



# FOCUS



***Newsletter of the  
Family Focused  
Treatment Association***



**Family  
Focused  
Treatment  
Association**



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## **A Chance of a Brighter Future** —by *Shahrukh Chishty*

Hearing all the #MeToo testimonies in the media lately has been empowering for many in our society. However, one doesn't have to travel to Hollywood to uncover stories of sexual abuse. Unfortunately, these stories are being created all around us and never make it to countless ears. These are the untold stories of our most vulnerable children who are our neighbors, the students in our schools, and the little girls and boys living in uncertainty, trauma, and fear each and every day in our communities. These are the stories of our youth in foster care. The following story recounts part of the journey of a young girl placed in one of our foster family homes at Aldea Children and Family Services.

At around 4:45 one morning, I received a call from one of our staff members, Nadira, who was in a panic as she tried to convince a young lady not to leave the foster home of Ms. Halsey. This child, Solice, was about 14, though she looked much older. She was a child who had been in and out of foster homes all her life. She had experienced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse at a very young age, and because her own home was not safe, she tried to escape and find protection in the arms of a pimp, someone who promised her basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing but who also subjected her body and soul to countless sexual assaults for countless dark nights.

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FFTA Resource:  
Domestic Minor  
Sex Trafficking Guide  
Visit: [www.ffta.org/dmst](http://www.ffta.org/dmst)

# EDITOR'S COLUMN

— by Beverly Johnson, LCSW

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a disturbing concern in our country and one that disproportionately affects the very children we work with. Many victims of sex trafficking have a childhood history of molest, rape, and sexual assault by a family member or close family friend making them four times more likely than their peers to be targeted and victimized by commercial sexual exploitation. Once exploited, the health risks for prostituted youth include sexually transmitted diseases and suicide attempts. One study reports the average life expectancy of a child after getting into prostitution is seven years, with homicide or HIV/AIDS as the main causes of death.

To address this concern, President Obama signed the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act into law on Sept. 29, 2014. This law paved the way in establishing much needed attention to the issue of child sex trafficking in this country. Within the new federal legislation were numerous state requirements including:

- Identifying children who are receiving child welfare services who are, or are at risk of becoming, victims of commercial sexual exploitation;
- Documenting these children and reporting to law enforcement;
- Determining appropriate services for these children; and
- Receiving relevant training in the identification, documentation, and determination of appropriate services for these children.

Other requirements included a national advisory committee and policy changes in many states that included decriminalizing the prostituted youth, recognizing them as victims, and securing the necessary treatment and resources.

April marks Sexual Assault Awareness Month in many communities across the nation and we are glad to be highlighting CSEC in this edition of FOCUS. Learn about one teenager's journey to find security in her foster family. Discover what it takes to build a continuum of care for these youth. You might be surprised to discover what the key intervention is from survivors themselves. And don't forget to check out the FFTA's publication on Domestic Minors Sex Trafficking/ Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children that provides resources for identifying and treating these youth specifically for Family Focused Treatment providers. And let us not forget the importance of sexual health education to the youth and families we serve as a prevention.

Happy reading!

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*Beverly Johnson, LCSW, is the Chief Program Officer of Lilliput Children's Services. She is a member of the FFTA Board of Directors and serves as the Chair of the FFTA Editorial Committee.*

## A Chance of a Brighter Future | continued from pg. 1

Solice had been in Ms. Halsey's home a couple of times before, in between her AWOLs. On one particular occasion, she had come back into the home in fear and pain after a disturbing couple of nights, having been raped several times. At that time, too, the warm though worried faces of Ms. Halsey and Nadira were present for her. Many times before, Solice had been in pain, and many times she was asked if she would like to go to the doctor. Each time she had refused. Luckily this time, it would be different. Nadira explained to Solice that she would take her to a doctor who understood situations such as hers. She explained to Solice that Dr. Shereen had joined the clinic that Aldea was working closely with. Dr. Shereen had been trained by Aldea staff members whom Solice knew and trusted and was very interested in helping young girls and boys such as she. Nadira told her that she would be right there with her at the medical appointment any time Solice wanted. Thankfully, Solice was able to finally seek the medical attention she so needed. Nadira sat by her and comforted her as she tried to answer the questions Dr. Shereen sensitively asked of her. Dr. Shereen is not only a skilled pediatrician but also passionate about helping young children, especially youth in foster care. Dr. Shereen and some of her key staff had attended informational sessions and received training regarding the dynamics and trauma sensitivity in working with families and youth in foster care.

