of-government approach to addressing human trafficking by including senior officials from PITF member agencies
- [U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking](#): Provides a formal platform for individuals—appointed by the President for 2-year terms—who have experienced human trafficking to advise and make recommendations on Federal anti-trafficking policies to PITF

HHS. ACF, through its [Office on Trafficking in Persons](#) (OTIP), is the lead agency addressing human trafficking. Priorities for this office include developing a national victim services system, guiding data-informed policy and programming, and integrating anti-trafficking messaging into prevention communications for service providers and the public (Gibbs, Feinberg, et al., 2019). OTIP currently supports the following efforts:

- [Child Eligibility Toolkit](#): Foreign national children in the United States who have or may have experienced human trafficking are eligible to apply for certain assistance programs. This toolkit explains how to report trafficking concerns to the Office on Trafficking in Persons and request assistance on behalf of a foreign national child.
- [Look Beneath the Surface](#): OTIP coordinates this human trafficking public awareness campaign.
- [SOAR to Health and Wellness Training](#): This training for health-care and social service providers focuses on how to identify and appropriately refer potential victims of human trafficking.
- [SOAR - Responding to Human Trafficking Through the Child Welfare System](#): This training, which is for providers who serve children, youth, and families involved with child welfare, addresses Federal laws, the role of child welfare in response to human trafficking, and ways to partner with child welfare agencies.
- [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#): This 24-hour hotline connects those who have experienced sex and labor trafficking with services and supports.
- [National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center](#): This resource delivers training and technical assistance to inform and enhance the public health response to human trafficking.

In addition to OTIP's work, other offices within ACF have programs designed to serve various areas or populations of focus. For example, between 2014 and 2019, the Children's Bureau awarded funding for nine demonstration grants to help child welfare agencies respond to human trafficking through infrastructure building and multisystem approaches.

In 2017, the [National Advisory Committee on Sex Trafficking of Children and Youth in the United States](#) was established in consultation with the Department of Justice and the National Governor's Association per PSTSFA to advise the Attorney General and the Secretary of HHS on the Nation's response to trafficking. The committee has the following responsibilities:

- Advise on the development and implementation of successful interventions with children and youth who are at risk of or experiencing sex trafficking
- Make recommendations for administrative or legislative changes necessary to use programs, properties, or other resources owned, operated, or funded by the Federal Government to provide safe housing for children and youth who have experienced sex trafficking
- Develop recommended best practices for States to follow in combatting the sex trafficking of children and youth
- Share best practices and recommendations with State governors and child welfare agencies

The committee was responsible for producing the following two Congressional reports: [Best Practices and Recommendations for States](#) and [Preliminary State Self-Assessment Survey Overview](#).

To learn more about the risk factors and signs of trafficking and sexual exploitation, visit Information Gateway's [Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation](#) webpage.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH WHO EXPERIENCE TRAFFICKING

Children and youth who have experienced commercial sexual or labor exploitation may have needs similar to those who enter the child welfare system because of neglect or abuse. For instance, children and youth who have experienced trafficking need trauma-informed and healing-based health care, mental health services, a safe place to live, and help with education and facilitated reconnections with family members or trusted adults. This section discusses these needs along with some aspects that distinguish the different needs of trafficking victims.

Physical health. Children and youth who have experienced trafficking often have suffered physical abuse, neglect (including medical and dental neglect), emotional abuse, and sexual abuse (Greenbaum et al., 2023). They may have physical ailments associated with this abuse, including malnutrition, broken bones, other internal and external injuries, or sexually transmitted infections. Their overall health may show the consequences of long periods of poor or no medical or dental care. Child welfare professionals can help by ensuring these young people have access to medical screenings and treatment to address immediate and long-term concerns. In addition, they may need an advocate to support them if they are asked to undergo a physical exam due to a sexual assault or abuse report. Connecting with a trauma-informed, healing-based health-care provider—and potentially a forensic interviewer from a child advocacy center—who has experience working with victims of trafficking may also provide reassurance to victims who may be reluctant to seek care.

