

Facts about Sex Trafficking and Cyntoia Brown

What is sex trafficking?

Sex trafficking is when someone is made to perform commercial sex.

On a broad scale, it's a criminal economic system that relies on exploitation to meet the demand for paid sex. While victims enter this system on various paths, sex trafficking is always characterized by **force, fraud, or coercion** or victimizes a minor, regardless of other factors.

Buyers and traffickers regularly target people who are vulnerable—searching for a better life, struggling with poverty, or living in an unsafe situation.

Because there is so much overlap, it's easy to confuse human trafficking and sex trafficking. Human trafficking is an umbrella term that covers sex trafficking as well as other forms of violation like forced agricultural labor and domestic servitude, trafficking is human trafficking that *specifically exploits people sexually for profit*.

Who is most at Risk?

Like most sexual violence, sex trafficking primarily impacts women and girls of color, LGBTQ+ youth, and immigrants. Additionally, three factors can increase its likelihood: poverty, abuse, and foster care. The failures of institutional systems (like welfare and policing) directly reinforce sex trafficking in these vulnerable communities. And even though the majority of victims lack better options for survival, they bear the brunt of the legal consequences. To that end, it's critical to frame the issue as a matter of social justice and human rights; it's entwined with gender, racial, and financial inequity, criminal justice reform, LGBTQ+, and immigrant rights.

Facts about the Cyntoia Brown case:

The vast majority of victims of sex trafficking have endured neglect, exploitation, and horrific abuse prior to being trafficked. These are some of the factors that cause individuals to be more vulnerable to being exploited. That is what happened in Cyntoia's case. She was born into a life that made her a perfect candidate for being trafficked. Her mother suffered from drug and alcohol addiction. Cyntoia was born with "fetal alcohol syndrome" and later in life was diagnosed with a severe neurodevelopmental disorder. She was a foster child when she got caught up with the wrong group of people. By the age of 16, Cyntoia was controlled by an abusive, domineering, hate filled man who went by the name, "Cut Throat." Cut Throat beat Cyntoia repeatedly, raped her, choked her until she was unconscious and forced her to have sex with multiple strangers for money. On the evening of August 6, 2004, Cut Throat demanded that Cyntoia go out and "get him some money." She knew what that meant and what would happen to her if she returned empty handed. She was walking through a fast food parking lot when she was solicited by a 43 year old, white, male, real estate agent, Johnny Allen. Allen took this child to his home where he agreed to pay her for sex. Cyntoia said that Allen was violent towards her and

brandished guns. While in bed with Allen, Cyntoia said she felt that Allen was reaching for a weapon when she shot him in the head. After killing him, she stole two guns and some cash and drove away in his truck. She was arrested, and charged with murder and aggravated robbery. She was tried as an adult and described at trial as a “prostitute.” She was convicted and sentenced to two life sentences to run concurrently.

Cyntoia was “purchased” and raped by a man 27 years her senior. Her mother testified at trial that she drank as much as she could get her hands on while she was pregnant. She gave birth to a child that as a result of the “fetal alcohol syndrome” would be at risk of being slower mentally, unable to control her actions/impulses and subject to reduced reasoning skills. After being in the foster system, Cyntoia was later adopted but had trouble adjusting to life. She had stability and trust issues. Understandably she felt alone, rejected, inferior, and as if no one cared for her. She had low self-esteem and felt devalued. She ended up running away and falling into the wrong hands. Cut Throat was a master manipulator and told Cyntoia that she was born to be a whore and that the best thing for her to do was to learn how to be a “good whore.”

Cyntoia’s case is an exception to the rule in that she was fortunate enough to receive clemency from Tennessee Governor, Bill Haslam. This came after multiple denied appeals, a denial by the Tennessee Supreme Court in December 2018, and sadly after spending almost 16 years in prison. Cyntoia is set to be released in August 2019. Everything that happened to this child is a tragedy but it happens far more than we care to think about. That is part of the problem with sex trafficking: we do not want to think about it.