Luckily this time, it would be different.

The journey to connecting with Solice wasn't easy. Her first couple of placements with Ms. Halsey most often ended with a quick meal, a shower, and Solice leaving the home, not returning for days, weeks, and sometimes months. Recently, this pattern was starting to change. Solice had started to build a relationship with people she was

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familiar with, people who, no matter how much she cursed or ignored them, still managed to show love and affection and care for her. She eventually started staying longer in the home, started to share her stories, her personality, and her thoughts about the future with individuals such as Ms. Halsey and Nadira. For her strength, for making the right choices in taking care of her health, and for choosing not to run, Solice was rewarded with gift cards (something most teenagers would enjoy) for each day she stayed safe in the home. Additionally, just to have some normalcy return to her life, she was taken shopping, out to eat, and to the movies as well as other activities that a child her age should experience without the worry of how many strangers she would have to “service” in order to earn enough for her pimp, who only then would provide her with some food, shelter, or money.

Through their numerous interactions with Solice, Nadira and Ms. Halsey had managed to enter the child’s heart—she trusted them to protect her. That night, she was back with Ms. Halsey, who had accepted her unconditionally, and the dedicated Aldea staff member Nadira, who had spent many hours with her, comforting her as she spoke of her pain, her fears, and her hopes. Unfortunately, that particular night, there was uncertainty. Nadira called me and said a man outside the home was pushing on the gas pedal and asking for Solice to come out. Nadira said that she tried everything she could to convince Solice not to go, but she thought that she had failed, as Solice walked out of the house. That night I could hear the fear, disappointment, and sadness in Nadira’s voice, and I felt that yet another child’s future was lost in the darkness.

Why are we so concerned and called to action?

- According to UNICEF, every 2 minutes, a child is being groomed for sexual exploitation.
- Every year, at least 100,000 children are subjected to sexual exploitation in the United States.
- The average age at which a youth is exploited in the United States is 12.
- It’s a \$32 billion-a-year industry.
- Seventy percent of exploited youth report having experienced physical or sexual abuse in their homes.
- Youth who experience sexual abuse are 28 times more likely to be exploited.
- Seventy-eight percent of exploited children had run away four or more times during the past year.



These statistics are numbers, but each number has a life, a generation, and a story attached to it. We have tried to overcome these dreary numbers in some of the following ways:

- **Awareness:** Knowing the problem exists is the first step.
- **Education:** We trained our leadership, our staff and foster families, our foster youth (age appropriately), our service partners, and our community.
- **Fostering Relationships:** If a child who ran from a home was placed back

into our agency, we tried, whenever possible, to place that child with the same family and with the same worker.

- **Incentives:** These children are, after all, just children, and they desire the same things that most children their age would like. We provide rewards (e.g., gift cards, going shopping, etc.) for making good choices (e.g., for each day staying and not running away, for getting medical attention, for getting help from an appropriate agency or therapist, etc.).
- **Advocacy:** It is vital to be involved at all levels and to talk about the true needs of this very special group of traumatized and exploited children as well as the foster parents who nurture, protect, and care for them.

And what of the young lady who had left the foster home? Fortunately, her story didn’t end there. Because of the trust our staff member had built over many interactions, Solice came back within a few minutes of going outside. She came back and told the surprised staff member that she had come back because she knew that she was cared for. She was protected from another night of rape, degradation, injury, or possibly even death.

It is a privilege to be able to serve humankind in such a profound way. Thank you to all who are truly present in the lives of our most vulnerable and hurting young boys and girls. Thank you for having the heart that you do. Thank you for being their hope. Thank you for helping pave the way to a brighter future and for changing the course of generations.

Note: Names have been changed to protect the identity of the individuals.

