

Preventing Youth Sex Trafficking and Supporting Survivors



EVIDENCE
BRIEF

This Evidence Brief provides an overview of youth sex trafficking, including recruitment and entrapment, and summarizes practices for preventing youth sex trafficking and supporting survivors.

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SETTING THE CONTEXT: SEX TRAFFICKING IN CANADA

Sex trafficking is a common form of **human trafficking**, through which individuals are coerced or manipulated with threats, force, lies, pressure, or abuse of power to take part in sexual activities in exchange for something of value, such as money, drugs, food, clothing, or shelter.¹ Young people are especially vulnerable, with the most trafficked individuals being between 12- and 14-years-old.¹ In Canada, Ontario is a key region affected by sex trafficking, with 75% of cases happening in the Greater Toronto Area.²

Recruitment and Entrapment

Recruitment refers to how traffickers find and target individuals. Youth can be recruited from various communities — cities, suburbs, and rural areas.² Traffickers often focus on places where young people may be spending time with minimal or no supervision, like malls, schools, parks, bus stations, restaurants, playgrounds, bars, and even courthouses.²

With more young people using social media and the anonymity they provide, online recruitment has become more common. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, X (Twitter), Snapchat, and Tinder are often used by traffickers to connect with and **groom** youth – the process of gaining trust to manipulate or control for harmful purposes.² In fact, studies show that between 41.7% and 52% of traffickers now use the internet to recruit, making both online and physical spaces critical areas for prevention efforts.²

Entrapment refers to the ways traffickers manipulate and control youth after making contact. These strategies fall into two types: **aversive strategies** and **grooming**.²

Aversive strategies involve threats, physical violence, or pressure from the trafficker or others involved to force the youth into submission.² For example, a trafficker may threaten to expose personal or compromising information about a young person (such as sharing an explicit photo) if they refuse to comply with demands.

Grooming involves gaining trust, often by providing youth with basic needs like shelter and food, along with gifts, attention, money, and sometimes drugs.² Traffickers pretend to be a caring partner, meeting the young person's need for safety, love, and belonging.²

Grooming can be hard to spot because it starts with friendly and caring behaviour. The gradual shift to control and secrecy often goes unnoticed until it's too late, so recognizing the signs is crucial.

Signs of grooming can include the young person:³

- Receiving expensive gifts like purses, clothes, jewelry, or manicures.
- Having large amounts of 'unexplained' cash.
- Withdrawing from family and friends.
- Being in an all-consuming relationship with a new friend or partner.
- Skipping school or missing curfew.
- Showing increased interest in their appearance.
- Doing things out of character, like using drugs or alcohol.
- Being secretive about activities and new relationships.
- Having a new or unusual tattoo.

KEY FINDING: DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGES, ADVERSE EXPERIENCES & SUPPORT SYSTEM GAPS CAN INCREASE VULNERABILITY TO SEX TRAFFICKING

Youth from all backgrounds can be targeted for recruitment into sex trafficking, but their **age** and **stage of development** make them especially vulnerable. Traffickers exploit typical adolescent experiences and needs, such as **identity formation, independence**, and the desire for **love and belonging**.¹ Youth tend to have less life experience and depend on adults for necessities like food, shelter, and safety. Traffickers take advantage of this dependency by offering care and safety, and to meet these needs to manipulate and control youth.¹

Factors that increase the likelihood of being trafficked can include:¹

- involvement with child protective services
- a history of childhood sexual abuse
- homelessness
- physical or emotional abuse
- neglect
- exposure to intimate partner violence
- strained relationships with caregivers
- substance use
- experiences of teen dating violence

Indigenous youth and racialized youth may face additional risks due to systemic marginalization, historical trauma, and social and economic inequities, making them even more vulnerable to trafficking.

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: PRACTICES TO PREVENT YOUTH SEX TRAFFICKING AND SUPPORT SURVIVORS

01. Commit to learning.

Research shows a gap in service providers' knowledge of sex trafficking, including its identification, the needs of survivors, misconceptions about signs and behaviours, and distinguishing child trafficking survivors from other child survivors of abuse.⁴ Service providers must commit to learning about sex trafficking, including recognizing the signs, knowing how to respond, and critically reflecting on personal biases when working with youth who have been trafficked.

Some of the signs of sex trafficking for youth may include:³

- Being unusually fearful, anxious, or irritable.
- Not being allowed or able to speak for themselves.
- Having inconsistencies in their stories.
- Being picked up by different cars.
- Having a second cellphone.
- Showing signs of exhaustion and/or addiction.
- Appearing disoriented and unaware of time and place.
- Showing signs of physical or sexual abuse.
- Being evasive about where they're going and who they're going with.

02. Create an inclusive environment that prioritizes safety, trust, dignity, and empowerment.

Research shows that youth who disclose trafficking experiences often feel judged, dismissed, or misunderstood, which can worsen feelings of shame and fear.⁵ Youth workers must adhere to their professional ethics and be trauma-informed and culturally sensitive, using an *intersectional* approach that considers how factors such as race, gender, and ability may intersect in a young person's experiences.

Youth workers must also challenge their biases and external influences on their practice to foster a supportive environment where youth feel safe and empowered. For example, adapting approaches to each youth's unique needs and using reflective questions can help build trust, allowing youth to control when and how they disclose their experiences.⁵ Having uncomfortable conversations with youth creates a space for trust and openness, allowing them to share their experiences and seek the support they need without fear of judgment.

03. Build meaningful relationships.

Engaging meaningfully with youth supports them to develop self-worth and set healthy boundaries, while encouraging a sense of belonging. Modelling these skills for young people through positive relationships is crucial in preventing exploitation, enabling youth to recognize unhealthy relationships and build resilience to protect against future harm.⁶

Teaching youth how to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy relationships – focusing on personal boundaries, bodily autonomy, and consent – is especially important in the context of trafficking, as grooming tactics can be used in the perpetration of trafficking and sexual violence.⁷

Having trusted adults in their life means a young person always has someone to rely on for guidance, support, and reassurance, especially during difficult or uncertain times. Young people can be supported to actively identify ‘safe’ people in their circle – those to whom they can disclose their (or their peers’) experiences to access support and resources –including youth workers.⁷

04. Educate youth about sex trafficking and internet safety.

To raise awareness and prevent trafficking, youth workers should teach youth about what sex trafficking is, including the key terms, how youth are groomed and recruited, and the power dynamics used to exploit vulnerable youth.⁷

Increasing youth’s internet safety is also crucial. With the rise of social media and other online platforms, young people’s personal information is more easily accessible and online luring has become more common. Traffickers can create fake profiles that seem trustworthy and connect with youth over shared vulnerabilities, such as body image or family and school struggles, especially on platforms that allow for anonymity.⁸

Youth should be taught to be cautious about sharing personal information online and to recognize that not everyone they meet on the internet may have good intentions. They should also be encouraged to set strong privacy settings, avoid chatting with strangers, and always talk to a trusted adult if something feels wrong.⁸

ENDNOTES

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8. Covenant House Toronto. (n.d.). [Online luring](#).