Pornography as a Destructive Behavior

While the connection between destructive behaviors such as opioid addiction and porn might not have many studies at present, there is overwhelming evidence to show the relationship between pornography and other destructive behaviors is real. For instance, porn is inextricably linked to [sex trafficking](#), [violence](#), [addiction](#), [sexual dysfunction](#), and [possibly brain damage](#). Addressing each of these areas is beyond the scope of this article since our focus is trafficking. However, a quick internet search of any of these topics will result in numerous scholarly articles that can help the reader understand the gravity of this addictive drug.

For those interested in ending human trafficking, the question quickly becomes: “Does pornography cause sex trafficking, and if so, how?” The answer to this question has become increasingly clear as more information is gathered on this topic. In fact, it is a fairly simple conclusion to draw as one begins to follow the logical trail from pornography to human sex trafficking.

According to neuroscience, pornography is [not only addictive](#) but in such a way that surpasses actual sexual intercourse with a partner. Engaging in sexual behavior activates the same areas of the brain used by addictive drugs, with internet porn being a “supernormal stimulus of this circuitry”. Eventually, the addict prefers porn to partnered sex and realizes that what originally stimulated them is no longer strong enough – much like the use of regular, addictive drugs. The end result is obvious: the more one participates in porn, the more one needs porn; the more one becomes immune to it, and consequently, the more one needs harder porn. This unfortunate circle means there is a demand not only for more pornography but for “harder” more violent and perverse forms of it.

Violence is a common thread that winds its way throughout this issue. Because sexual films exhibit a good deal of violence towards women, many consumers begin to believe that women enjoy sexual assault, [changing viewpoints](#) on women and sexual violence towards them. Perhaps unsurprisingly, studies have found that men who commit rape are six times more likely to watch violent porn. In her book *Slave Girl*, Sarah Forsyth recounts how she was tricked into sexual slavery in Amsterdam. In addition to working in the brothels, she was also required to participate in violent, sexual films. In one instance, one of the girls with whom she shared her prison was violently raped alongside her for a film. The end result for her cellmate was a bullet which took off much of her head. This was all part of the movie. She explains that many men were so conditioned to the vilest types of porn that her bosses had to become more and more gruesome to provide sexual release.

Does Pornography Cause Sex Trafficking?

If pornography affects brain function, is highly addictive, increases violence, and requires increased levels of aggressiveness to trigger consumers, it seems an obvious conclusion that it would increase sex trafficking. First, the need for greater consumption increases demand. Second, women are often tricked and trapped into porn films, such as Sarah Forsyth. Third, a woman becomes objectified and the client believes she “enjoys” the violence perpetrated against her. Harvard law school professor Catherin Mackinnon states: “consuming pornography is an experience of bought sex [which]...creates a hunger to continue to purchase and objectify, and

act out what is seen”. Again, demand is created, and violence against women is enjoyed, which makes trafficking a simple means to an end.

Put into simpler, more economic terms: demand increases supply – consensual or not. Brain addiction requires more stimulation to reach satisfaction. Violent images are supplied to reach that stimulation as perpetrated against women who are forced to “enjoy” the humiliation. Consequently, the user has no qualms about perpetuating sex trafficking against women to reach his end goals.

The use of pornography is an unfortunate epidemic that is leaving a large portion of our society in the hands of an addiction that is destroying lives, families, and self-esteem. Its results have enslaved women and, in many cases, rolled back generational successes for women’s equality as many change their perceptions on violence against women. While governments quibble on various sides of the debate, counter-trafficking advocates struggle to fight this scourge to end the violence.