Behavioral health. Children and youth who have experienced trafficking often have an array of complex behavioral health needs (Greenbaum et al., 2023). They may have experienced beatings, sexual assault, and other acts of violence. Many people who have experienced trafficking have a need for long-term, intensive behavioral health services that can help them move forward with new, healthier life skills. Studies have identified several behavioral health symptoms associated with trafficking, including posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, depression, substance use disorder, and other mental health diagnoses (Greenbaum et al., 2023). Screening by qualified behavioral health providers who have experience working within the realm of anti-sexual violence support can be the first step to getting help. Although disclosure should not be the goal, screening can help determine the type of therapy that might be most useful, and child welfare workers can facilitate access to treatment providers.

Out-of-home care setting. Children and youth who have experienced trafficking and who come into contact with child welfare may need to enter out-of-home care if they cannot return safely to their families. Common challenges to finding stable and safe out-of-home care settings for these children and youth include protecting them against continued contact with traffickers, reducing the risk of runaway behavior, and addressing caregiver concerns about inappropriate sexual acting out (Gibbs, Feinberg, et al., 2019).

Agencies should determine the most appropriate and least restrictive out-of-home care setting depending on the unique needs of the child or youth and consider settings in which the caregivers are trained in how to work with children and youth who have experienced trafficking, such as specialized therapeutic foster care, specialized group homes, and traditional therapeutic foster homes (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019a). Some children and youth may need short-term, safe houses to meet their immediate crisis needs during initial intake.

The 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) established guidelines for the use of congregate care settings for children and youth, including limitations on title IV-E reimbursements for congregate care placements lasting longer than 2 weeks. However, these limitations are waived in cases involving youth who have experienced or are at risk for trafficking, provided the congregate care setting can provide "high-quality residential care." It is important to note that FFPSA did not define "high-quality residential care" and that title IV-E agencies have the flexibility to develop their own working definitions (Children's Bureau, 2018).

The ultimate goal should be for the child or youth to transition into a family-like setting and continue to establish healthy relationships.

Education and employment. Children and youth who have experienced trafficking may have specific education needs (Office of Safe and Supportive Schools, 2021). For example, while some children and youth may feel comfortable in a traditional school, others may prefer more nontraditional education options. Child welfare caseworkers can help by collecting records, exploring education options, and facilitating enrollment. Youth who have experienced trafficking may also need assistance obtaining safe employment, especially if they lack legal work experience or have not acquired a high school diploma or GED. They also may have been arrested for crimes committed while under a trafficker's control or influence, which could prevent them from passing background checks required for

employment. Additionally, those who have experienced sex trafficking may have had the experience of making a large amount of money in a short time period and may not view the pay in an entry-level position as a viable option (Lutnick, 2016). Caseworkers can seek out programs in their communities that connect youth with GED classes, job training, job skills and application support, internships or externships, or other supports. They can also educate employers on how best to work with youth who have lived through trauma such as sexual victimization.

Legal services. Children and youth who have experienced trafficking need lawyers if they are charged with crimes that result from their victimization. They may also need legal counsel to protect themselves from their "pimps" or traffickers or to establish their legal identity. Some children involved with the justice system may require an attorney for victim advocacy, while those who are not U.S. citizens may require an immigration attorney. It is important for caseworkers to inform themselves about the process for prosecuting trafficking cases in their jurisdiction. This can be a long and strenuous process for a young person who wants to move forward with healing. Youth law programs at the State level also may be available to help youth navigate the legal system.

Other needs. Children and youth who have experienced trafficking will often need financial assistance and help with basic life skills (e.g., opening a bank account, keeping medical records, getting their mail). For many, having a mentor, sexual violence advocate, or an outreach caseworker who is willing and available to provide guidance over the long term is essential to ensuring that they are able to pursue a life away from abuse.