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*Shahrukh Chishty is the Senior Director of Social Services at Aldea Children and Family Services in Napa, California. She is a member of the FFTA Editorial Committee.*





# A MULTIFACETED APPROACH TO HEALING FROM SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

—by Andrea Sparks, JD

**CATHY WAS WORRIED. ANNA, WHO HAD BEEN PLACED IN HER FOSTER HOME WEEKS AGO, HAD RUN AWAY, AND NO ONE HAD SEEN OR HEARD FROM HER FOR SEVERAL DAYS.**

Anna had been placed in Cathy's home to get the safety, therapy, programming, and trauma-informed care that she needed to heal from years of abuse and neglect followed by sex trafficking. Before Anna disappeared, Cathy had struggled with her. When Cathy tried to talk and engage with Anna, Anna would ignore her and dismiss her. Anna had been extremely restless, constantly expressing the need to leave to meet her friends and consistently seeking out the attention of men and boys. Still, Cathy had not given up. Instead, she had doubled down, seeking resources from her foster care agency and from the community to meet Anna's needs. Cathy's commitment to Anna's bumpy journey of healing was obvious to everyone. Then, one day, Anna ran away.

Several days later, as Cathy stood looking out of her kitchen window, she heard a noise and turned to see Anna coming down the stairs into the kitchen. Anna had come into the house during the night and gone to bed. She explained that she knew she could come "home" and didn't want to wake Cathy in the middle of the night.

To the public, this story may not seem extraordinary; it may even seem like a failure. After all, Anna spent several days away from Cathy's home and was likely revictimized during at least part of that time. Anna had violated her conditions of probation and was at risk of being detained or sent to a more restrictive placement.

But to those of us who work with and on behalf of survivors of trafficking, this story is a ray of hope. Anna came home. She trusted her foster mother enough to return, believing that this healthy attachment wouldn't lead to being rejected as had happened too often before. That this time, relapsing didn't mean she would have to move and start over again.

Cathy and Anna's story shows us that even those children who have survived severe sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and trauma can start to feel safe, to trust, to learn new coping skills, to develop healthy relationships, and to feel like they have a home. These stories remind us that the definition of success can be a moving target. That it will vary with the length of time that the child is away from the trauma, how solid the child's support network is, and a host of other factors. That the cyclical nature of healing from trafficking requires that success be measured and acknowledged incrementally. And that what may be most critical to the healing of these youth is the development and support of healthy relationships.

At the Texas Governor's Child Sex Trafficking Team (CSTT), our vision is a state in which children are free from sexual exploitation. Our mission is to prevent victimization, identify and recover survivors, coordinate services to help them heal and thrive, and bring them justice. Our work so far has shown us that relationships—collaborative relationships among stakeholders and trust-based relationships between

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# A MULTIFACETED APPROACH TO HEALING FROM SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

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healthy, protective adults and the children they serve—are the key to success with all these goals.

Our prevention work includes building protective relationships for vulnerable youth. CSTT partners with Boys and Girls Clubs across Texas to provide and support healthy adult and peer relationships for at-risk youth. We support Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and their work to provide volunteer advocates and find supportive family members and permanency for children in the child welfare system, who are particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

CSTT's efforts to bring justice for victims of child sex trafficking rely heavily on building and sustaining collaborative relationships in working through trafficking cases. Research and experience show that when federal, state, and local law enforcement, prosecutors, victim services providers, and survivors trust each other and work well together, investigations and prosecutions of trafficking increase and are more successful. Survivors are more willing to engage with the criminal justice system when they trust that system to provide the services they so desperately need instead of treating them as criminals. CSTT is funding and working with local multidisciplinary teams, including law enforcement, prosecutors, children's advocacy centers, behavioral and health-care providers, residential placement providers, child welfare and juvenile justice leaders, and survivors across the state of Texas to develop collaborative investigations and victim services protocols and processes.

In our work to provide services to help victims across the state heal and thrive, we have learned from research, other jurisdictions, and survivors themselves that the most important intervention is often the development of a healthy, authentic, trust-based relationship. In response, CSTT is supporting advocacy programs for young sex trafficking victims that provide vetted, trained, supported, and supervised personal advocates for victimized youth. These advocates are available 24/7 to provide crisis management, emotional support, and long-term case management to survivors and their families as they move through systems and work through the stages of healing and relapse. CSTT is also implementing specialized foster care programs, like the one Cathy provides to Anna, by providing the technical assistance and funding and supports that are needed to serve this population beyond those the foster care and juvenile justice systems currently offer.



