

Busting the Myths



Sex Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation

Sexual exploitation and sex trafficking receive a lot of media attention, which may leave you wondering how these issues impact *your* community.

Increased awareness of the problem is always good, but conversations around sexual exploitation and trafficking can sometimes be confusing. The realities of these forms of sexual violence are often misrepresented and misunderstood, including who is affected. This resource provides basic definitions of both sexual exploitation and sex trafficking, and addresses some common myths and misconceptions people may have.

What is commercial “sexual exploitation”?



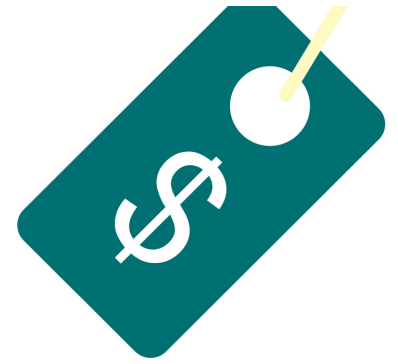
The term “sexual exploitation” involves exchanging any kind of sexual activity, including any type of commercial sex act (including pornography, stripping, or sexually explicit performance or video) for money, drugs, or something else of value. A trafficker may or may not be involved.

Examples of sexual exploitation include:

- “Survival sex” in which a person exchanges sex for basic needs
- Minor youth engaging in pornography or stripping

What is sex trafficking?

Sex trafficking is a type of commercial sexual exploitation where a third person, often referred to as a trafficker, arranges or profits from the exploitation.



Examples of sex trafficking include:

- Profiting in some way from another person engaging in transactional sex (sometimes referred to as “prostitution”)
- Facilitating transactional sex between two people. Facilitating might include posting online ads for commercial sexual activity on behalf of another person or providing transportation for another person to engage in commercial sexual activity

Busting the Myths

To prevent sexual exploitation and trafficking, we need to be able to challenge myths with a better understanding of these issues.

Below are some common misconceptions (often shared and promoted in popular and social media) and explanations of why they’re false or incomplete.



Traffickers often drive around neighborhoods and abduct children and teens in order to traffic them.

Teens and children are rarely abducted into sex trafficking. In reality, the majority of trafficking victims are lured into relationships through promises of love, safety, and stability. Recruitment can happen online, through peers or familial connections, or in places where youth gather, such as schools, parks, shopping malls, and community centers. Children or teens are rarely abducted off the streets for trafficking.



Sex trafficking only happens in large cities, where the purchase of sex often takes place on the streets.

Sex trafficking can happen anywhere, and it isn't always so visible to the average person. Massage parlors, hotels and motels, strip clubs, and truck stops are all places where sex trafficking might occur.

In addition, online advertisements, social media, and numerous websites provide opportunities for purchasing sex anywhere and at any time.

Traffickers recruit their victims from rural spaces and suburbs, not just urban areas. Young people may be recruited in public spaces such as malls, libraries, or community centers, as well as through social media connections.

Research shows that although people of all backgrounds buy sex, the majority of buyers are middle-class to upper-middle-class white men. Hunting lodges, resorts, and other outstate vacation spots are frequently places where buyers purchase sex.



Victims of sex trafficking and exploitation are mostly young girls.

Boys and gender-nonconforming youth are equally vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation, and research suggests that boys are sexually exploited at comparable rates to girls. In fact, social frameworks of masculinity can make boys vulnerable, because they can be less likely to come forward and seek services due to shame or embarrassment.

Age can increase vulnerability which is why young folks are often at a higher risk. However, people of any age can be victims of trafficking and exploitation.



There's no way my child could end up involved in sex trafficking or exploitation. That only happens to kids with "troubled backgrounds."

All youth are at risk for sexual exploitation or trafficking. There are many risk factors that make young people especially vulnerable, including unstable family or housing situations and a history of abuse. However, simply being a young person can be a vulnerability in itself.