Facts On Child Sex Trafficking

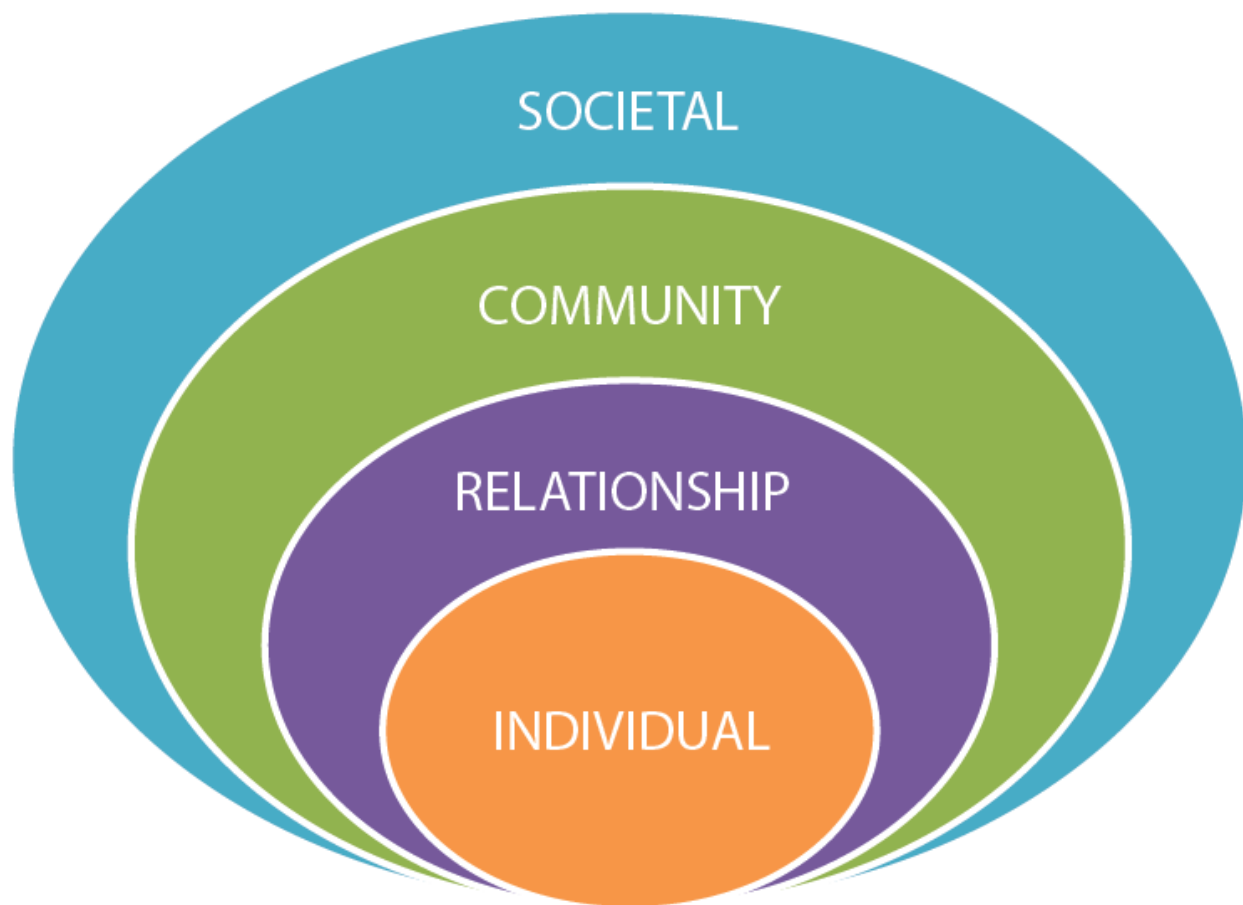
Child Sex Trafficking is a severe form of child sexual abuse that is illegal in all 50 states. According to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, the sex trafficking of minors is the

recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or solicitation of a person under the age of 18 for the purposes of a commercial sex act, defined as any sex act for which anything of value is given to or received by any person. In simple terms, it is the exchanging of something of value for sex with a child/minor. While proof of force, fraud, or coercion is required for adult sex trafficking victims, these elements are NOT required when the victim is a minor, nor is it a requirement that a 3rd party benefit from or facilitate the exchange. That is, the youth does not have to have an identified trafficker to be a victim of trafficking. (“Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children—CSEC” is a commonly used related term.)

