

RISK FACTORS FOR CHILD TRAFFICKING

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"The average age for victims entering the human trafficking lifestyle is 14-16 years old," said Elizabeth Goatley, Ph.D., assistant professor in Baylor University's Diana R. Garland School of Social Work, who studies trafficking. "Each year, there are 30,000 to 40,000 children at risk for trafficking recruitment. Some common places for recruitment are schools, bus stations, homeless shelters, malls and on the Internet." The Polaris Project, a national statistical housing project on human trafficking, shows that, in 2014, there were 5,042 cases reported in the United States -- 3,598 (71 percent) were sex trafficking, 818 (16 percent) were labor trafficking, 454 (9 percent) were nonspecified trafficking, and 172 (4 percent) were a combination of sex and labor trafficking.

"Traffickers, pimps and perpetrators prey on the vulnerabilities of people. They are masters at reading people and their behaviors," said Goatley, whose research stems from first-hand experience as a unit program director and victim advocate in the Commercial Sexually Exploited Children's Unit at Sandy Springs Police Department in Atlanta, Georgia. "They will offer anything to lure young people into the trafficking lifestyle. Adolescents are in a vulnerable place in their development because they want to fit in and feel loved. Traffickers manipulate love to fill the void they detect within their targeted victim."

Since human trafficking often begins with recruitment, it's important that parents and guardians know the signs, Goatley said.

"Not every sign is a definite cause for concern," Goatley advised, "but, taken in context, these signs could show that a child is at risk for trafficking."

1. **The child's communication patterns and physical appearance changes.** "If your child begins to speak in new 'slang' or begins to have more sexualized and/ or covert conversations outside the realm of ordinary adolescent behavior, they may be at risk of being recruited. This is particularly concerning if there was a history of healthy communication between the parents and the child. If their physical appearance suddenly becomes overly sexualized, or if new unexplained tattoos appear, that could make them more susceptible," Goatley said.
2. **The child will not allow access to his or her technology.** "A lot of human trafficking occurs through technology and online. If your child begins to isolate himself with his or her technology, or he or she begins to only make friends online, he or she could be more at risk for trafficking recruitment. If your child is meeting new 'friends' that they've only known through the Internet, they are more at risk for trafficking recruitment," Goatley said.
3. **The child has a second cellphone and/or multiple accounts on social media.** Children with secondary or hidden cellphones are more at risk, Goatley said, adding that children who have multiple Internet accounts (multiple accounts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, kik, etc.) and do not give parents or guardians access to those accounts may be more susceptible for trafficking recruitment.

4. **The child is exhibiting chronic runaway behaviors.** "Research states that within 48 hours of running away a child is propositioned/approached by traffickers," Goatley said. "Traffickers know that a child who's on the street for 24 hours needs food, shelter and security. They offer this in return for entering into the trafficking life. This is important to know if you have a child that chronically runs away from home or a child that has been thrown out of the home. This is also important to know to help protect our homeless youth."
5. **The child has a new boyfriend -- particularly an older one.** "If [the] child is hiding a boyfriend or is not willing to introduce family or friends to the boyfriend, this could be a sign that recruitment is taking place," Goatley said.

Goatley said several factors that place children at more risk for recruitment are a history of sexual abuse, witnessing or experiencing physical abuse, a pattern of runaways or throwaways (parents kicking the child out of the home) or children with histories in foster care/juvenile detention.

"The best defense parents and guardians have against trafficking is loving and caring for their children, keeping the lines of communication open and making their children aware of human trafficking," she said.

If parents suspect their children are being recruited or groomed, Goatley encourages them to call local law enforcement or their local human trafficking agency to discuss their situation and gain more awareness.