Learn what human trafficking is, how to prevent it in school communities, and what to do to support students affected by the crime.

What is Human Trafficking?

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security Blue Campaign website states that human trafficking is a crime that involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act. It is also important to note that causing someone under the age of 18 to engage in a commercial sex act, regardless of using force, fraud, or coercion is human trafficking under U.S. law. Every year, millions of people are trafficked around the world, including students in the American school system.

Those affected by human trafficking can be any race, gender identity, sex, ethnicity, nationality, or immigration status, and no community, school, socioeconomic group, or student demographic is immune to the threat of this crime. Cases of trafficking are found in every area of the country—including rural, suburban, and urban settings alike—with devastating consequences including physical, emotional, and psychological trauma.

Youth Human Trafficking

While there is no standard profile, many traffickers target youth who are vulnerable to exploitation simply because they may be less equipped to make informed decisions when presented with a situation that could lead to trafficking. Peer-to-peer recruitment may also take place in schools, which is when traffickers coerce or force youth under their control into recruiting their peers with promises of payment, better status, or less abuse.

Indicators of Trafficking

Youth affected by human trafficking can exhibit physical, behavioral, or social indicators. Some of these indicators may include:

- Unexplained absences
- Sudden or dramatic changes in behavior
- Newly obtained material possessions like expensive new clothing or electronics
- The appearance of deprivation or withdrawal.

While no single indicator is necessarily proof of human trafficking, recognizing these types of signs is the first step in identifying potential individuals impacted by this crime.

Risk Factors

Potential risk factors that may make students vulnerable to exploitation or trafficking may include:

- Adverse childhood experiences
- History of trauma
- Housing instability/ homelessness
- Lack of supportive adult figures

Traffickers recognize these factors may make someone more likely to take risks to access opportunities and stability.

To report suspected human trafficking to Federal law enforcement, please call 1-866-347-2423. To get help from the National Human Trafficking Hotline, please call 1-888-373-7888 or text HELP or INFO to BeFree (233733).

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Strategies for Schools to Address Human Trafficking

Schools are uniquely positioned to support students facing human trafficking and exploitation. Because of the regular interaction between educators and students, school personnel can help identify and report suspected cases of trafficking and connect affected students to critical services. There are several strategies school leaders, staff, and districts can implement to help identify, prevent, and respond to human trafficking, including:

Create a Safe and Supportive School Environment

Schools should be safe places for all students, especially those whose lives lack safety and security. To counteract risk factors, identifying and building protective factors and a safe, supportive, and inclusive school community can help to prevent youth from entering exploitative and trafficking situations. Protective factors can include encouraging youth to seek help from trusted school staff or other adults, identifying resources to meet student needs, and offering ongoing education about healthy relationships, intimate partner violence, and child sex abuse. Schools can also support the social-emotional behavioral needs of students and promote a safe, predictable, and positive environment where students are more aware of potential dangers and feel comfortable reporting concerns or instances of trafficking.

Increase Awareness and Education

Through educational and training efforts, school leaders can provide information to help teachers and school staff identify and appropriately respond to human trafficking. These programs can help increase awareness around what human trafficking is, risk factors and indicators, and assessing the needs of individuals who are at risk or who may have experienced trafficking to ensure they receive appropriate support services. School and district leaders can also offer age-appropriate safety education programs for students and engage with parents and guardians to raise awareness of the crime. These safety education programs can provide information regarding what human trafficking looks like and how to appropriately prevent and respond to it.

Develop and Implement Prevention and Response Plans

Schools and school districts should establish and articulate clearly defined policies, protocols, and procedures for school personnel to follow if cases of human trafficking are suspected or disclosed. As part of this process, it is important for schools to discuss policies and include engagement with community partners such as trained counselors and licensed mental health professionals, child welfare officials, law enforcement, and victim specialists. These professionals play a critical role in guiding school staff in responding to both suspected and confirmed cases of trafficking while considering any mandated reporting requirements. To help prevent trafficking from occurring on school grounds, schools should also put in place campus security measures and screen visitors to school buildings and events.

Resources

Guides and Practice Briefs

- Addressing the Growing Problem of Domestic Sex Trafficking in Minors through Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: This brief highlights the broader issue of domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) and suggest a framework for integrating school-based prevention and intervention strategies through Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). It includes a brief review of DMST and connections to PBIS and a discussion of how actions within the PBIS framework may help prevent DMST and assist student victims and their families.

- Child Sex Trafficking in America: A Guide for Parents and Guardians: This guide offers information for parents and guardians on child sex trafficking, including an overview on the victims and perpetrators, tips for keeping children safer, and warning signs.

- How to Talk to Youth about Human Trafficking: A Guide for Youth Caretakers and Individuals Working with Youth: This guide can be used by any adult who is a caretaker of a youth or individuals who work with youth through formal or informal programming. It includes information about what

human trafficking is, how to recognize it among youth, tips for talking to youth about general exploitation, information about building life skills that may help prevent youth from being trafficked, and reporting options if you suspect a youth is affected by human trafficking or being exploited.

- Human Trafficking in America's Schools: What Schools Can Do To Prevent, Respond, and Help Students To Recover From Human Trafficking (Second Edition): This guide is intended to provide awareness of the current prevalence of child trafficking and the forms it takes; information on risk factors and indicators of child trafficking; details about three prevention tiers and the implications for schools' role in addressing child trafficking; information on how professional development of school staff and prevention education for students and families can reduce the likelihood of trafficking; and details on how policies, protocols, and partnerships with other community sectors can help prevent trafficking.

- Human Trafficking Response Guide For School Resource Officers: This guide designed for school resource officers includes information about what human trafficking is, how to recognize it among youth, tips for talking to youth about general exploitation, information about building life skills that may help prevent youth from being trafficked, and reporting options if you suspect a youth is affected by human trafficking or being exploited.

Training Programs

- Addressing Human Trafficking in America's Schools: Staff Development Series: This training program provides educators with an introduction to human trafficking prevention. It includes three brief videos that provide information to help identify potential trafficking, generate appropriate school-level responses, and prevent trafficking of students.

- Introduction to Child Sex Trafficking: This three-part online training course introduces the complex and multifaceted subject of child sex trafficking. It provides a deeper understanding of the issue and its impact on victims and communities by addressing indicators, vulnerabilities, and the trauma associated with this crime.

- Understanding Human Trafficking: This training is a series of five interactive online modules that offer foundational learning on trauma-informed and victim-centered approaches to human trafficking.

Websites and Other Resources

- Blue Campaign Resources: This webpage houses a collection of materials, trainings, and videos from the Blue Campaign. Blue Campaign is a national public awareness campaign designed to educate the public, law enforcement, and other partners to recognize the indicators of human trafficking, and how to appropriately respond to possible cases. These resources include a four-part animated video series that depicts the experience of a young girl being trafficked through the lens of different individuals in her life.

- Child Sex Trafficking: This webpage provides an overview of child sex trafficking, its risk factors, recent data and trends, and resources and training available to prevent and identify exploitation and support survivors.

- Combatting Human Trafficking in America's Schools: This webpage provides resources to support schools' efforts to combat trafficking. It includes resources and information on identification and intervention, universal prevention, and vulnerable populations.

- Indicators of Labor Trafficking: School Personnel: This infographic outlines indicators to help individuals in schools identify potential victims of labor trafficking. It also includes contact information to report suspected trafficking incidents.

For additional human trafficking information and resources, visit SchoolSafety.gov's Child Exploitation topic page.

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