STRATEGIES FOR STATE AND LOCAL AGENCIES

States and other jurisdictions, taking their lead from the Federal Government, have undertaken their own efforts to prevent and respond to human trafficking. They have enacted policies and practices; sought out partners in other agencies and within the community; helped build awareness among their own staff, related professionals, and the general public; developed and used screening and assessment tools; and designed service programs to address the needs of children and youth who have experienced trafficking. This section describes these strategies and provides select examples from State and local agencies across the country.

TRAFFICKING PREVENTION

The prevention of human trafficking requires a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach that is coordinated at the local, State, national, and international levels. Child welfare should be a key partner in any efforts to curtail the victimization of children in or formerly in foster care, particularly those who run away from foster care.

As discussed in the "Intersection of Human Trafficking and Child Welfare" section, a large percentage of children and youth who have experienced trafficking have been involved with child welfare. Child welfare agencies can help children in foster care and congregate care recognize situations and factors that increase their risk of being trafficked. They can also help them understand they are safe in their placements, especially if they have recently left trafficking situations. In addition to meeting basic needs and providing mental and behavioral health services, child welfare agencies

can also support programs that help children and youth feel a sense of belonging in their placement. Traffickers frequently recruit children and youth in foster care or group settings (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2017), and those who have experienced trafficking may attempt to maintain connections with their traffickers due to a trauma bond—when a victim forms a connection with their abuser (West & Loeffler, 2015).

In addition, children experiencing labor trafficking may face complex psychological and social pressures to continue their forced employment. One study of homeless youth in the United States and Canada found that those who experienced labor trafficking were likely to have experienced familial or cultural coercion in addition to violence (Murphy, 2016).

Trafficking prevention programs have been developed and are being tested for their effectiveness with youth who are at risk of experiencing sex trafficking. Georgia's Statewide Human Trafficking Task Force published [The Child Sexual Abuse, Exploitation and Trafficking Prevention Technical Assistance Resource Guide](#), which includes a comprehensive list of prevention programs.

Examples: Prevention Education Programs

[Love146](#) works to end human trafficking through prevention education and survivor care programs. [Not a Number](#), its youth trafficking and exploitation prevention curriculum, is in use with 337 partner organizations in 29 States. The program is designed to empower youth through peer-to-peer prevention, the development of social-emotional skills, and the creation of a safe and respectful space for open and informed dialogue.

[My Life My Choice](#) is a prevention education program for girls and young women who have risk factors for commercial sexual exploitation, including involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Several State child welfare agencies have implemented the program, including Indiana, through the Indiana Protection for Abused and Trafficked Humans (IPATH) task force. IPATH reports that several girls have self-identified as trafficking victims after participating in the program (Gibbs, Feinberg, et al., 2019).

STATE AND AGENCY POLICY

The policies that State and local child welfare agencies develop, as well as State legislation, can have wide-reaching effects on casework practice. Agency policy can dictate how victims of human trafficking are identified, how they can be screened into the system, and how they can be supported. Even just the presence of a policy regarding human trafficking may indicate to staff that it is a priority issue. Due to the complex needs of victims and because their needs and responses may differ from other young people involved with the child welfare system, it is critical for agencies to develop policies that guide casework practice and their interactions with other agencies and organizations on this issue.

Although enacting State legislation can be a long and complex effort, it can achieve the most sweeping and long-lasting results for addressing human trafficking. A growing number of States are

enacting "safe harbor" laws that decriminalize the acts of children who are exploited for commercial sex while also providing them important legal protections and access to services. Safe harbor laws generally attempt to treat children as victims rather than criminals. This diverts them from the justice system to child welfare or other systems where they can receive services and also punishes traffickers and those who seek out children for sex. Safe harbor legislation and its protections vary widely across States. As of 2022, 45 States had passed such legislation (Shared Hope International, 2022).

