



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

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

What is Child Sex Trafficking?

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

Some general facts include:

- Human trafficking is the fastest growing crime in the nation and is a nine-point-five billion dollar industry annually in the United States.

- Four out of five victims are women or girls.
- The National Human Trafficking Hotline receives, on average, 100 calls per day.
- It's estimated that there are 27 million slaves in the world today.
- Every 30 seconds, a human is sold into slavery.
- One out of three teens on the street will be lured into trafficking within 48 hours of leaving home.



On a local level, 340 individuals aged 25 or under were either confirmed to be or were believed to be victims of sex trafficking in Milwaukee between 2013 and 2016. It may be easy to think that the problem of sex trafficking exists only in big cities or urban areas,

but the fact is that this epidemic has filtered into suburban and rural communities, as well. According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, there have been nearly 500 total victims of trafficking in Wisconsin since 2007.

While Milwaukee is a known hub for sex trafficking, and has been referred to as the place where pimps

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come to train, Wisconsin has documented cases of human trafficking in all 72 counties. Green Bay, Appleton, and Racine have seen a rise in reported incidents in the recent past. In 2017, Brown County officials arrested 16 people in a sex trafficking sting, in addition to recording 150 calls to Wisconsin's human trafficking hotline and 47 cases of human trafficking in 2017. Of those cases, 34 were sex trafficking cases, with 27 adults and 19 minors being victimized. A 2016 report from the National Human Trafficking Hotline shows increases in potential trafficking locations in Milwaukee, Madison, Fond du Lac, La Crosse, Eau Claire, Wausau, Green Bay, and Sheboygan, among other areas of the state.

What to Be Aware Of

It's frightening to know that any child can become a victim of sex

trafficking. However, there are risk factors and indicators that you can make yourself aware of to see if your child may be more susceptible to becoming a victim. Children who were adopted and/or are in foster care, unfortunately meet most of the risk factors, such as:

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

LGBTQ youth are also at higher risk of being

targeted for sex trafficking.

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

odds for children in care or who have been adopted.

Most youth begin to seek out their identities when they reach the early teen years. We know that this search for identity is often heightened for children who were adopted or who spent time in the

foster care system. In the search to find themselves, you may start to see some of the behaviors that have been mentioned, such as running away, defiance, expressing feelings of being unloved or unwanted, and an increasing need to feel accepted.

Characteristics such as these may mean a higher risk of becoming victims of sex trafficking. Traffickers seek out youth who are vulnerable and who can be easily groomed and controlled, youth who are often trying to find a place where they fit in or someone to accept them. Traffickers may also use peers who are already involved to groom and recruit classmates who may be at a higher risk. The promise of cell phones, clothing, shoes, a place to stay, drugs, alcohol, and other things may all be ways to lure

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victims in. However, eventually all those things need to be “paid back,” and that is when youth are introduced to sex work as a repayment.

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

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



In addition to behavioral indicators, there are also several physical signs that may give you an insight on sex trafficking. Those include:

- A group of minors who surround themselves with unrelated adult males who seem to be overly controlling or abusive towards them.
- The presence of minors at hotels and truck stops.
- A stash of birth control, such as large quantities of condoms or lubrications, as well as hotel and pre-paid cards, multiple cell phones, or large amounts of money

hidden in your child’s room.

- Be aware of any notebooks or pieces of paper that may have phone numbers, addresses, names, or dollar amounts written on them.

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

Next Steps

Awareness is key when it comes to this epidemic in our society. These activities are going on in every community, large and small, and

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

Additionally, you can learn more by reviewing the work of the [Wisconsin Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force](#), or organizations such as [Exploit No More](#), [Lacey’s Hope Project](#), and [Polaris](#), which operates the National Human Trafficking Hotline. These organization’s sole goals are to create awareness, and help schools, communities, hotels, and hospitals set up protocol and procedures on what to do for prevention, as well as

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assisting victims. There are additional resources included at the end of this tip sheet. If you have any questions or want to speak with someone about this topic further, we encourage you to reach out to one of the organizations listed or to the Coalition for help and support.



Resources

Additional Resources

- [National Human Trafficking Hotline: Wisconsin](#)
- [Building an Effective Response to Sex Trafficking in Wisconsin](#)
- [National Foster Youth Institute: Sex Trafficking](#)
- [Wisconsin Child Sex Trafficking and Exploitation Indicator and Response Guide](#)
- [10 Things You Can Do Today to Help Fight Human Trafficking](#)



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