



Child Sex Trafficking: Experiences of Youth Who Have Been Trafficked

Often, youth who have been sex trafficked have experienced multiple traumas and adversities in their lives. This includes various trauma and adversities prior to being trafficked that often contributed to their vulnerability, as well as their experiences while being trafficked. Even after identified as having been trafficked, youth may face many challenges. It is helpful for professionals to be aware of these experiences and their impact on youth. While not exhaustive, below is a list of common youth experiences prior to, while being, and after being trafficked.

Prior to Being Trafficked

- Child sexual abuse
- Exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) and community violence
- Traumatic loss and separation from caregivers (e.g., death, incarceration, separation during migration, caregiver substance misuse, mental health or medical treatment)
- Impaired caregiving (e.g., substance misuse, mental illness, disability)
- Exposure to familial trafficking or peers involved in commercial sex trade
- Expectations of caring for, and providing monetarily for, family members due to impaired caregivers, vulnerable siblings, needs of own children
- Involvement with Child Protective Services (CPS)
- Involvement with Juvenile Justice System
- Foster care placement, multiple caregiver and placement transitions
- Educational disruptions
- Homelessness, including family homelessness, rejection/removal by caregivers and “running away” from home or placement

While Being Trafficked

- Sexual violence, multiple sexual contacts with different purchasers in a short time, sexual contact without contraceptive, barrier, and/or condom
- Physical violence by purchasers and traffickers, witnessing violence to others
- Community or gang related violence
- Significant emotional abuse, isolation, coercive control, including degradation by traffickers and purchasers
- Bullying by peers
- Betrayal by caregivers and other trusted individuals believed to support and protect (e.g., romantic partners, peers, fellow gang members)
- Separation from traditional supports of family and community
- Poor sleep hygiene, inadequate nutrition, medical neglect of untreated and/or chronic conditions requiring medication management or regular contact with healthcare providers
- Unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- Substance use (forced as a method of control or used as a method of coping with trafficking experiences)
- Forced to inflict harm on and/or exploit or recruit others
- Dual exploitation (e.g., being both sex and labor trafficked)
- Arrest and detention

After Being Trafficked

After youth are identified and are no longer being trafficked, they may continue to experience challenges and adversities:

- Arrest and detention
- Placement transitions (often multiple)
- Threats and/or fear of harm by former exploiters
- Contact by exploiters and purchasers
- Efforts to re-exploit through commercial sex by traffickers and/or peers
- Educational difficulties and disruptions
- Isolation and shame
- Difficulties integrating in to social settings
- Lack of access to resources
- Loss of community support
- Bias and discrimination by professionals and other adults, caregivers, and peers
- Medical conditions (e.g., STIs, pregnancy)
- Difficulty accessing employment and other financial supports

Despite these adversities, youth are resilient and can cope with difficult experiences in many ways. It is important to note that even if youth who are being or have been trafficked have any of the experiences noted above, they may not view these experiences as traumatic.

Because of the complexity of the past and ongoing adversities youth experience, it is important to engage a multi-disciplinary team response to address past harms and ongoing adversities to enhance youth safety and wellbeing. For more information and resources, go to <https://www.nctsn.org/what-child-trauma-trauma-types/sex-trafficking>.

Suggested Citation: Wozniak, J, Kinnish, K., Blacker, D., Greenbaum, V.J., Garrett, R., and Grady, J.B and Child Sex Trafficking Collaborative Group. (2021). *Child sex trafficking: Experiences of youth who have been trafficked*. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.