

## Human Trafficking: At Risk Populations, Indicators, and Protective Factors

This resource is a service-planning tool. If previously undisclosed human trafficking is suspected, please refer to [SOP 2.15.9 Investigations of Human Trafficking](#).

Not all risk factors or indicators listed below are present in every human trafficking situation, and the presence or absence of any of the risk factors or indicators is not necessarily proof of human trafficking. [When indicators of human trafficking are present, further screening or assessment may be warranted](#). The presence of protective factors does not necessarily mitigate risk, but are important factors for consideration in case/service planning with survivors and those at risk of human trafficking.

**At Risk Populations:** While anyone can be affected by trafficking, available research indicates some populations that live and work in the communities you serve are at more vulnerable to trafficking. These include, but are not limited to:

- Youth who experience homelessness<sup>1,2</sup>
- Youth who have runaway episodes<sup>1,3-5</sup>
- Youth who are, or have been, in out-of-home-care<sup>4,5</sup>
- Youth who are undocumented<sup>6</sup>
- Black, Indigenous, or Youth of Color<sup>3,7,8</sup>
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) individuals<sup>9-11</sup>
- Youth who have physical, emotional and behavioral health challenge<sup>12</sup>
- Survivors of other crimes, particularly child abuse, child maltreatment, or sexual assault<sup>5</sup>
- Youth who are or have been involved with the Department of Juvenile Justice<sup>1,13</sup>
- Youth who have previous allegations of human trafficking, regardless of confirmation

**Indicators:** There are varieties of potential “red flags” that can be indicators of either labor or sex trafficking.<sup>14</sup>

None of these red flags directly indicates trafficking; rather they can offer potential clues that further screening or information gathering may be warranted. These potential indicators are presented as guidelines with encouragement that staff consider individual situations with each child or youth with whom they work.

### Physical Indicators:

- Untreated or undertreated workplace injuries
- Bruising and burns
- Exposure to toxic chemicals
- Respiratory issues
- High number of anonymous sexual partners/older partners
- Multiple pregnancies/abortions
- Physical impacts of long-term trauma
- Frequent treatment for sexually transmitted infections and injuries
- Physical and sexual abuse
- Communicable and noncommunicable disease (e.g., TB, hepatitis)
- Substance misuse
- Dental issues
- Tattoos, burns, or scarring to indicate branding

### Behavioral Indicators:

- Sudden changes in behavior
- Confusing or contradicting stories
- Inability to focus or concentrate
- Unaware of location, age, time
- Protects the person who hurt them, minimizes abuse
- Guilt and shame about experiences
- Reserved/avoiding interaction or providing limited information
- Psychological trauma
- Depression and anxiety disorder
- Sexual acting out in children and young adolescents
- Knowledge and behavior outside of typical range for age

**Environmental Indicators:**

- Accompanied by another person who answers for them, preventing them from speaking freely
- Constantly accompanied by a person who won't leave them alone
- In school settings, students no longer coming to school when they should
- Wearing the wrong clothing based on the season
- Possession of multiple cell phones, hotel keys, fake ID's, etc.
- Living at work or living in overcrowded locations
- Not allowed to take adequate breaks, eat, or drink at work
- Recruited for different work than currently doing
- Homeless minors, and those not living with relatives or foster parents (i.e., living in motel, "couch surfing", living with non-relatives who are several years older)

In addition to the aforementioned physical, behavioral and environmental red flags, ask yourself: *Do you have any other reason to believe the child may be a victim of human trafficking?* Whatever this reason is, including your gut feeling, if it is new and unexplored, consider it an indicator that warrants further screening.

**Protective Factors for Children in Foster Care**

Protective factors are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities, or the larger society that, when present, promote well-being and reduce the risk for negative outcomes. These factors may "buffer" the effect of risk exposure and help individuals and families negotiate difficult circumstances and fare better in school, work, and life.

The following presents the nine protective factors with the strongest evidence to date for youth in and aging out of foster care.<sup>15</sup>

<b>Individual Level</b>	<b>Relationship Level</b>	<b>Community Level</b>
Self-regulation skills	Parenting competencies	Positive school environment
Relational skills	Caring adults	Stable living situation
Academic skills	Living with family member(s)	Supports for independent living

The impact of stability and healthy relationships with safe adults cannot be overstated. Traffickers exploit existing vulnerabilities; youth are less likely to fall prey to these tactics when they have caring adults around them. As you assess the child's needs and identify potential resources, keep the child's risk and protective factors in mind. Services should strive to decrease risk while increasing natural supports/protection.

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