

Youth Human Trafficking: Risk Factors and Protective Actions for K-12 Schools

Understand risk factors of youth human trafficking and how to counteract them with school-based protective actions.

Human trafficking can happen to any person, regardless of age, sex, socioeconomic class, nationality, or location. Traffickers often target individuals who are vulnerable because they lack social or family support systems, their basic needs are not being met (housing, food, and financial insecurities), they have experienced previous abuse, and/or they are unable to recognize exploitative situations. Traffickers recognize these factors may make someone more likely to take risks to access opportunities and stability. Sometimes, youth are targeted by traffickers solely because they are young and may not have the skills to make informed decisions when presented with a situation that may lead to trafficking.



Schools can play an important role in preventing and responding to youth trafficking. Below is a list of risk factors that can make students susceptible to trafficking and related school-based protective actions that can help counteract these risk factors. *Please note this is not a complete or exhaustive list of risk factors, protective actions, or resources related to youth human trafficking.*



Lack of knowledge about human trafficking.

Schools can incorporate programs and classroom-based activities to educate students about what human trafficking is, how it could look, and how it could feel so youth can understand if they are being taken advantage of or in danger. These programs can employ age-appropriate lessons and language to help ensure information resonates with students.

Because traffickers commonly use the internet, social media, and/or online gaming platforms to reach youth and coerce them into trafficking situations, schools can also play an important role in teaching students online safety skills. Educators can reinforce these skills throughout the school year and work with families to remind students how to make smart online decisions or ask for help if a situation makes them uncomfortable.

Related Resources

- ✓ **[Carter's Story: Blue Campaign Youth Animated Video Series:](#)** This animated video series raises awareness of how to keep young people safe while playing online video games and provides tips for recognizing signs of human trafficking.
- ✓ **[How to Talk to Youth About Human Trafficking: A Guide for Youth Caretakers and Individuals Working with Youth:](#)** This guide includes resources that can be incorporated into activities, lessons, or conversations to engage youth.
- ✓ **[Mia's Story: Blue Campaign Youth Animated Video Series:](#)** This animated video series depicts the experience of a young girl being trafficked through the lens of different individuals in her life.
- ✓ **[NetSmartz:](#)** This online safety education program provides age-appropriate videos and activities to teach children how to be safer online.





Challenges or lack of support for mental health, substance use or addiction, or trauma-related incidents.

Schools are essential partners in providing and connecting students with vital support services. To help address student needs, schools and districts can consider building relationships with community organizations such as child welfare systems, programs serving runaway and homeless youth, human trafficking prevention organizations, domestic violence agencies, child advocacy or assessment centers, and parent groups. Referrals to services in the school or community should work to address both the immediate and long-term needs of the student, and all students should have access to services.

Schools can also explore ways to establish comprehensive school-based mental health services that address prevention, early intervention, and treatment. Comprehensive school-based programs incorporate a team of licensed behavioral health professionals to provide on-site therapy services that allow mental health needs to be addressed without removing students from the learning environment. Schools can also implement practices such as Psychological First Aid to reduce the initial distress caused by traumatic events.

Related Resources

- ✓ **Mental Health Resources:** This webpage shares strategies and resources that K-12 schools can implement to support student mental health.
- ✓ **Psychological First Aid: How to Help Students Recover After a Personal, Community, or School-Based Emergency:** This fact sheet provides information on the goals of Psychological First Aid (PFA) models, when and how schools can implement PFA, and the type of training school staff need to use this strategy effectively.
- ✓ **“Talk. They Hear You.”®:** This campaign provides resources to help student assistance professionals, school leaders, and families work together to support students who may be struggling with substance use, mental health, or school-related issues.
- ✓ **Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package:** This resource package offers a framework and roadmap for adopting a trauma-informed approach school- or district wide.



Experiencing bullying or feelings of low self-esteem.

School-based programs that focus on building youth skills and positive school environments can be effective in decreasing incidences of bullying and associated risk factors. Schools can consider a variety of strategies to prevent and address bullying like setting and enforcing policies and expectations for student behavior, promoting classroom-based bullying prevention activities, and actively monitoring places on campus where bullying is likely to occur.

Related Resources

- ✓ **StopBullying.gov:** This interagency website provides information on what bullying is, what cyberbullying is, who is at risk, and how schools and individuals can prevent and respond to bullying.



Lack of support networks, like strong relationships with friends, family, or other trusted adults.

Fostering a sense of community among school staff and students can help students feel cared for, supported, and accepted. Even if a child lacks stability and family support at home, a positive school environment can provide a safe place where youth can build trusting relationships with their peers and other adults. By fostering in-school connections, students may also be more willing to reach out to a trusted adult for help if they find themselves in a trafficking or exploitative situation.

To build strong school connections and relationships, educators can show students they are valued and respected by establishing routines, reinforcing positive behaviors, and incorporating opportunities for student participation.



Human Trafficking Defined

Human trafficking, according to the [U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Blue Campaign](#), is a crime that involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act. Causing someone under the age of 18 to engage in a commercial sex act, regardless of using force, fraud, or coercion, is considered human trafficking by U.S. law.

Report Suspected Human Trafficking

It is important to know that students who are experiencing human trafficking may not reach out for help due to fear, shame, or loyalty to their trafficker. Trusted adults in the K-12 community must be able to identify [indicators of suspected trafficking](#) and help connect students to the supports and services they need.

To report suspected human trafficking to federal law enforcement, please call 1-866-347-2423. To get help from the National Human Trafficking Hotline, please call 1-888-373-7888 or text 233733. Call 911 if someone is in immediate danger.

General Human Trafficking Resources

SchoolSafety.gov provides a range of resources for schools and districts to use to prevent and identify human trafficking and support students who experience trafficking situations. These include:

- ✓ **Blue Campaign Resources:** This webpage houses a collection of materials, trainings, and videos from the Blue Campaign, a national public awareness human trafficking prevention campaign, to educate youth and adults about what human trafficking looks like.
- ✓ **Combating Human Trafficking in America's Schools:** This webpage provides resources to support schools' efforts to combat trafficking, including resources and information on identification and intervention and universal prevention.
- ✓ **Human Trafficking in America's Schools, What Schools Can Do To Prevent, Respond, and Help Students Recover from Human Trafficking, Second Edition:** This guide includes information on risk factors and indicators of child trafficking, as well as how school-based professional development and education programs can prevent and reduce youth human trafficking. It also includes details on how policies, protocols, and partnerships with other community sectors can help prevent trafficking.



Learn more and find additional resources on SchoolSafety.gov's [child exploitation page](#).

Sources: [A Public Health Approach to Adverse Childhood Experiences](#) | [Bullying and Cyberbullying](#) | [Child Exploitation](#) | [How to Talk to Youth About Human Trafficking: A Guide for Youth Caretakers and Individuals Working with Youth](#) | [Human Trafficking in America's Schools: What Schools Can Do to Prevent, Respond, and Help Students Recover from Human Trafficking, Second Edition](#) | [Mental Health](#) | [Psychological First Aid: How to Help Students Recover After a Personal, Community, or School-Based Emergency](#)

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