Youth often grapple with social pressures, emotional and physical changes, and a desire to form their own individual identity. Traffickers and exploiters use a number of tactics to coerce youth, including forming romantic relationships, fulfilling needs or desires, or providing attention and interest the youth may be seeking. They may come into contact with youth in public spaces like schools, libraries, parks, or community centers. They may also find youth online via social media or gaming apps. Youth may be recruited into trafficking by peers or even family members. Ultimately, young people of all backgrounds are at risk for coercion into exploitation or trafficking.

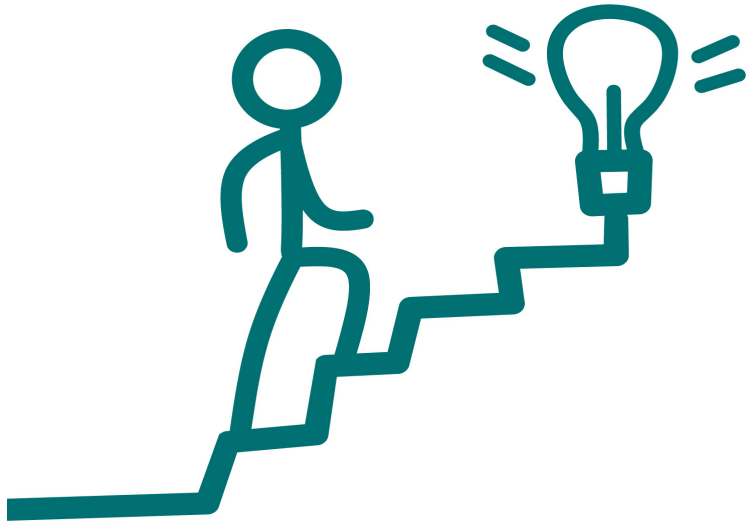


All victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking hope to be rescued.

Most individuals involved in sexual exploitation and trafficking do not consider themselves to be victims of a crime. Often, they express that their involvement was a choice and many take pride in their ability to earn money and be independent. Because traffickers are often a loved one, survivors may be unwilling to accept help or services out of loyalty or fear of getting their trafficker in trouble with the law.

In addition to relational bonds, traffickers may exert control over their victims in many ways. Media often portrays trafficked victims/survivors as bound, imprisoned,

or otherwise held captive. In truth, those involved in trafficking and exploitation frequently move freely through society and don't show any outward appearance of being under a trafficker's control. Traffickers may exert control using threats of harm to the victim or their family, withholding of money or identification documents, and ongoing emotional and psychological abuse.



Taking Steps to Prevent Sex Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation

Sexual exploitation and sex trafficking are issues that impact *all* communities. Gaining a better understanding of the realities of sexual exploitation is the first step toward prevention.

Learn More

1. Safe Harbor Protocol Guidelines: https://www.mncasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Safe_Harbor_Protocol_Guidelines.pdf
2. Mapping the Demand: Sex Buyers in the State of Minnesota: uroc.umn.edu/sextrafficking
3. Mapping the Market for Sex with Trafficked Minor Girls in Minneapolis: Structures, Functions, and Patterns: uroc.umn.edu/sextrafficking
4. Voices of Safe Harbor: Survivor & Youth Input for Minnesota's Model Protocol on Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Youth: <https://www.hennepin.us/~media/hennepinus/your-government/projects-initiatives/documents/no-wrong%20door-voices.pdf?la=en>
5. Safe Harbor for All: Results from a Strategic Planning Process in Minnesota: <https://uroc.umn.edu/safe-harbor-all-strategic-planning-process>
6. Minnesota Department of Health: <https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/safeharbor/>
7. Minnesota Department of Human Services: <https://mn.gov/dhs/people-we-serve/children-and-families/services/child-protection/programs-services/safe-harbor.jsp>
8. Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault: <https://www.mncasa.org/sexual-exploitation-trafficking/>



Get Help

1. National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/otip/training/nhttac>
2. National Human Trafficking Hotline: 1-888-373-7888 <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/>
3. Polaris: <https://polarisproject.org/>