CHILD TRAFFICKING IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

OVERVIEW

Human trafficking of children in the U.S. includes labor trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation (CSE). These crimes violate youths' fundamental rights and well-being. Such experiences can cause deep and lasting harm, affecting children's physical safety, mental health, and long-term development. Yet, despite the serious harm trafficking causes, many cases still go undetected, leaving children without the protection and support they need.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Sex Trafficking: Involves using force, fraud, or coercion to cause a person to perform sexual acts. If the person is under 18, it is considered sex trafficking no matter what. There does not need to be force, fraud, or coercion, because the law says minors cannot consent to commercial sex and are always considered victims. **Examples**: Escort services, pornography, street-based sex, survival sex (exchanging sex for basic needs like food or shelter)

Labor Trafficking: Involves using force, fraud, or coercion to make someone work or provide services. This includes threats, lies, or abuse, and usually happens in unsafe conditions with little or no pay. **Examples:** This can occur in industries such as agriculture, domestic work (cleaning or caregiving), construction, food services (like restaurants or food stands), traveling sales crews, and street vending.

Labor Trafficking for Forced Criminality: This refers to situations where victims are forced to engage in illegal activities as a form of labor or services. Traffickers make children or youth commit crimes, using force, fraud, or coercion as powerful tools of control. **Examples:** Growing or transporting drugs, shoplifting, pickpocketing, credit card fraud, or other crimes carried out for the trafficker's benefit.

HOW CHILDREN ARE TRAFFICKED

Traffickers often target vulnerabilities and make offers that seem "too good to be true." These methods are designed to build trust and dependence over time, making it harder for victims to recognize the danger or break free.

Tip: If an offer sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

COMMON METHODS

- Fake job offer
- False promises of love or romance
- Online grooming
- Peer Pressure
- Blackmail with photos or videos ("sextortion")
- Family exploitation
- Offering gifts, shelter, or drugs
- Threats of arrest or deportation

Fact Sheet 2025

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SIGNS A CHILD MIGHT BE TRAFFICKED

Trafficking can look very different from what most people imagine. Changes in behavior, appearance, or relationships may signal that a child is at risk. These signs do not always mean trafficking, but they are important indicators that a young person may be struggling and in need of support.

- Often runs away from home
- Regularly misses school or arrives late
- Sudden drop in school performance
- Has unexplained cash or expensive items
- Secretive about whereabouts or companions
- Unexplained injuries or signs of sexual assault
- Unusual tattoos (such as names, symbols, or barcodes) or drastic changes in appearance
- Falls asleep during school and/or difficulty focusing

THIS IS WHAT WE KNOW

- Over 2,200 child welfare referrals for commercial sexual exploitation were made in LA County between 2020–2023 (Child Welfare Services/Case Management System [CWS/CMS], 2024).
- 85% of CSEC referrals to the LA County Child Protection Hotline were for Black or Latinx youth (Child Welfare Services/Case Management System [CWS/CMS], 2024).
- Many affected youth remain unidentified or underserved — especially boys, LGBTQ+ youth, and those in labor trafficking or forced criminality (LA County Five-Year Strategic Plan).
- In 2023, about 1 in 6 children under the age of 18 in LA County lived in poverty - a risk factor for trafficking and other forms of exploitation (U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey).
- Nearly half of California children have an immigrant parent, and in LA County, about 1 in 5 residents are undocumented or live with someone undocumented (USC Dornsife, State of Immigrants in LA County).
- In LA County, nearly 4 in 10 immigrant-headed households (about 39%) live below twice the federal poverty line, and they are more likely to experience housing instability and limited access to public supports. Economic insecurity at this scale increases vulnerability to trafficking and forced labor.(LA County DCBA Report, USC Dornsife State of Immigrants in LA County).

WHAT MAKES A CHILD MORE VULNERABLE

Children who experience instability - such as unstable housing or changes in caregivers - along with trauma, or lack of support, are especially vulnerable to trafficking. These challenges can make it easier for traffickers to manipulate, control, or take advantage of them. Belonging to a disadvantaged community can also increase risk, since factors like racism, poverty, immigration status, gender identity, or sexual orientation may create additional barriers to safety and support. Some common experiences linked to increased risk include:

- A history of abuse or neglect
- Homelessness or unstable housing
- Involvement in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems
- Substance use or mental health issues
- Lack of family support
- Recent migration or relocation

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BARRIERS TO IDENTIFICATION

Many trafficked children are never identified or helped because of barriers that keep them hidden or misunderstood. These barriers include:

- Misidentification as delinquents or runaways rather than victims
- Lack of trauma-informed training among frontline professionals
- Fear of law enforcement, deportation, or retribution from traffickers
- Shame, guilt, and distrust of adults or institutions

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Learn the signs of trafficking and share them with others.
- Report suspected trafficking to the **National Human Trafficking Hotline (888-373-7888**) or the **LA County Child Protection Hotline (800-540-4000)**
- Support organizations that work directly with children and youth.
- Advocate for trauma-informed, youth-centered policies in your community.
- Talk to young people in your life about safety, consent, and healthy relationships.

RESOURCES

LOS ANGELES COUNTY:

Coalition to Abolish Slavey and Trafficking (CAST LA): Offers legal services, housing support, and survivor-led advocacy for both labor and sex trafficking survivors. castla.org| 888-539-2373

LA County Child Protection Hotline: To report suspected or known child trafficking. dcfs.lacounty.gov| 800-540-4000

NATIONAL RESOURCES:

National Human Trafficking Hotline: Provides 24/7 confidential support and can help locate services anywhere in the U.S. humantraffickinghotline.org| Text* 233733

Love146: Provides prevention education and survivor care programs focused on child trafficking.| love146.org