Some States have also enacted vacatur laws, which allow victims to petition the court to vacate or expunge criminal convictions that resulted from their trafficking situations or, in some cases, that occurred while they were trafficked (U.S. Department of State, 2021). These laws are crucial, as having a conviction on their record may affect employment, immigration status, obtaining loans, and eligibility for certain programs. At least 35 States have vacatur laws available to human trafficking victims (University of Arizona James E. Rogers School of Law & University of San Diego School of Law, n.d.). For more information about vacatur laws, see the [Human Trafficking State Laws](#) section of the National Conference of State Legislatures website and the [How to Obtain Vacatur for Survivors of Human Trafficking](#) section of the [Human Trafficking Survivor Advocate Toolkit](#).

COLLABORATION

Preventing, identifying, and responding to human trafficking requires a multidisciplinary, communitywide approach. It is beyond the scope of a child welfare agency to serve all the needs of those who have experienced trafficking. Common partners in collaborations addressing the trafficking of children and youth include the following:

- Educators
- Health-care and behavioral health providers
- Nonprofit agencies, foundations, and community members
- Law enforcement
- District attorneys' offices
- Juvenile justice agencies
- Court personnel and guardians ad litem
- Policymakers
- Survivors of human trafficking with lived experience and expertise
- Nonoffending family members and/or caregivers of survivors

Collaboration can help communities develop supports and services to address unmet needs, coordinate strategies, develop a common language, identify trends, reduce duplication, and bring attention to human trafficking as a public health issue. It also can help create a more accessible service array for those who have experienced trafficking and possibly reduce the trauma suffered by those who have experienced trafficking by limiting the number of interviews during which they need to retell their experiences.

Developing a task force is one method for developing or strengthening support for those who have experienced trafficking. Task forces can have a variety of objectives, including assessing current approaches, coordinating law enforcement activities or the provision of social services, collecting and analyzing data, or even investigating possible cases of human trafficking. For more information about forming and operating a task force, see the [Human Trafficking Task Force e-Guide](#) from the Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center (OVC TTAC).

Example: Interagency Task Force

The [Governor's Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force](#) was formed to coordinate efforts to identify people who have experienced human trafficking, create a coordinated law enforcement response to investigate and prosecute human trafficking crimes, and provide the appropriate treatment and services necessary for victim recovery. As of 2021, 14 Ohio agencies were represented on the task force, including the Department of Youth Services and the Department of Job and Family Services, which oversees the State child welfare agency. The task force develops and distributes resources related to raising awareness of sex trafficking, identifying and responding to victims, and more. It also called for a coordinated effort to identify a statewide provider network that can serve as a first-response system for children and youth who have been trafficked. Between 2014 and 2020, the Ohio Network of Children's Advocacy Centers identified 741 minors who had experienced trafficking.

TRAINING FOR AGENCY STAFF AND PARTNERS

Since people who experience human trafficking often come into contact with several agencies, it is critical for training efforts to include child welfare and related professionals. This helps establish a support network that understands and recognizes the complexities of human trafficking and uses common language. The JVTA requires training for CPS workers and authorizes specialized training programs for law enforcement officers, first responders, health-care officials, juvenile justice personnel, prosecutors, and judicial personnel to identify victims and acts of child trafficking.

The National Advisory Committee on the Sex Trafficking of Children and Youth in the United States (2022) recommends that child welfare agencies require initial and ongoing training on sex trafficking for all child welfare professionals as well as providers contracted by or credentialed through the system. As of December 2018, 17 States, along with the District of Columbia, Guam, and the Virgin Islands, had established training requirements in human trafficking for child welfare agency staff (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019b).

Proper training will help professionals identify possible signs of human trafficking, ensure that victims receive necessary services, and understand that survivors of human trafficking are victims rather than criminals, which can influence the overall system response. OVC TTAC offers standardized, ready-to-deliver training courses on a wide range of topics that can help child welfare agency staff build skills in particular areas. They also offer tailored trainings to address needs specific to a particular agency. To learn more, visit the [Training and Technical Assistance](#) section of the OVC TTAC website.

