

How To... Recognize A Sexually Exploited Youth

An ever increasing number of youth are exploited through prostitution and international sex trafficking. In the United States alone, about 300,000 children are at risk of being commercially sexually exploited. The average age of youth entering the sex industry is 13.

To help officers recognize signs of sexual exploitation of youth, Strategies for Youth has summarized current information and best practices on how to recognize, interview and interact with sexually exploited youth. At the end of this page are links to helpful resources.

Strategies for Youth believes that minors involved in prostitution and trafficking should be treated as victims, not criminals. It is important officers are clear on how their local police department handles such cases. To date, prostituted women and girls are ten times more likely to be arrested for selling sex than men are for buying sex. Thankfully, especially in the context of youth, this is changing. Prosecutors' offices are prosecuting girls under the age of 18 less and less for selling sex. For information on targeting purchase of sex with children and methods of deterrence see Abt Associates, Developing a National Action Plan to Eliminate Sex Trafficking.

Remember: *While girls are the majority of youth who are trafficked, boys are trafficked, too.*

DEFINITION

- The term *prostitution* is increasingly falling out of favor and being replaced by the terms *commercial sex exploitation of children* (CSEC) and trafficking. Any prostituted person under the age of 18 is by definition a victim of trafficking.
- According to the Trafficking Victims Prevention Act of 2000, human sexual trafficking is defined as: "Trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age."

HOW TO RECOGNIZE YOUTH INVOLVED IN SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Asking the right questions and looking for small clues will help you identify youth who have been forced or coerced into a life of sexual exploitation. In addition to the obvious act of sexual soliciting, sexually exploited youth are often arrested for abuse of street drugs and survival crimes (i.e. shoplifting food and clothing or not paying public transit fares).

A combination of these physical factors may indicate involvement in sexual exploitation

- Extreme attire that may not be appropriate for weather conditions
- High end labels on shoes, purses, jackets
- Evidence of drug use
- Fatigue and hunger
 - Evidence of homelessness
 - Recently in custody of the state or a group home
 - No identification
 - Claims to come from another large city
- Bruises or other physical trauma
- Wears tattoos used by identified pimps or gangs
- Often seen in proximity (i.e. he may be watching from across the street, or a car) of a watchful male or group of males
- Refuse to make eye contact, looks down while walking
- A combination of these emotional factors may indicate involvement in sexual exploitation
- May swing from withdrawn behavior, depression, and fear, to aggression and boisterousness
- Repeated statement of urgent need to leave, to get back (vs. go home)
- Initiates discussion of sexual topics



How To... Recognize a Sexually Exploited Youth (CONT.)

WAYS OF INTERACTING WITH YOUTH WHO MAY BE INVOLVED IN SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

- Maintain physical distance.
- Developing a relationship with a sexually exploited youth takes a long time and can't be rushed. Assume youth distrusts youth and needs proof of your trustworthiness.
- Anticipate exploited youth will make a sexual advance and be prepared. A hint that this may occur is if a youth initiates discussion of sexual topics.
- Don't judge. If youth refers to person as a boyfriend use that word, not pimp.
- Be aware of how an officer's gender affects youth's willingness to speak.
- Be aware of youth's physical stance: does s/he look threatened? Could s/he perceive danger? Is there a possibility of overpowering the youth? Is anyone standing behind the youth?
- Call a local social service agency and the prosecutors' officer to determine alternatives to detention.
 - hungry/malnourished, homeless, offer resources for shelter, medical services, birth control, condoms, food, work training opportunities, education, etc. Questions about a youth's needs can help get to the bottom of the youth's situation.
- Avoid judgmental questions. Ask, "What do you want to do to get out of the life?" Don't say, "Aren't you ashamed of what you are doing?"
- Ask about travel: Youth who boast or make references to frequent travel to other cities are telling you something.

RESOURCES

Organizations

- Street Smarts: Homeless LGBT youths are vulnerable to exploitation
- Justice for All Report
- Girls Education and Mentoring Services

Identifying Human Trafficking

- Administration for Children and Families Rescue and Restore Campaign Tool Kits
- Communicating with Victims of Human Trafficking [PDF]
- Screening Questions to Assess Whether a Person is a Trafficking Victim
- Tips for Identifying the Crime of Human Trafficking

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

- Administration for Children and Families – National Human Trafficking Resource Center

Contact Information and Resources

- Homeland Security: Anti-Human Trafficking Resources: Victims
- Polaris Project: Take Action
- Polaris Project: National Human Trafficking Resource Center
- White House: Council on Women and Girls
- FBI: Crimes against Children

Human Trafficking Fact Sheet for Schools

- Human Trafficking of Children in the USA – A Fact Sheet for Schools

U.S. Department of State

- U.S. Department of State: Office To Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons

U.S. Department of Justice

- U.S. Dept of Justice: Child Trafficking