Examples of Child Sex Trafficking

- A 14-year old meets a “friend” online and engages in a relationship with him. The “friend” wants her to have sex with his friends in order for him to get money to pay his rent.
- A mother allows her drug dealer to engage in sex acts with her 6-year-old son in exchange for drugs.
- A 15-year-old girl exchanges sex for free rides from a ride share driver.
- A 16-year-old transgender youth has sex with a physician in exchange for hormones and money for medical procedures needed to achieve a physical body consistent with their gender identity.
- Boys, as young as 12, on a reservation are recruited by a tribal member to sell drugs and engage in sex acts with casino visitors for which the boys are provided cash, phones, and clothes.
- An 11-year-old boy is sent a cell phone from someone he meets on his gaming system in exchange for the boy masturbating live on camera.
- A 15-year-old Guatemalan girl is sent to live in the U.S. with her uncle, who promises her a better life. The uncle forces her to engage in sex acts with his business associates for money.
- A 13-year-old girl runs away from her group home with a 14-year-old peer. The friend takes pictures of her and places an ad for sexual services on an adult services website to get money to cover the cost of their hotel room and food.

Who Is Most Vulnerable?



Sex trafficking occurs among all socioeconomic classes, races, ethnicities, and gender identities in urban, suburban, rural communities, and on land-based nations and other tribal communities across the U.S. However, some youth are at heightened risk due to a complex interplay of individual, relationship, community, and societal factors.

Societal: Sexualization of children, gender-based violence, strict gender roles, homophobia and transphobia, tolerance of the marginalization of others, lack of awareness of child trafficking, lack of resources for exploited youth, social injustice, structural racism, and tolerance of community and relationship violence.

- **Community:** Under-resourced schools and neighborhoods, community violence, community social norms, gang presence, commercial sex in the area, transient male populations in the area, poverty and lack of employment opportunities.
- **Relationship:** Friends/family involved in commercial sex, family dysfunction, intimate partner violence, caregiver loss or separation, lack of awareness of child trafficking, poverty, and unemployment.
- **Individual:** Abuse/neglect, systems involvement youth (child protection, juvenile justice), homeless/runaway, LGBTQ identity, intellectual and/or developmental disability, truancy, unmonitored/risky internet and social media use, behavioral or mental health concerns, substance use, unaccompanied migration status.

Familial Trafficking

Familial trafficking involves the intentional or unwitting exploitation of children/youth by individuals who are responsible for the care, safety and trust that is foundational to how society understands and defines the family. Some ways that family members initiate child sex trafficking include:

- Caregivers engaging with traffickers who fraudulently promise to obtain jobs or other opportunities for their children, and instead force the children into commercial sex, strip club involvement, production of [child sexual abuse materials](#) (formerly called, ‘child pornography’), etc.
- Caregivers providing inadequate supervision leaving children/youth vulnerable to those who sexually exploit them.
- Family members not otherwise engaged in trafficking allowing traffickers to exploit their children/youth in exchange for drugs, money, or something else of value.
- Family members exploiting/trafficking their own children and potentially others.

Methods used to control or sustain involvement of youth in family sex trafficking include psychological, physical, and/or sexual abuse. Studies demonstrate significant psychological and physical harm, and high levels of clinical need in these sometimes younger, child victims, including high rates of PTSD (80%), psychiatric hospitalization (35%) and suicide attempts (48%). This strongly underscores the need to specifically focus counter-trafficking prevention and intervention services to families with children/youth.

Young children are often under identified. They may be especially vulnerable to familial trafficking and may not be aware that something has been exchanged. In many cases the abuse is normalized, with multiple generations and family members directly involved or complicit. Professionals who work with young children should look beyond conventional views of sexual abuse. They also should consider the possibility the caregiver has received something of value in exchange for access to the child, essentially child sex trafficking.

