

Protecting God's Children for Adults

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The Most Silent Victims of Sex Trafficking

By [Kim Robinson, Ph.D.](#)

Sex trafficking is defined as compelling someone to engage in forced labor or sexual acts due to force, fraud, or coercion.¹ It is difficult to find accurate statistics because most sex trafficking remains unreported. However, of the more than 23,500 runaways reported to the *National Center for Missing & Exploited Children* in 2018, 1 in 7 were likely victims of child sex trafficking.²

Ever since the enactment of the [Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000](#),³ nearly all of public awareness campaigns highlighting victims of sex trafficking have included only the horrific plight of child female victims. As the majority of sex trafficking victims are, in fact, female, the prevailing myth is that sex trafficking is only a female issue. However, this is not the case. The reality is that there are also many male victims of sex trafficking, yet they are the most silent about their victimization. Unfortunately, our society places a negative stigma on males who are survivors of any kind of sexual exploitation, including sex trafficking. There is a societal expectation that males should be "strong," "macho," or "assertive" enough to avoid any kind of manipulation, force or coercion from traffickers—which is one reason male survivors are reluctant to report their victimization or get the help they need.



Many victims of sex trafficking, both male and female, may not consider themselves victims because of the extreme manipulation done to them.⁴ The fact is, their traffickers groom and manipulate them into believing falsehoods and to coerce them into doing whatever is being asked of them. According to federal and state laws regarding the sex trafficking of minors, "Force, fraud or coercion need not be evident to prove sex trafficking of minors."⁵ The laws were written in this manner because of the extensive manipulation and grooming of a minor. With this distinction, the criminal justice system does not need to "have sufficient evidence of force, fraud or coercion" to file a charge against a trafficker.

It is difficult to know the full scope of sex trafficking of males due to underreporting. Male victims fear being judged harshly for "allowing it to happen," or for fear of being labeled as homosexual, or, criticism about not "getting out."⁶ Even though the majority of male victims are heterosexual, there is a widespread presumption that the majority are bisexual, homosexual or transgendered.⁷ There is also a tendency among law enforcement to misidentify male victims as pimps, exploiters, or as willing participants in the sex trade, rather than as survivors of sexual exploitation.⁸ This illustrates there is a significant misunderstanding regarding the psychological and physical trauma victims of sex trafficking experience, making it even more difficult for them to disclose about the abuse.

Due to the underreporting of the sexual trafficking of males, it is difficult to estimate the true prevalence of this crime among U.S. male minors. As a result, past statistics have underestimated the scope of male sex trafficking, which in turn, causes it to appear that the need for emergency safe houses and other important resources for male survivors is minimal. With human trafficking identified as the fastest growing illegal enterprise worldwide, and second in global profits only to illegal drug sales, the world faces a significant economic crime with enormous human costs.⁹ The Counter-Trafficking Data Collaborative (CTDC) was launched in 2017 with the goal of equipping the counter-trafficking community with up-to-date, reliable data on human trafficking.¹⁰ The CTDC is the first global data hub on human trafficking, and they report that 28% victims who are minors are males; and that males tend to remain in the sex trade for more years than females.¹¹

A 2016 study found more than a third of the minors sexually exploited in the U.S. sex trade were boys and young men.¹² The highest percentage of males who are recruited into sex trafficking occurs between the ages of 11 and 13 by traffickers who are nearly twice their age.¹³ In some cases, boys are initially trafficked by their families to raise money, often for drugs. In these situations, when a youth runs away to escape the sexual abuse that occurs in the home (either by a relative, or being trafficked by a relative), he often finds himself homeless, only to be more easily groomed and entrapped by traffickers masquerading as friends who want to help. This is the primary difference of how boys are brought into



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Kim Robinson, Ph.D.

Dr Robinson has had the joy and honor of working as a nurse, a licensed professional counselor, and a psychologist. While pursuing her PhD at the University of Houston, she worked at the Brain Injury Research Center at The Institute of Rehabilitation and Research. She taught at Midwestern State University and in their Study Abroad Program in London, England at Queen Mary University. While working in a private psychiatric hospital, she specialized in PTSD and trauma work when working on a military unit. She then worked for all 4 branches of the military as a contractor. She currently is a "train the trainer" and consultant for the Catholic Diocese of

sexual trafficking versus girls. This illustrates the need for additional safe houses and resources for male victims of sexual trafficking.

Although there has been a proliferation of state agencies and private organizations serving female sex trafficking survivors, there are very few in the U.S. for male victims. Safe shelters are needed for a wide range of ages to meet basic needs. There are no established standards for what works and what does not work to assist male survivors in their recovery and healing, but there are five shelters pioneering this effort.¹⁴

Domestic violence shelters are often a resource for trafficking victims; however, few have housing services for males. Some domestic violence shelters are unwilling to extend their services to trafficking victims due to safety concerns and because the specific needs of trafficking victims might not be addressed by their programs. Trafficking shelters must maintain strict safety measures and keep their locations unpublished so that the survivor's traffickers cannot track them down. More research is needed, however, to fully understand the impact of exploitation of male victims and their immediate needs through competent and comprehensive trauma-informed crisis management.

Warning signs that a trafficker may be grooming a youth for sexual exploitation and trafficking. The adult:

- Gets jealous easily, seems controlling or exhibits violence
- Is significantly older than the child or youth
- Makes promises to children or youth that seem "too good to be true"
- Encourages youth to engage in illegal activities (framed as helping a child or youth achieve his or her goals and dreams)
- Suggests that they know how to help youth make a lot of money
- Buys expensive gifts or likes to flash their money
- Is vague about his/her actual profession without giving any details
- Gets pushy or demanding about sex
- Wants to take sexualized or "suggestive" photos of youth, encourages youth to model or dance for money
- Makes youth feel responsible for the adult's financial stability and discusses financial matters frequently

Red flags that a youth is being trafficked. The youth:

- Physically shows evidence of abuse, such as burn marks, bruises, brands or cuts
- Has unexplained absences from school
- Dresses more provocatively than usual
- Displays sexualized behavior
- Is overly tired in class
- Is withdrawn, depressed, distracted or emotionally "checked out"
- Brags about making or having lots of money
- Displays expensive clothes, accessories or shoes
- Has a new tattoo (tattoos of a name, symbol or barcode are often used by traffickers as a way to brand victims)
- Has an older boyfriend or girlfriend, or new friends with a different lifestyle
- Talks about wild parties or invites other students to attend parties
- Shows signs of gang affiliation, (i.e., a preference for specific colors, notebook doodles of gang symbols)

If you *suspect* sex trafficking, do not try to intervene on your own as it may be dangerous. Please call the National Human Trafficking hotline at 888-373-7888 and report it immediately. You can do so anonymously, 24 hours/day. If you *witness* sex trafficking of youth, call your local law enforcement at 911 and ask to speak to the officer in charge of human trafficking.

Fort Worth for Child Sexual Abuse and Sex Trafficking. She is an ambassador for Shared Hope International, a nonprofit organization combating Human Trafficking since 1998. She works part time with Ranch Hands Rescue (RHR), a sanctuary for humans and animals who have experienced trauma. RHR offers trauma informed therapies geared towards meeting the needs of trauma victims and will open the first safe house for male survivors of sex trafficking between the ages of 18 and 25 in June of 2021.

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14 Author's Note: This author is aware of safe house shelters in Florida, Washington D.C, Texas, Colorado and North Carolina for males under the age of 18 and one in Texas dedicated solely to males between 18 to 24 years of age.

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