Andrea Sparks, J.D., is the Director of Governor Abbott's Child Sex Trafficking Team (CSTT). She previously served as the Director of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's Texas Regional Office and as the Director of Public Affairs for Texas CASA.

CSTT was created by Texas' 84th Legislature and launched in 2016. CSTT's mission is to prevent child sex trafficking, identify and recover survivors, provide coordinated services to help them heal and thrive, and bring them justice by holding their exploiters accountable.

LEARN more and sign up for email updates about CSTT at <https://gov.texas.gov/organization/cjd/childsextrafficking>.

CSTT still has much to do and more to learn in order to build the continuum of care that victims of child sex trafficking need and deserve. But in our 2 years of researching, studying other jurisdictions, building collaborations with stakeholders, funding and supporting advocates, drop-in centers, and residential placements for survivors, and consulting with survivors themselves, we have learned that relationship is the key ingredient for any intervention we develop or support. When we ask survivors what helped them survive and ultimately escape exploitation, they usually answer not with a particular therapy or program, but with the name of a person—an advocate, a relative, a foster parent. This is good news. This means we do not have to develop the perfect program before we can start helping these young victims. That we can help victims start to heal even before we can provide access to a particular therapy or intervention. And this means that those who provide care for these children do not have to be perfect. Foster parents and relative caregivers can—and will—make mistakes,

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A MULTIFACETED APPROACH TO  
**HEALING**  
FROM SEXUAL EXPLOITATION  
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ing a difference. These relationships—based on love, not judgment—counteract the trauma bonds that traffickers use to imprison their victims, and it is through relationships that survivors find the long-term emotional supports they will need to cope and ultimately thrive.

As for Anna, her relationship with Cathy may have saved her life. Now, six months after being placed in Cathy's home, Anna is engaged in weekly therapy, swimming on a swim team, and involved in a church youth group. She has developed additional supportive relationships. Anna feels safe in Cathy's home because she understands that Cathy is there for her, unconditionally. Cathy has nurtured a relationship with Anna's biological family, earning their trust and assuring them that they can have a positive role in Anna's future. Even though Anna's family cannot take care of her at home, Anna knows that they support her and have not given up on her.

have setbacks, and get frustrated. As long as they are providing a victim with an authentic and trust-based relationship, they are mak-

There are still challenges and setbacks, of course, but the specialized foster care agency provides lots of support for both Anna and Cathy: respite for both of them, in-person assistance with managing crises, guidance, transportation, and flexibility and support to empower Cathy and Anna to access community supports like swim team and to try new things based on their individual needs and interests. There is a strong relationship between Anna and Cathy that will continue to support Anna even after she eventually leaves Cathy's home.

If we are going to help more children like Anna, we need many more courageous and committed people like Cathy. And we need more foster care agencies like the one supporting Cathy. If you are based out of Texas and you or your agency are interested in providing care for child sex trafficking victims or would like to learn more about CSTT's strategies and the grants offered to support that work, please visit <https://gov.texas.gov/organization/cjd/childsextrafficking>.

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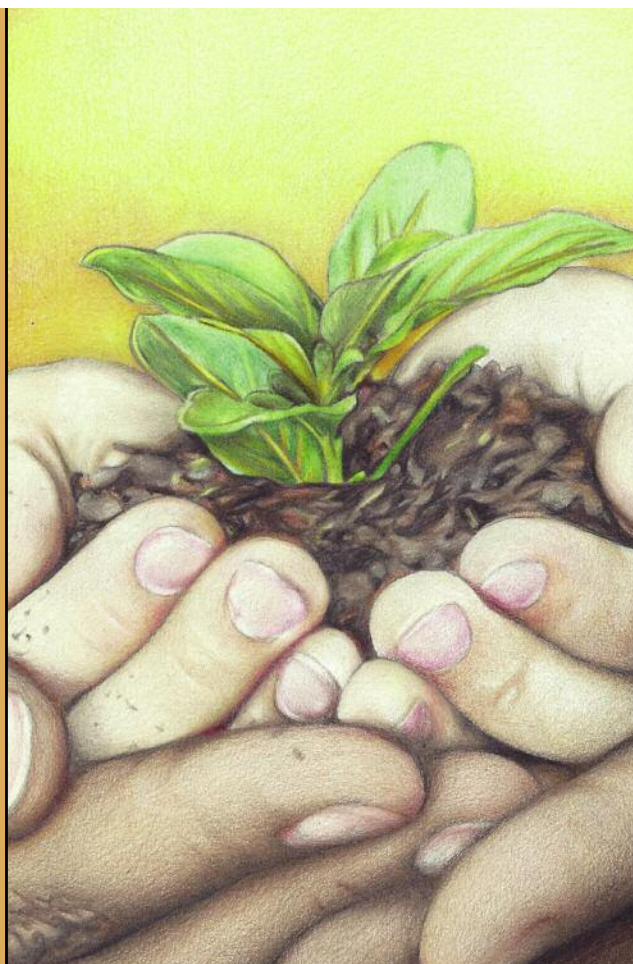
# HOPE, HEALING AND PARTNERSHIP