***International Organization for Migration. (2017). Counter-Trafficking Data Brief: Family Members are Involved in Nearly Half of Child Trafficking Cases. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.**

***Sprang, G., Cole, J. (2018). Familial Sex Trafficking of Minors: Trafficking Conditions, Clinical Presentation, and System Involvement. *Journal of Family Violence*, 33, 185–195.**

Immigrant and Refugee Youth

Immigrant and refugee children are vulnerable to sex trafficking, especially when they are unaccompanied by a parent or guardian. Factors prompting migration may elevate the risk of sexual exploitation, including violence in the community or within the home, armed conflict and prominent gang activity in the area. During transit, economic deprivation, breakdown of family

and social structures, imbalance in power relations and dependence on traffickers and/or smugglers to cross borders render children at risk for exploitation. Unknown physical surroundings, fear of law enforcement, social isolation, and food insecurity compound the risk. In the destination country, additional factors contribute to increased vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation including the social and physical structure of refugee camps and other housing situations (e.g., over-crowding, deprivation, inadequate supervision). Limited knowledge of legal rights within the new country, distrust of authorities, and language barriers only add to the vulnerability.

LGBTQ+

Youth who identify as LGBTQ+ are disproportionately impacted by a wide variety of traumatic experiences including abuse and neglect, harassment, and family rejection, all of which place them at risk for trafficking. LGBTQ+ youth who lack family support or safe shelter are vulnerable to traffickers who are seeking to exploit their needs for housing, food, and social connections.

LGBTQ+ youth are at a disproportionate risk for sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. In fact, even among runaway/homeless youth, LGBTQ+ youth experience commercial sexual exploitation at greater rates than their heterosexual cisgender counterparts.*

Youth facing housing and employment discrimination related to their actual or perceived gender identity or sexual orientation may feel they have no choice but to exchange sex acts for items and conditions necessary for survival like shelter or food. This is sometimes referred to as “survival sex.” Furthermore, the lack of LGBTQ+ affirming and inclusive schools, healthcare, legal and criminal justice systems, and other critical social services increase isolation and create barriers for youth to access support.

***Covenant House (2016). *Labor and Sex Trafficking Among Homeless Youth: A Ten-City Executive Summary*. New Orleans, Louisiana: Loyola University.**

Poverty and Economic Factors

Economic factors and poverty appear to be important elements of trafficking vulnerability. Economic factors constrain opportunities, undermine educational attainment, impact community values and norms, and otherwise profoundly contribute to trafficking victimization. Individuals with limited opportunities to meet basic needs and/or expectations to provide monetarily for their loved ones (e.g., runaway/homeless youth, youth with impaired parents, siblings in need, young children) are especially at risk. Similarly, parents facing severe financial distress may be vulnerable to manipulation by traffickers and allow their children to enter into high-risk situations, or may be even more fully complicit in the sex trafficking of their child in an effort to help the family survive.

System Involved Youth

Children and adolescents who have experienced sex trafficking often have very high rates of involvement in multiple child-serving systems, especially child welfare (e.g., Child Protective Services, foster care) and juvenile justice. The trafficking risk associated with child welfare involvement is sometimes related to the traumatic experiences (child sexual abuse, child physical abuse, neglect) that may have precipitated a child's or adolescent's entry into the system. Often it is related to, and compounded by, experiences that occur because of their involvement in child welfare, such as housing instability, foster care placement, disruptions in education, and continued experiences of maltreatment. Foster care in particular, especially multiple placements and earlier placement in congregate care vs. single family homes, appears to increase trafficking risk.* While, initial placement is often a result of early experiences of abuse and neglect that contribute to trafficking vulnerability, there also appears to be experiences while in care that potentially exacerbate vulnerability, including degrading of a youth's self-worth, erosion of their belief or expectation that others will care for them, and the monetization of their care. Perpetrators, both traffickers and buyers, will often target children who are not getting their basic needs met (including those for love and belonging) because they assume they will be easier to manipulate and control.

