



Who Is Susceptible to Domestic Child Sex Trafficking and What Are Some Red Flags?

Identifying victims of domestic child sex trafficking (DCST) is challenging.¹ While all youth can become victims of DCST, there are a multitude of factors that can make children and youth particularly susceptible to sex trafficking.² Figure 1 shows the interconnectedness of individual, relational, community, and societal factors making children and youth vulnerable to DCST.³ The individual factors listed in Figure 1 illustrate how certain populations (e.g., LGBTQ, system-involved youth)⁴ can be targeted by traffickers. Traffickers may engage runaways or LGBTQ youth, for example, by offering youth basic necessities, a sense of family and/or protection.

Being dependent on their trafficker may **prevent** vulnerable youth from reporting or speaking out against their trafficker.

Vulnerable youth may also see their trafficker as a boyfriend or as family, or may be frightened into keeping silent. Research suggests that trafficking victims rarely identify themselves due to shame, embarrassment, stigma, fear, etc.⁵

Because research suggests that children or youth first fall victim to trafficking **before the age of 16**,⁶ it is necessary for court stakeholders, including judicial officers, to be cognizant of common misconceptions about DCST.

Some **common myths and misconceptions** include but are not limited to:

- Trafficked persons can *only* be immigrants from other countries;
- Trafficking involves *some form of travel* or transportation across state or national borders;
- Trafficking victims *will ask for help* and/or self-identify as a victim; and
- Trafficking victims come from families with *lower* socioeconomic means.⁷

Figure 1. Factors Related to DCST

(See IOM & NRC, 2013; Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017)

Individual

- History of abuse/neglect
- History of system involvement
- Vulnerable populations (e.g., runaways, homeless, LGBTQ, those with disabilities)

Relationship

- Limited family connections
- Parental dysfunction (e.g., addictions)
- History of family violence

Community

- Undersourced schools
- Social isolation
- Gang involvement

Societal

- Lack of awareness
- Lack of resources

What are some red flags judicial officers should be aware of?

Because many of the risk factors that make a youth more susceptible to DCST are commonly seen in system-involved youth, judicial officers should be aware of red flags or warning signs that a child or youth may be being trafficked (see Figure 2). While several of these warning signs may be observed in many vulnerable populations, some red flags tend to be more specific to trafficking victims. Displaying sexualized behaviors at a young age, having an older boyfriend, being branded with a tattoo, etc. are significant warning signs for those serving DCST victims.

If you suspect a case of child sex trafficking, contact the National Center of Missing & Exploited Children at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678), visit www.cybertipline.org, or call 1-800-CALL FBI (1-800-225-5324).

Endnotes

- 1 Greenbaum, V. J. (2014). Commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of children in the United States. *Current Problems in Pediatric and Adolescent Health Care*, 4, 245-269.
- 2 Development Services Group, Inc. (2014). *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children/Sex Trafficking: Literature review – A product of the model programs guide*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Retrieved from <https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/litreviews/CSECSexTrafficking.pdf>
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- 3 *Ibid.* Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC). (2013).
- Miller-Perrin, C. and Wurtele, S.K. (2017). Sex trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of children. *Women and Therapy*, 40, 123-151.
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- 4 *Ibid.* Polaris Project. (n.d.). Sex trafficking and LGBTQ youth. Retrieved from <https://polarisproject.org/sites/default/files/LGBTQ-Sex-Trafficking.pdf>
- 5 Curtis, R., Terry, K., Dank, M., Dombrowski, K., and Khan, B. (2008). The commercial sexual exploitation of children in New York City: Volume 1: The CSEC Population in New York City: Size, Characteristics and Needs. National Institute of Justice, US Department of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/225083.pdf>

Figure 2. Red Flags that a Minor May Be a Victim of DCST

(*Ibid.* Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC). (2013).)

- Exhibits bruises or other signs of physical abuse or malnourishment
- Has a history of juvenile status offense (e.g., truancy)
- Displays sexualized behaviors and/or is inappropriately dressed
- Shows signs of withdrawn behavior, depression, anxiety, and/or fear
- Has an older boyfriend and/or a new group of friends
- Brags about making (or having) a lot of money
- Has a new tattoo (i.e., branding by the trafficker), or new clothing and/or expensive gifts
- Has experienced homelessness and/or often stays with friends
- Has limited family connections and minimal social support
- Lacks control over her/his schedule

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- 7 National Human Trafficking Hotline. (n.d.) *Myths and misconceptions*. Retrieved from <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/what-human-trafficking/myths-misconceptions>