Examples

Multistep Training and Technical Assistance Approach

As part of its Children's Bureau demonstration grant project, Massachusetts developed a two-phase training to build a statewide response system that addresses human trafficking. Initial trainings, delivered by [My Life My Choice](#), were designed to meet the unique needs of various Massachusetts counties and to help child welfare and juvenile justice professionals learn how and where sex trafficking can occur, identify risk factors, and understand the significant challenges victims face in recovery. Subsequent trainings were delivered by the [Support to End Exploitation Now](#) program and focused on building a multidisciplinary approach to a child trafficking response protocol. Technical assistance and additional support were also provided to each county that implemented a protocol.

Labor Trafficking Response Program

In July 2022, Minnesota launched what is believed to be the [first comprehensive labor trafficking protocol for law enforcement in the Nation](#). The goal is to help law enforcement better identify and respond to the crime of labor trafficking using trauma-informed practices. The protocol, developed in coordination with criminal justice, health, nongovernmental agencies, and victim service providers, includes specific investigative practices for patrol personnel, investigators, and law enforcement administrators, including evidence collection, initial response, and situation-specific trafficking indicators.

SCREENINGS AND ASSESSMENTS

In order for children and youth who have experienced or are vulnerable to human trafficking to receive the services and supports they need, child welfare professionals must be trained to recognize the signs and symptoms and have access to appropriate screening and assessment tools. It is recommended that child welfare agencies establish universal screening procedures for all children and youth ages 13 and older who encounter the child welfare system (National Advisory Committee on Sex Trafficking of Children and Youth in the United States, 2022). In addition, suspected or confirmed victims who are in the care of the child welfare system should have initial and ongoing assessments to identify their needs and help determine the most appropriate and least restrictive placement options.

Implementing screening measures and protocols in child welfare practice is a requirement of the PSTSFA. Currently, there is substantial variation across agencies in screening approaches, the tools used, and the ways in which screenings are integrated into processes and systems (Gibbs, Feinberg, et al., 2019). Research suggests that agencies should incorporate validated screening tools that best fit the context in which they are being used, including the ease with which the tool could be integrated into agency systems, the length of the screener, and the burden of use (Charm et al., 2022).

The Loyola University Center for the Human Rights of Children and the International Organization for Adolescents developed a series of tools and checklists to help child welfare professionals identify potential child victims of both sex and labor trafficking. To view these resources, including the Comprehensive Screening and Safety Tool for Child Trafficking, see [Building a Child Welfare Response to Child Trafficking Handbook](#). Additionally, the National Advisory Committee on the Sex Trafficking of Children and Youth in the United States offers a [list of validated screening and assessment tools](#).

Children and Youth Missing From Foster Care

A growing body of research indicates that children who go missing from foster care face an increased risk of encountering predators and abusers looking to take advantage of their need for basic care and desire for friendship (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Reid, 2015). One study found that leaving a foster care placement was the most common pathway to experiencing sex trafficking (Reid, 2015), while another found that 83 percent of youth who were confirmed or strongly likely to have experienced sex trafficking had at least one runaway episode (Pullmann et al., 2020). Based on these analyses, which have sample size limitations, it is estimated that as many as one in six youth may experience sex trafficking victimization during a period when they are missing from care (Latzman & Gibbs, 2020).

On September 30, 2020, more than 4,200 children in foster care were classified as having run away from their placement (Children's Bureau, 2022a). Agency efforts to prevent and respond to runaway behavior provide an important opportunity to prevent sex trafficking and support children and youth who have experienced trafficking (Latzman & Gibbs, 2020). In addition, title IV-E requires State child welfare agencies to determine a child or youth's experiences while missing from care, including screening them to determine if they may have experienced sex trafficking (see section 471(a)(35)(A)(iii) of the Social Security Act). For an indepth discussion of research-informed approaches to reducing runaway behaviors, see the ACF Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation's [Examining the Link: Foster Care Runaway Episodes and Human Trafficking](#).