Justice systems were once the primary systems that served youth with histories of being trafficked because youth would be arrested for "prostitution." While there are some states that still charge minors with prostitution, other states have shifted to match federal laws recognizing victims of child sex trafficking as victims of child abuse. With this recognition, the child welfare system is increasingly becoming the intended primary system to serve children and youth who have experienced child sex trafficking.

Even with this shift, youth are still vulnerable to contact with law enforcement, probation systems, and the juvenile court. This is often due to factors related to their exploitive situations (e.g., substance abuse, coercion to commit crimes, traumatic stress reactions, and homelessness) that lead to increased interaction with law enforcement and the justice system.

*** Dierkhising, C. B. & Ackerman-Brimberg, M. (2020). *CSE Research to Action Brief Translating Research to Policy and Practice to Support Youth Impacted by Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE)*. National Center for Youth Law: California State University, Los Angeles.**

Youth of Color/Racism and Racial Disproportionality

Although people of all races and ethnicities are trafficked, racial and ethnic minority youth are identified as being trafficked at disproportionate rates compared to non-minority (White, non-Hispanic) youth. This is likely due to intersecting economic, educational, community, and societal factors and embedded racism, and structural inequality in multiple child-serving systems (e.g., juvenile justice, child welfare, and education).

In the United States, Black, Native American, Asian American and Pacific Islander youth are especially vulnerable to trafficking due to the particular histories of oppression and exploitation, including the sexualization, objectification, and fetishization of these girls. Sexual stereotypes

persist in the present day with specific implications in the commercial sex market. Biases that attribute greater physical, emotional, and sexual maturation and less need for protection and support to youth of color, furthers the harm and increases their vulnerability to trafficking.

Youth Who are Homeless or Leave Placement without Caregiver Permission

Youth who leave home or placement without caregiver permission, are often rejected by caregivers, forced to leave, or unwelcome in their homes. Due to this, LGBTQ+ youth who are homeless, may be especially vulnerable to being trafficked. Youth who are homeless often experience several risk factors increasing their vulnerability to trafficking prior to and while being homeless. That is, exposure to trauma and other stressors (e.g., poverty, abuse or neglect, violence in the home or the community, conflicted or lack of social and family relationships, disrupted education, and substance abuse) are common precipitants and consequences of trafficking. These experiences may also contribute to low self-esteem, problems with trust, depression, anxiety, and other social-emotional issues that increase vulnerability to trafficking. In particular, youth experiencing homelessness or housing instability often have unmet basic needs such as food, clothing, safety, shelter, money, or access to other resources or things of value with restricted options for securing these basic needs and resources.

Youth with unstable housing or experiencing homelessness may feel they have no choice but to exchange sex acts for items and conditions necessary for survival like shelter or food. This is referred to as “survival sex.” They may not perceive their situation to be one of exploitation, but instead view it as engaging in voluntary acts that meet their needs and preserve their independence and freedom. However, under the age of 18, any exchange of sex acts for goods, is child sex trafficking. Due to youth’s needs and vulnerabilities, they may view those who seek to manipulate them as “friends,” benefactors, or intimate partners, as well as a source of help, support, or care.

It is important for professionals, caregivers, and youth alike to be educated on the increased vulnerability to trafficking for youth who are homeless or absent from placement, especially if periods of homelessness or absence from placement are prolonged or repetitive, in order to inform prevention, identification, and intervention.

Youth With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD)

Youth who have disabilities (e.g., physical, intellectual, developmental, or a combination) are at increased risk for experiencing a range of traumatic experiences including being vulnerable to trafficking. They may be especially vulnerable because of the social discrimination and stigma they face regarding their disability.

