



Child Sex Trafficking in America:

A Guide for Child Welfare Professionals

What is Child Sex Trafficking?

Child sex trafficking (CST) is a form of child abuse that occurs when any child under 18 years of age is advertised, solicited or exploited through commercial sex where something of value – such as money, drugs or a place to stay – is exchanged for sexual activity. The item of value can be given to or received by any person including the child.

Traffickers can be anyone who profits from the selling of a child for sex to a buyer, including family members, foster parents, gangs, and perceived trusted adults or romantic partners. In some cases, there is no identified trafficker, and it is the person buying sex from the child who is exploiting the child's vulnerabilities. For instance, if a child runs away, a buyer may exploit the child's need for food and shelter offering to provide that in exchange for sex.

Child Sex Trafficking and Children in Care

Child welfare professionals play a critical role in preventing, intervening in, and providing a comprehensive service response to victims of child sex trafficking. Data and lived experience of survivors have revealed children in the care of social services are disproportionately vulnerable to sex trafficking. Perpetrators commonly target and recruit youth who have already experienced a disrupted home life and childhood sexual abuse.

18%

of the children reported missing to NCMEC in 2024 who left from the care of social services were likely victims of child sex trafficking.

If a child runs away from care, it is important that the professionals who interact with the child express relief when the child is found and concern for the child's well-being while they were missing.

Asking non-judgmental questions about how the child took care of themselves while they were missing, and noting any red flags or changes in behavior, can help reveal potential victimization.

NCMEC Assistance for Child Welfare Professionals

The Child Sex Trafficking Recovery Services Team (RST) provides specialized support and resources to child welfare professionals, foster parents and law enforcement who are working with victims of child sex trafficking. RST Resource Specialists provide expert knowledge and guidance on promising practices in trauma-informed response by making connections to statewide and local specialized child sex trafficking resources. RST Resource Specialists are prepared to assist in the development of intentional, trauma-informed, and victim-centered plans which has been proven to build rapport, increase opportunities for youth engagement, and reduce trauma responses. RecoveryServices@ncmec.org

Familial Trafficking

When working with youth in care or investigating cases of abuse or neglect, it is important to be aware that traffickers can include family members. This includes, but is not limited to, biological mother and/or father, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, in-laws, and adoptive, foster, or stepparents. Cases are hard to identify because children are often dependent on familial traffickers for survival and the abusers use complex techniques to silence child victims. In familial trafficking, where the trafficker and primary abuser is the biological father and/or mother, the child is less likely to attempt to run away and the grooming can begin as early as infancy and trafficking can begin as early as toddler-age.

Children Missing From Care

What to do if a child in care goes missing*

24-Hour Hotline

1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678)

[NCMEC.org/CMFC](https://www.ncmec.org/CMFC)

* Per federal law anytime a child is missing, the child's legal guardian should immediately call law enforcement and then the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children at 1-800-THE-LOST®



1 in 7 of the more than **29,000** missing children reported to NCMEC in 2024 were likely victims of CST.

What Child Welfare Professionals Report is Critical

As many child welfare professionals are aware, Federal laws have been enacted in response to the increased awareness of and attention to the prevalence of sex trafficking victimization among system involved youth.

The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act requires states to have specific protocols and policies concerning children who go missing from care and requires child welfare professionals to report missing children to Law Enforcement and NCMEC.

In 2022, the Trafficking Victims Protection and Prevention Reauthorization Act (TVPPRA) was passed and requires specific information be reported to NCMEC including descriptive information, a photograph whenever possible, and any endangerments such as:

- Suspected trafficking
- Mental health diagnosis(es)
- Medical concerns
- Other vulnerabilities


This legislation also requires on-going communication with NCMEC in order to continually assess what resources should be applied to locate missing youth and assist in their recovery.


NCMEC has a plethora of resources available specifically for child welfare and law enforcement professionals in their efforts to recover and support missing children exploited through child sex trafficking. However, the first and most important step is ensuring that you share as much information as possible when making the report to NCMEC. Every piece of information is reviewed to determine how it might lead to locating the missing child. We also encourage you to reach back out if more information becomes available after the initial report. Working together we can attempt to reduce the amount of time children are missing and experiencing exploitation. We are honored to support the work you do every day to keep kids in care safer.


- Under the **Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA)** definition of an abused and neglected child was amended to include sex trafficking victims irrespective of the relationship of the abuser to the child.¹ Further, to be eligible for CAPTA funding, states must ensure that child welfare professionals are trained to identify, assess and provide comprehensive services to child sex trafficking victims.

NCMEC provides specialized support and guidance on reporting children missing from care to NCMEC. For more information regarding NCMEC's work to address child sex trafficking and children missing from care, please visit [NCMEC.org/CMFC](https://www.ncmec.org/CMFC)

DO

**Be Patient**

**Listen**

**Reassure**

DON'T

**Assume**

**Blame**

**Interrogate**

NCMEC Training

NCMEC is excited to offer free, online trainings specifically for **you!** Child Welfare professionals play an important role in the response to children missing from care and child sex trafficking. Navigating federal requirements, providing services, and engaging with survivors can be challenging. NCMEC is here to help!



Courses:

- Child Sex Trafficking: Understanding Running Behavior and Trauma-Informed Youth Engagement (1 NASW CEU)
- Child Sex Trafficking Legislation: What it Means for You
- Reporting Children Missing from Care: How NCMEC Can Support You
- NCMEC Resources for Child Welfare Professionals

¹ NCMEC uses the word "victim" to consistent with law, protocol and policy, and to recognize that a crime has been committed. This type of abuse and trauma should not define the people who have experienced it