



Child Sex Trafficking Overview

What is Child Sex Trafficking?

Child sex trafficking (CST) is a form of child abuse that occurs when a child under 18 is advertised, solicited or exploited through a commercial sex act. A commercial sex act is the exchange of anything of value – such as money, drugs or a place to stay for sexual activity.

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

Not every report NCMEC receives involves a missing child. Some reports include children being exploited while still living at home and going to school, sometimes by their own family. Other children who are particularly vulnerable to trafficking include homeless youth who have been kicked out of their homes due to lack of acceptance of their sexual orientation.

In many situations, due to the trauma and manipulation from the trafficker, survivors will feel as if they are responsible for their own victimization. In some cases, even defending their abuser. It's important to remember to meet survivors where they are at in understanding their victimization while also ensuring their rights and access to services as a victim¹ of a crime are honored.

What We Are Seeing

In 2024, NCMEC received more than **27,800 reports** of child sex trafficking from all 50 U.S. States, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico which included every type of community: cities, small towns, and tribal land.

In 2024, of the over 29,000 children reported missing to NCMEC, **1 in 7 were likely sex trafficking victims.**

18% of the children who left from the care of social services and were reported missing to NCMEC in 2024, were likely victims of child sex trafficking.

In 2024, **15** was the average age of child sex trafficking victims reported missing to NCMEC.

What We Are Doing About It

NCMEC provides training, case management, clearinghouse resources, specialized analysis and recovery services on cases involving child sex trafficking, including:

- NCMEC's Child Sex Trafficking Team leverages open source data and specialized child sex trafficking technology tools to develop information and leads on all missing child cases and CyberTipline reports related to child sex trafficking
- Case Managers assist on cases of missing children involved in, or at risk of, sex trafficking
- Child Sex Trafficking Recovery Services Team offers technical assistance and support to child welfare workers and other multidisciplinary team members in developing informed victim assistance plans for survivors of child sex trafficking
- Family Advocacy and Team Hope provide resource planning and support for families who are experiencing the trauma of their child being trafficked

¹ NCMEC uses the word "victim" to consistent with law, protocol and policy, and to recognize that a crime has been committed. This type of abuse and trauma should not define the people who have experienced it

What to Look For

Child sex trafficking victims often are unable to self-identify as victims or disclose their abuse because of fear, shame or loyalty to their abuser(s). It is not a child's responsibility to ask for help. It is up to the professionals and trusted adults in these children's lives to recognize the signs associated with child sex trafficking, so they can intervene and help them get the support they deserve.

These red flags or indicators should not be considered a checklist or an assessment tool. Rather, if observed they may be an opportunity to ask more questions, make a report to NCMEC's CyberTipline or connect the child to resources for prevention or intervention.



Physical Indicators

- Signs of sexual or physical abuse
- Symptoms of neglect such as malnourishment
- Unaddressed or chronic medical/ dental issues or STIs
- Close association with an overly controlling adult
- Recovered at hotels, street tracks, truck stops, or strip clubs; or other locations where trafficking or commercial sex is known to occur
- Has secret cell phones or apps providing multiple cellphone numbers
- In possession of material goods, inconsistent to the child's access to money or socioeconomic status
- In possession of bulk sexual paraphernalia (such as bulk condoms or lubricant)
- Living out of suitcases, at motels, or in a car, or other evidence of housing insecurity
- Unexplained access to large amounts of cash, pre-paid credit cards, or hotel keys
- Tattoos or branding, such as those indicating money, matching those of other known trafficking victims or that the child is reluctant to explain
- References traveling to other cities or states while missing or lack of knowledge of their current whereabouts
- Drug dependency or frequent abuse of "party drugs" such as GHB, Rohpno^l®, Ketamine, MDMA (Ecstasy), Methamphetamine

Behavioral Indicators

- Chronically runs away from home (especially 3+ missing incidents)
- Unexplained absences from school
- Constantly sleeping during class
- Stops engaging in activities they previous enjoyed (such as athletics or clubs)
- Abruptly disconnects from family and friends
- Significant changes in behavior, including their online activity
- Avoids answering questions or lets others speak for them
- Appears frightened, annoyed, resistant, or belligerent to authority figures
- Reluctant to disclose true identity or personal information and/or has a secret online profile
- References online escort ads or dating websites/apps
- Uses language or emojis often associated with prostitution, such as "Trick," "The Life," "The Game"

What to Do

Report suspected child sex trafficking or make a tip at **1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678)** or [CyberTipline.org](https://www.cybertipline.org)

Learn More

NCMEC offers a free, on demand [Introduction to Child Sex Trafficking](#) training. This training offers three modules and builds a comprehensive foundation on the issue of child sex trafficking for all audiences including law enforcement, child welfare, as well as concerned citizens.