There are many reasons why youth with intellectual disabilities may be more vulnerable to being trafficked, including lack of understanding of what is and is not sexual exploitation. These disabilities may also limit a youth’s ability to assertively refuse the propositions or directions of others and to report abusive situations. An inability to assess risk and to be overly trusting and engage in relationships in which they are sexually or financially vulnerable and exploited. Often,

others do not see youth with Intellectual Disabilities as sexual beings, and, as a result, they are often uninformed about concepts on sexual health including consent.

Youth with disabilities may lead more isolated lives, sometimes restricted to their caregivers and service providers (e.g. physical therapist, staff at a recreational or vocational training center). Due to this isolation and restriction, they may desire autonomy, friendship, and human connection outside of their support system. This may heighten vulnerability to exploitation of all kinds and make them especially vulnerable to manipulation by a trafficker who gives the appearance of friendship or relationship. Traffickers may also seek out victims with disabilities to gain access to their public benefits such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits.

Youth with disabilities may be submissive to their caregivers and comply with their caregivers' wishes because they are dependent upon them. This dependency on others may lend itself to youth being at risk of being compliant and submissive to traffickers and their demands.

Some youth who have disabilities depend on caregivers for intimate care and bodily cleaning or have had medical procedures that involve aftercare with physical touching. As a result, youth can become desensitized to touch and/or may be unsure about what appropriate touch is and whether they have the right to object to and report unwanted touch, sexual abuse, and sexual acts.

Youth who have disabilities may have difficulties with communication and/or speech. They may be unable to speak clearly or require communication devices or interpreters to make their needs known. This may affect their ability to get help and report any abuse they are experiencing and could require them to depend on their trafficker for interpretation of their needs.

In some cases, youth may not be believed by family, friends, or even authorities when they report their abuse and exploitation. This is especially true for young people with disabilities that affect intellectual, cognitive, or communication functions or those with mental health diagnoses.

What are the Experiences of Youth Who Have Been Sex Trafficked?

Often, youth who have been sex trafficked have experienced multiple traumas and adversities in their lives. This includes various trauma and adversities prior to being trafficked that often contributed to their vulnerability, as well as their experiences while being trafficked. Even after being identified as having been trafficked, youth may face many challenges. It is helpful for professionals to be aware of these experiences and their impact on youth. While not exhaustive, below is a list of common youth experiences prior to, while being, and after being trafficked.

Prior to being trafficked

- Child sexual abuse
- Exposure to intimate partner and community violence
- Traumatic loss and separation from caregivers
- Child Protective Services Involvement
- Foster care placement
- Juvenile justice Involvement
- Multiple caregiver and placement transitions, educational disruptions
- Homelessness

- Impaired caregiving
- Providing monetarily for family members
- Exposure to familial trafficking or peers involved in commercial sex trade

While being Trafficked

- Sexual violence, multiple sexual contacts with different purchasers
- Sexual contact without contraception/barrier
- Unwanted pregnancies and STIs
- Witnessing the violence of others
- Community or gang related violence
- Betrayal by caregivers and trusted others
- Neglect of medical and physical needs
- Substance use (forced or method of control)
- Significant physical and emotional abuse by traffickers and purchasers
- Bullying by peers
- Separation from traditional supports of family and community
- Forced to inflict harm and/or exploit others

After Being Trafficked

- Arrest and detention
- Placement transitions
- Threats, fear of harm by exploiters
- Efforts to re-exploit through commercial sex by traffickers and/or peers
- Isolation and shame
- Difficulties integrating in to typical educational and social settings
- Lack of access to resources
- Loss of community support
- Bias and discrimination by professionals and trusted others
- Medical Conditions
- Difficulty accessing employment and other financial supports

Despite these adversities, youth are resilient and can cope with difficult experiences in many ways. It is important to note that even if youth who are being or have been trafficked have any of the experiences noted above, they may not view these experiences as traumatic.

Sources:

<https://www.nctsn.org/what-child-trauma/traumatypes/sex-trafficking/about-child-sex-trafficking>

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