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32<sup>ND</sup> ANNUAL CONFERENCE  
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## “Yes, your neighborhood, your kids!”

For several years, FFTA and various member agencies have been a voice for youth who have experienced the trauma of sex trafficking.



In general, only two treatment options are available for these youth. One option is treatment in a group home or congregate care setting specifically addressing this population and providing the multifaceted services needed by these survivors. The other option is specially trained Treatment Foster Care (TFC) homes, in which the youth experience, sometimes for the first time, a safe and responsive home setting and treatment regime.

Preference for a treatment setting should be determined by an assessment with each youth. Some survivors will prefer a congregate care setting with other youth who have had similar experiences. Others will prefer a TFC setting, having had traumatic experiences in a sex-trafficking group environment.

TFC providers are needed. We know trauma, we know families, we need to know the unique needs of survivors, whose numbers are being exposed and are growing. We have colleagues doing this work with amazing impact. They need us to learn and lead also.

Specifically, we need to consider appropriate outcomes unique to this population regarding such measures as timeliness and permanency of reunification, median length of stay in care, achieving permanency, placement stability, and safety.

Different measures of progress and well-being should be included for the trafficked population: stability of the relationship with the foster parent/home; improvement in education or in employment attendance and performance; improvement in physical health, sleep patterns, and relationships with other students, coworkers, and foster parents; improvement in grooming and personal presentation; improvement in mental health status, including reduction in any self-destructive behaviors, outbursts of emotion and impulses, and withdrawal and depressive traits; and changed perception of, idealization of, or bonding with former perpetrators.

As we move forward, I will continue pushing on the public policy level for a different set of Children and Family Services Review (CFSR) outcomes and public child welfare agency reporting outcomes pertaining to this specific population as described above.

FFTA welcomes the opportunity to address the treatment needs of trafficked youth through treatment family care.



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Write for an upcoming edition of **FOCUS**

Summer Issue: Serving Rural Populations **Articles Due: 5/23/18**

**For more information email [AKoscielny@ffa.org](mailto:AKoscielny@ffa.org)**

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# Indicators of Youth at Risk for Sex Trafficking

—by Mothyna James-Brightful and Rachel Sye

**Most children enter sex trafficking between the ages of 14 and 16.**

While striving to positively impact the lives of survivors of sexual assault and abuse, rape, and incest in a transformative way and educating the public to prevent violence from affecting the life of another, service providers, including our agency, were missing an entire community of people who needed services and support. They are individuals affected by human trafficking, which can occur both through labor and sex. This article will focus on sex trafficking.

TurnAround, Inc. committed to working with trafficking victims after coming in contact with a victim of sex trafficking and learning about the prevalence of this crime in Baltimore. The connection to the agency's work was validated in Shared Hope International's *National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking*. The report revealed that nearly 70% of sex trafficking victims have experienced physical or sexual abuse prior to being trafficked. TurnAround has had a program for trafficking victims since 2012.

Shared Hope International's report also showed that, on average, a child enters sex trafficking between the ages of 14 and 16. TurnAround's Anti-Trafficking program has served nearly 700 individuals in the past 7 years, and we've found that many of them were in fact recruited as young teens. Although youth in general are vulnerable, some youth are at higher risk for sex trafficking.

Youth who have experienced substance abuse or violence in their homes and those involved with Maryland's Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) or the foster care system have an increased risk of being trafficked. The signs that a young person is at risk of being trafficked may be difficult to identify and differentiate from other signs of trauma. Understanding key indicators will assist in screening youth and incorporating appropriate interventions.

