



Human Trafficking and Youth in Care

Children, teens, and young adults who have been involved with the child welfare system are at higher risk of human trafficking. Despite being taken into care by authorities for their protection, system-involvement often creates or exacerbates existing factors that increase a young person's risk of being trafficked.

It is estimated that at least 60% of minor victims of trafficking have been involved with the child welfare system. (Schlagel, 2021)

CHILD WELFARE INVOLVEMENT

While there are many reasons that a child or teen can become dependent within the child welfare system, most cases fall into two categories, including when a child is “without proper parental care and control” or if a child has been delinquent. Being without proper parental care and control can include situations where a child's basic or medical needs are not being met or if they are at risk of harm. Delinquency can be a cause for dependency in cases where a minor's behavior, actions, or needs cannot be managed effectively by their parents or guardians. At the age of 18, young people are able to sign themselves out of care. However, they may also choose to remain dependent until the age of 21 (OCFC, 2021).

DISPROPORTIONALITY AND DISPARITIES

It is important to point out that the child welfare system does not impact all children and families equally. For example, while Black children account for 14% of the general population, they make up 23% of children in foster care. Alaskan Native and American Indian children make up 1% of the general population, but 2% of the population of youth in care. Nationally, Latinx* children have historically been underrepresented in foster care, but this trend is shifting and Latinx youth are now overrepresented in many states. Similarly, over 30% of youth in foster care are LGBTQ, with 5% being trans, compared to approximately 11% and 1% respectively of youth who are not in care. Black, Indigenous, and youth of color and LGBTQ children and teens more commonly experience negative outcomes and discrimination than their white, cisgender, heterosexual peers (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021; Children's Rights, 2021).

The disproportionality and disparities that exist within the child welfare system's response to

children and families are rooted in systemic biases and oppression, including racism, homophobia, transphobia, ageism, and ableism. These are the same root causes of interpersonal violence, such as human trafficking, sexual abuse and assault, or family violence, where a person believes they are entitled to harm or exploit another person (PCAR, 2018).



WHAT IS HUMAN TRAFFICKING?

In Pennsylvania, trafficking of minors includes participating in the exchange of sexual acts or labor of a person under the age of 18 for something of value, which may include money, shelter, food, drugs, or protection. In cases involving minors, the legal elements of force, fraud, or coercion that are required in cases involving adults do not need to be established (CSE Institute, n.d.).

Trafficking can take many forms and may include exploitation for the purposes of sex or labor. Commercial sexual exploitation can involve sex acts, but may also include image exploitation or the production or dissemination of child pornography. Labor trafficking may include requiring a person to work for minimal or no wages, in unsafe conditions, or for long hours. In some cases, sex and labor trafficking may co-occur (CSE Institute, n.d.).

RISK FACTORS FOR TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION

Children and teens are at increased risk of harm simply due to their age and development. Obviously, minors have fewer legal rights and are often completely dependent upon adults for their care and basic needs which can make them more susceptible to coercion or manipulation. Additionally, child and adolescent brains are not fully developed; the part of the brain that is responsible for critical thinking, understanding consequences of actions, and impulse control may not fully developed until a person is in their mid- to late twenties. This is why younger children are less regulated in their emotions and behaviors, and why teens are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors. Socially, particularly in the teen years, young people are increasingly dependent upon the approval of others to establish their sense of self and self-esteem. Feelings of safety, access to basic needs, and a sense of belonging are critical to a young person's healthy development. When these needs are not being met in positive ways, children, teens, and young adults are at increased risk of harm and exploitation (McLeod, 2018; McLeod, 2020; Siegel, 2018).

Recognizing the importance of feeling safe, having access to basic needs, and having a sense of belonging, it is no surprise that risk of trafficking and exploitation increase when there are deficits in these areas. Common risk factors include (CDC, 2021; Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017; NCSSLE, 2021; Philadelphia ACE Project, 2019; Wolfe, Greeson, Wasch, & Treglia, 2018):

- Unhealthy or unsupportive relationships
- Lack of resources, access to services or help, such as living in poverty or having food insecurity
- Housing instability
- History of trauma or adverse childhood experiences
- Family or individual history of violence or substance use

The risk of trafficking and exploitation increases when there are deficits in feelings of safety, access to basic needs, and a sense of belonging.

- Disruption within the family unit due to causes such as divorce, death, incarceration
- Physical or mental health challenges
- Marginalized identities based on race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, limited English proficiency, immigration status, etc.

It is important to note that these same factors can apply to a child's/family's risk for involvement with the child welfare system. Ideally, once a child comes into the care of the child welfare agency, many of these risk factors are addressed; unfortunately, for many children, teens, and young adults, their experiences within foster care compound the harm that brought them into care. Once in foster care, young people often experience profound disruption of their relationships, education, medical or mental health care, and housing. These impacts can be particularly significant in cases where children are removed from their communities, placed in homes or locations that don't align with their culture or values, when consistent, caring relationships are not created or maintained, and particularly in cases when abuse or neglect continues within the placement.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

In order to reduce risk factors and build resilience, caregivers, service providers, and people who regularly come in contact with children, teens, and young adults, can take steps to ensure that basic needs are being met, including the need for love and belonging. Not only should adults familiarize themselves with the risk factors and signs of trafficking and abuse, they should educate themselves about what to do if they suspect a child or teen is being abused or trafficked, including mandated reporting responsibilities and local resources for support.

We can:

- 1 Become familiar with the risk factors and signs of trafficking and abuse.
- 2 Understand mandated reporting responsibilities.
- 3 Learn about local resources, such as local rape crisis programs, for children and teens experiencing trafficking and abuse.
- 4 Promote prevention education initiatives within schools and organizations. Check out Safe Secure Kids for more information about effective prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation.
- 5 Model healthy, supportive relationships.
- 6 Be trauma-informed and youth-/survivor-centered. Elevate the voices of children and youth to learn more about what they need.
- 7 Become involved as a mentor, coach, or volunteer with a youth-serving organization.
- 8 Advocate for training for case workers, foster families, congregate care providers, and other professionals that work with dependent youth. Local rape crisis programs and anti-trafficking advocates can help to provide training in local communities.
- 9 Support robust independent living programming and options for teens who are aging out of care.
- 10 Collaborate with community service providers and government agencies to learn more about how we can support youth throughout their dependency.
- 11 Engage in cross-training.
- 12 Join a working group or response team, such as a local human trafficking response team, child abuse task force, or youth homelessness working group.

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**Latinx is used throughout this resource as a gender-neutral and non-binary term when referencing people of Latin American culture or origin, regardless of race.*

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