

COVID-19: Human Trafficking and Exploitation

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Human trafficking is the crime of using force or fraud for the purpose of compelled labor or a commercial sex act. The United States considers “trafficking in persons,” “human trafficking,” and “modern slavery” to be interchangeable umbrella terms that refer to both sex trafficking and labor trafficking. The United States was one of the top three countries of origin of federally identified victims in FY 2018. Populations in the United States most at risk of human trafficking include: children in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems [1]; runaway and homeless youth [2]; unaccompanied foreign national children without lawful immigration status [3]; American Indians and Alaska Natives, particularly women and girls [4]; individuals with drug addictions; and migrant laborers (including undocumented workers and temporary workers participating in visa programs) [5].

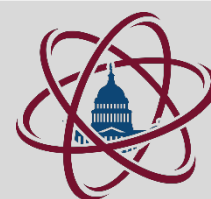
Impact of COVID-19 on trafficking

Increased poverty, marginalization and social insecurity caused by disease outbreaks [6] [7], such as COVID-19, are drivers of human trafficking. Rising rates of unemployment, disrupted supply chains, and the threat of an economic recession add additional productivity pressures and increase competition for jobs [8]. Traffickers are known to leverage promises of basic needs, such as shelter and food, to recruit and exploit individuals.

Children and youth, in particular, at risk. Approximately one in four of all trafficking victims are minors [9]. As of April 24, forty-two states so far have extended their statewide school closures through the remainder of the school year. School closures represent a loss of safety zones for children and youth and reduce their contact with teachers and staff, who are critical to the identification and prevention of trafficking victimization [10]. Children, many of whom are now spending more time online during school closures, also face a heightened risk of “grooming” (the process in which predators try to meet children) and the live-stream child sex abuse trade by relatives [11]. In addition, the loss of meals provided at school negatively impacts family income and exacerbates financial stress and associated vulnerability of trafficking.

Proposed Solutions Policymakers Could Consider

- Conduct awareness-raising campaigns. Communities, including those most at risk of being trafficked, need clear, timely and accurate information to help prevent and identify trafficking during this time.
- Reinforce efforts to reduce the demand for labor trafficking and commercial sex, such as providing food and meals to individuals experiencing food insecurity.
- Increase access to comprehensive victim services. The physical, emotional, and psychological trauma caused by trafficking precipitates short- and long-term physical and health concerns, including substance abuse, developmental delays, chronic health disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, aggression, and suicide [12]–[14].
- Improve access to short-term and/ or transitional housing for those vulnerable to trafficking and survivors of trafficking. Access to safe housing is widely agreed to be the most pressing need for at-risk populations [15].
- Cooperation between public health authorities, homeless service systems, and local-level partners could be beneficial, as evidenced in CDC’s interim guidance [16].



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