DESIGNING SERVICE PROGRAMS

Children and youth who have experienced human trafficking require service programs offering many of the same supports as the general child welfare population, such as permanent families and mental health care. This population, however, has unique needs and requires service systems that acknowledge and are responsive to their circumstances and experiences. For example, people who have experienced trafficking may be in the United States without family, or they may be eligible for Federal programs or services specific to trafficking.

When developing service programs or finding community organizations as referral sources, child welfare agencies should ensure they are survivor, trauma, and healing focused. Child welfare and related systems should recognize that these children and youth have experienced violence and exploitation—they are not criminals. Unfortunately, research-based, peer-reviewed evidence about

how to serve this population is limited (Administration on Children, Youth and Families [ACYF], 2013; California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare [CEBC], n.d.; Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2013). While some trafficking-specific service and treatment programs have been developed, research has not confirmed their effectiveness. For more information and a list of existing programs, see the [Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents: Services for Victims](#) section of the CEBC website.

The issue of limited evidence-based programming for minors who have experienced human trafficking is compounded by the problems that child welfare professionals have with locating community-based service providers equipped to serve this population (Charm et al., 2022). Agencies and service providers may need to address these challenges by assessing interventions intended for populations with similar characteristics or service needs (e.g., runaway and homeless youth, sexually abused children) and tailoring them appropriately (ACYF, 2013). When doing so, however, providers should ensure that the strategies are flexible enough to meet the unique needs of this group.

Example: Recovery Services Team

The State of Kansas enlisted a NCMEC recovery services team to help develop victim-centered and trauma-informed recovery plans to assist children missing from care who are suspected or confirmed to have experienced trafficking. These teams are designed to help agencies implement child and youth engagement strategies that encourage victims to break ties with their traffickers and begin the process of building a foundation for healthy relationships (NCMEC, 2021). The team has assisted the State in developing a recovery plan for youth who have run away from care and in improving trafficking prevention and treatment services. The team is part of a larger State initiative to combat sex trafficking using strategies such as interagency collaboration and rapid response trafficking assessments. To learn more about recovery services teams, see NCMEC's [Child Sex Trafficking: Recovery Services Team \(RST\)](#).

BUILDING COMMUNITY AWARENESS

Building community awareness can have a twofold effect on anti-trafficking efforts. First, it can help identify those who have experienced sex and labor trafficking. Awareness efforts may help victims recognize their situations, self-identify, and seek assistance. These efforts also can alert those who are more likely to come into contact with people at risk for trafficking. Sharing signs of trafficking with these community members helps them understand common trafficking scenarios and indicators, which may spur additional leads or reporting. Second, awareness efforts can help prevent trafficking. Campaigns, such as the [Blue Campaign](#), can inform those vulnerable to exploitation—as well as professionals and the public—about how to recognize circumstances that could be recruitment strategies and how to request help. Campaigns also raise awareness among those who solicit the services of children experiencing trafficking or engage with businesses that exploit them.

CONCLUSION

Human trafficking is a complex problem that requires a multifaceted, collaborative response. With their close connection to children who are highly vulnerable to exploitation or who may already have experienced trafficking, child welfare agencies are central partners in this effort. To serve this population, child welfare agencies should incorporate targeted protocols into agency policy and ensure staff receive training about the risk factors and signs of trafficking as well as the availability of appropriate services and supports in the community. Agencies can also participate in data-collection efforts regarding the incidence of human trafficking in their communities and the needs of those affected. This can help child welfare and partner agencies determine the scope of trafficking in their areas and develop strategies to prevent and address it.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2023). *Human trafficking and child welfare: A guide for child welfare agencies*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/human-trafficking-and-child-welfare-guide-child-welfare-agencies/>



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