

# Sex Trafficking of Minors

The Vermont Department for Children and Families (DCF), Family Services Division (FSD) defines **Sex Trafficking of Minors** as a range of crimes committed against children and adolescents, including but not limited to:

- exploiting a minor;
- recruiting, enticing, harboring, transporting, providing, or obtaining minors by any means for the purpose of sexual exploitation;
- exploiting a minor through survival sex (exchanging sex or sexual acts for money or something of value, such as shelter, food, or drugs);
- using a minor in child pornography;
- exploiting a minor through sex tourism, mail order bride trade, or early marriage; or,
- exploiting a minor by having her/him perform in sexual venues (e.g., peep shows or strip clubs).

In 2011, Vermont enacted laws related to human trafficking: <http://www.leg.state.vt.us/docs/2012/Acts/ACT055.PDF>

**ANY CHILD (UNDER THE AGE OF 18) ENGAGED IN COMMERCIAL SEX IS A VICTIM OF TRAFFICKING.**

**ANY ADULT WHO PURCHASES OR SELLS SEX FROM A MINOR IS A TRAFFICKER.**

## How does a child or youth become a victim?

Children and youth can be lured into different forms of sexual exploitation by psychological manipulation, drugs, and/or violence. Any child or youth may be vulnerable to such a person who promises to meet his or her emotional and physical needs. Often the motive is to exploit the victim for monetary gain. Traffickers will create a seemingly loving and caring relationship with their victim in order to establish trust and allegiance. The child or youth is manipulated to believe they are in a loving and caring relationship so they remain loyal to the exploiter even in the face of severe victimization. Vulnerable youth may become victimized when they are trying to meet their basic needs such as food and shelter.

## Signs that a child or youth may be a victim of sex trafficking:

The following are common indicators that a child or youth may be a victim of sex trafficking. This is not an exhaustive list. The presence of one of these signs alone does not indicate trafficking. These indicators are provided as a guide for identifying situations that may warrant further observation.

- ❖ A history of running away
- ❖ The child or youth has contracted a sexually transmitted infection
- ❖ Inexplicable appearance of expensive gifts, clothing, or other costly items
- ❖ Presence of an older boy-/girlfriend
- ❖ Substance use or abuse
- ❖ Suspicions that the parent/caretaker may be selling their child for sex
- ❖ Withdrawal or lack of interest in previous hobbies and activities
- ❖ Gang membership or involvement
- ❖ Lack of enrollment in school or repeated absence from school
- ❖ Patterns of unexplained unsupervised time
- ❖ Overuse or obsessive use of social media
- ❖ Disruption in peer group or association with a new peer group
- ❖ Increased vigilance regarding privacy (over-protective of cell phone)
- ❖ Suspicions that the child or youth is exchanging sex for housing/shelter, food, clothing, or other basic necessities
- ❖ Demeanor exhibiting fear, anxiety, depression, submissiveness, or nervousness

The Family Services Division's Sex Trafficking of Minors Workgroup is currently developing policy recommendations based on best practice. Until policy is in place, please contact us at [AHS.DCFSDSexTraffickingQuestions@vermont.gov](mailto:AHS.DCFSDSexTraffickingQuestions@vermont.gov) if you have questions about best practice and available resources.

If you suspect a child or youth you are working with is a victim of sex trafficking, report to Vermont's 24-Hour **Child Protection Line** at **1-800-649-5285**.



### **Victims of sex trafficking are:**

- ❖ **Targeted** – Traffickers are predators who seek out vulnerable victims, particularly runaways or children experiencing trouble at home. They know these children have emotional and physical needs they perceive are not being met and use this to their advantage. Traffickers find victims at a variety of venues such as social-networking websites, shopping malls, schools, on local streets, or at bus stations. While traffickers often target children outside of their family, a family member may also exploit a child.
- ❖ **Tricked** – Traffickers are often willing to invest a great deal of time and effort into their victims to break down natural resistance and suspicion – buying them gifts, providing a place to stay, promising a loving relationship – before revealing their true intent. Frequently victims do not realize the deceptive nature of their trafficker’s interest in them because they view their exploiter as a caretaker or partner.
- ❖ **Traumatized** – Traffickers’ use of psychological manipulation (causing the child or youth to truly believe the exploiter loves and cares for his or her well-being) coupled with physical control (threats, violence, or drug addiction) can make a victim feel trapped and powerless. This “trauma bond” is difficult to break; long-term treatment and counseling for victims is often required.

### **Barriers for victims include:**

- ❖ **Psychology of Victimization** – Traffickers may use force, threats, fraud, or coercion to virtually enslave their victims. Juvenile victims may be controlled by threats of violence to their family; pornographic images taken and used for blackmail or stigmatization; and physical, verbal and sexual abuse. Child victims may be gang-raped to desensitize them to sexual activity prior to being victimized through prostitution. Victims are taught to not trust law enforcement and may have experienced negative encounters with law enforcement. Victims often remain with their exploiters out of fear of being physically harmed, having another victim endure physical harm, or threats to their family members. Traffickers have been convicted of homicide of victims and plotting to murder cooperative victim witnesses, further instilling fear.
- ❖ **Trauma Bonding** – Trauma bonding is common among child victims exploited for commercial sex. The child experiences a strong link to the trafficker or exploiter based on what the child perceives as an incredibly intense or important relationship, but one in which there has been an exploitation of trust or power. Emotional bonding is a learned tactic for survival and can be common between exploited children and the exploiter. Advocacy groups working directly with this population note reframing the trauma bond with an exploiter can take months of therapy and/or residential treatment for the child. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is common among children and youth exposed to sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. PTSD symptoms include anxiety, depression, insomnia, irritability, flashbacks, emotional numbing, and hyper-alertness. Victims of sex trafficking often have unique needs as a result of the frequent nature of sexual exploitation and violence committed by multiple offenders, potentially occurring over a sustained period of time.

