



## The Impact of COVID-19 on Child Sex and Labor Trafficking

At this unprecedented time, many of our most vulnerable children and families are facing new, exacerbated, and compounded risks to their health and safety due to COVID-19. Specifically, there are a number of factors and conditions created or exacerbated by the pandemic that can increase the risk of involvement in sex or labor trafficking, including:

- **Poverty:** Children and families experiencing food and housing insecurity adds significant pressure to meet the basic needs of youth and caregivers. Traffickers manipulate children and adults when they are most vulnerable.
- **Cutbacks and/or closure of street outreach and shelter services:** There is increased vulnerability for youth who are homeless and/or missing from care, especially those who have relied on street outreach and shelter services that are now limited.
- **Unsupervised and risky social media use:** With the increase in children and adults being online, there is greater opportunity for exploitation, such as the enticement to share images and live video feeds with others, online sex traffickers grooming and recruitment efforts, and scams offering work, money, or other enticements exploiting economic pressures.
- **Family and interpersonal violence, child abuse, and trauma:** Domestic violence, child sexual and physical abuse, conflict with caregivers, ongoing trauma, and trauma reminders are harmful and distressing experiences. They are also common precipitants to youth running away from home or placement which is a key risk factor and pathway for entry into trafficking.
- **Substance use problems in youth or caregivers:** An increase in financial struggles and overall stress can lead to an increase in substance use. Substance dependence and substance use problems, especially an increase in opioid dependence, can make youth and adults more vulnerable to exploitation.
- **Overburdened Systems:** Law Enforcement and other systems professionals are less able to respond to reports of trafficking and vulnerable runaway youth due to other demands at this time and due to concerns of COVID-19 exposure.

### What You Can Do

- **Be aware** of sex and labor trafficking risk factors and vulnerabilities, like those listed above, that are heightened at this time.
- **Prioritize safety and safety planning with youth and families.** Inquire about and assess specific areas of concern such as changes and stressors in the home, amount and supervision of technology use, level of involvement and responsiveness of legal and child protective systems, access to other safety and support people. Help the family establish code words or cues to signal someone is in an unsafe situation and have them practice the plan.
- **Be straightforward and transparent with youth about COVID-19 risks.** Explain to children and families the rationale for any changes in policies and practices to services that impact them in negative ways. To balance the uncertainty they may feel, collaboratively identify opportunities with youth to have voice and choice in their daily lives.
- **Be direct with youth who have an elopement history and risk.** Ask youth if they are thinking about or have urges to leave their home or placement. Engage in non-judgmental, strengths-based conversations and incorporate harm reduction strategies into these conversations. Emphasize healthy coping strategies for youth.
- **Recognize the variability in how systems are able to support and respond to youth** during and after COVID-19. Vulnerable systems-involved youth, including youth in foster and congregate care as well as youth in detention, face many

challenges. Legal and social service processes are being delayed or suspended resulting in greater lengths of stay and increased uncertainty regarding their future. Look for opportunities to enhance coping strategies for youth, caregivers, and child-serving professionals involved with different systems. Identify ways you can creatively collaborate with system partners to continue to meet the needs of youth during this uncertain time.

- **Use telehealth and video-conferencing platforms liberally and creatively** to maintain contact with youth and families while balancing ethical, safety, and confidentiality considerations and requirements. Stay educated on rapidly evolving online platforms, safety concerns associated with those platforms, and resolutions to those concerns. Recognize that low-resource families and youth missing from care may have particular challenges staying connected through technology during this time when it is most essential. Stay up-to-date on your community's efforts to enhance access (e.g., WIFI availability outside public libraries.)
- **Pay attention to background activity during telehealth sessions** that may indicate sex and/or labor trafficking is occurring. Look for the presence of individuals exerting concerning control or refusing to leave, indicators youth are not alone and are afraid to say so.
- **Prioritize recognizing and managing secondary traumatic stress among caregivers and professionals, including yourself.** Foster healthy coping, gain professional support, connect to resources, and engage solution-focused efforts. Be flexible as each day brings new information and changing circumstances. Honor your small victories.
- **Be aware of resources in your community to help meet basic needs.** Know the agencies and organizations that are supplying food, clothing, and shelter. Partner with providers who have access to flexible funding and other tangible goods to meet immediate needs.
- **Be familiar with and connect vulnerable youth and families to these 24/7, confidential, and free resource supports:**

- **National Human Trafficking Hotline:** 1-888-373-7888; text SMS: 233733 (Text "Help" or "Info")
- **National Runaway Safeline:** 1-800-786-2929 and chat at <https://www.1800runaway.org/>
- **National Domestic Violence Hotline:** 1-800-799-7233 and chat at <https://www.thehotline.org/help/>
- **National Sexual Assault Hotline:** 1-800-656-HOPE (4673) and chat at <https://hotline.rainn.org/online>
- **National Suicide Prevention Hotline:** 1-800-273-8255 and chat at <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/>
- **Technology Safety to Communicate with Survivors During a Public Health Crisis:** <https://www.techsafety.org/digital-services-during-public-health-crises>
- **NCTSN COVID-19 Resources:** <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/disasters/pandemic-resources>

## How to Support Yourself

As a child-serving professional, you have an opportunity to support vulnerable youth, help to prevent exploitation, and offer assistance to those who are already being trafficked. However, COVID-19 has more than likely had a significant impact on you personally as well as your job responsibilities. Work restrictions and shelter-in-place orders that are critical for public safety have depleted the workforce serving our most vulnerable youth and families. You may be finding it more difficult to connect with trafficked and vulnerable youth as restrictions in your movement and access may limit your opportunities for face-to-face contact as well as to offer support and resources.

On top of all of the changes at work, you are also managing and balancing your own personal, familial, and/or financial stressors as well as worry for your own health. This is a unique and uncertain time; the usual stressors you face may be exacerbated by the pandemic. While there is much you cannot control, it is important to be aware of and to manage the stress of what you can control. During these unprecedented times, we must be intentional about taking care of ourselves as we care for those we serve. This means holding on to our successes and showing gratitude to those on our team. We all need encouragement during these times.