



# Special Issues Facing Juvenile Victims of Human Trafficking in the United States

*There are significant intersections among child maltreatment, delinquency, and human trafficking. Victims of trafficking are often involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The same risk factors that contribute to child maltreatment make these juveniles vulnerable to traffickers. Moreover, youth who have been maltreated have a greater risk of juvenile delinquency, particularly when their trauma is left untreated and unresolved, making youth in the juvenile justice system also vulnerable to traffickers. Minors are often compelled by traffickers to engage in criminal behaviors such as drug dealing and prostitution.*



## Why Are Youth Vulnerable to Human Trafficking?

Specific vulnerabilities of minors make them targets of traffickers. These include:

- Emotional vulnerabilities (feeling lonely, desperate to belong, or in need of love).
- Poverty (needing work in order to take care of family or pay for education, sometimes needing to move or migrate to find work).
- Aspects that make minors different and outcasts within their community (sexual orientation, disability, or being new to a setting).
- Lack of family or community support (being a runaway or throwaway, lacking parental supervision, being neglected).
- Presence of violence in the home (physical, sexual, or emotional abuse).

## What Support Is Available for Juvenile Victims?

Child Protective Services (CPS) programs operate in every state, providing services for

juveniles who are abused or neglected and offering case management, establishment of a legal guardian, and housing options, including foster families and group homes. For juveniles who are foreign nationals, it is important to note that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) administers the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) program. The program establishes legal responsibility, under state law and in coordination with state-level CPS programs, to ensure that unaccompanied refugee and immigrant minors, including human trafficking victims, receive the full range of assistance, care, and services that are available to all foster care placements in the state. A legal authority is designated to act in place of the juvenile's unavailable parents.

In addition, specialized programs for survivors of youth trafficking are developing across the nation.

Listed below are some key considerations when working with minor and adolescent victims:

- **Identify an appropriate guardian.** In some cases, it is possible to reconnect and build positive ties to family and community (which may include family support and reconciliation, if appropriate); in other cases, it may mean connecting minors to placement programs, such as foster care, to build new ties.

- **Utilize the child welfare and protection system.** Identify key personnel at your local child welfare office who can assist in navigating the system and obtaining services.
- **Become familiar with the Child Advocacy Center (CAC) in your area.** CACs are child-focused, facility-based programs in which representatives from many disciplines—including law enforcement, child protection, prosecution, medical and mental health, victim advocacy, and child advocacy—work together to conduct interviews and make team decisions about the investigation, treatment, management, and prosecution of child abuse cases.
- **Advocate for a forensic interviewer** or law enforcement professional trained in interviewing children and adolescents to conduct investigative interviews.
- **Explore sealing, expunging, or vacating criminal records.** A criminal record can create difficult downstream consequences, whether the juvenile was arrested, convicted, or both. For example, employers or landlords often ask about criminal

offenses, which can lead to roadblocks in obtaining services. Expunging refers to the process of sealing arrest and conviction records, whereas vacating deletes the records, as if they never existed.

- **Identify programs that are unique and interesting for minors.** Many service providers have developed programs that help minors self-identify, avoid risky behavior, develop new skills, and use peer-to-peer groups to foster new healthy relationships. These may include after-school programs, homeless and runaway outreach teams, and youth drop-in centers.
- Most communities have **multidisciplinary coalitions focused on issues affecting youth**, which can be an excellent source of information when creating a network of comprehensive services, along with many additional trained eyes and ears for identifying trafficked youth.

For more information, please visit [www.ovc.gov/trafficking](http://www.ovc.gov/trafficking) and [www.ovcttac.gov/taskforceguide](http://www.ovcttac.gov/taskforceguide).