The following are some things to look for in vulnerable youth that may be signs of sex trafficking. Although this list isn't exhaustive, these are the most frequent signs we've experienced in our work with youth who are trafficking victims.

**LANGUAGE** (conversations between youth or during phone calls): Are you hearing multiple conversations about money or the need to get money—"getting the paper," "getting the coins," or "gotta get that money"? Youth are vulnerable to sex trafficking when they have limited access to resources to meet their basic needs. Youth who are eagerly seeking materials or clothes that are trendy or high fashion are also vulnerable, especially if their financial situation makes it extremely difficult to obtain these things.



## **DATE:**

The term date is commonly used in sex trafficking. Youth who talk about setting up dates or going on a date could mean that they are going to meet a "John" or buyer of sex. Youth may also refer to having a "boyfriend" who may possibly be older or who is not known or seen.

**SOCIAL MEDIA:** Is the youth visiting or mentioning sites that are commonly used to advertise for sex, such as Backpage or Craigslist? Is the child visiting adult dating websites, such as Plenty of Fish, which traffickers use as a tool to connect with youth?

## **CHANGES IN OVERALL**

**APPEARANCE:** Are you seeing changes in the youth's appearance? Do you see designer clothing, shoes, or handbags that the youth would not be able to pay for? Are the youth's hair and nails being done? Is the child leaving home dressed one way but returning dressed another? The opposite observation can also be of concern if a youth appears not appropriately taken care of.

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# Indicators of Youth at Risk for Sex Trafficking

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**PHONE USE:** Does the youth have more than one cell phone? Is the child's phone activity beyond normal, such as constant back-to-back phone calls or significant texting? Is the youth having secretive conversations or being over-protective of access to this phone?

**CHRONIC RUNNING AWAY:** Does the youth continually run away from the placement at odd hours or for days at a time? Does the youth reveal a destination or a place to stay? The child may often use such phrases as "staying with a friend" but won't share any information about who the friend is. You may also hear increased conversation or notice behavior indicating more sexual activity or unusual travel out of the area or state. Sometimes a youth may return home and request medical treatment. Is the child insisting on seeing a doctor or admitting to multiple sexually transmitted diseases? Phrases such as "something

is wrong" or "I just want to be checked out" are indicators that the youth is aware of or concerned about the need for medical care.

**TRAUMA HISTORY:** For those supporting a youth, knowing as much as possible about that youth's trauma history is critical. Some forms of trauma can be considered a gateway to victimization—sexual abuse, substance abuse, or witnessing domestic violence can make a person more vulnerable to becoming a trafficking victim.

Many victims of trafficking have an identified pimp or trafficker. However, we are finding that more youth are engaging in what is known as survival sex in which a trafficker or pimp is not involved. More youth are engaging in survival sex to support basic needs or a substance abuse addiction. According to the legal definition of a sex trafficking victim (22 U.S. Code § 7102), "any youth under the age of 18 that is receiving any item of value in exchange for a sex act" is a trafficking victim. Recruitment does happen, with or without a pimp. Teens can be recruited by other teens in group homes, schools, bus stops, malls, and the like. Many of the signs we've mentioned can involve peer-to-peer recruitment whereby youth simply decide that they will do this together. It is important to listen and to observe the interactions of youth together and note if you witness any of the indicators noted above.

The signs discussed are indicators of possible trafficking but can be indicators of other forms of victimization as well. The activities or behaviors noted in this article don't necessarily indicate that the youth is being trafficked.

Rather, these indicators should all be used as red flags to begin having a deeper conversation with the youth regarding personal safety and safe spaces to seek support for difficult conversations or circumstances.

If you believe a youth is being trafficked, we recommend the following strategies to begin the conversation.

**Listen.**  
**Believe.**  
**Don't judge.**

Be mindful and respectful of the youth's previous experiences. Approach with thoughtful care and with the intent to find out if the youth is safe. Offer a referral to a trusted resource if possible.

National resources include Polaris Project, Shared Hope International, and the National Human Trafficking Hotline, which may offer additional information or access to local agencies. Ideally, local resources specific to your area are best because they know what laws may affect the youth in addition to services that could help that youth get out of "the life" of trafficking.

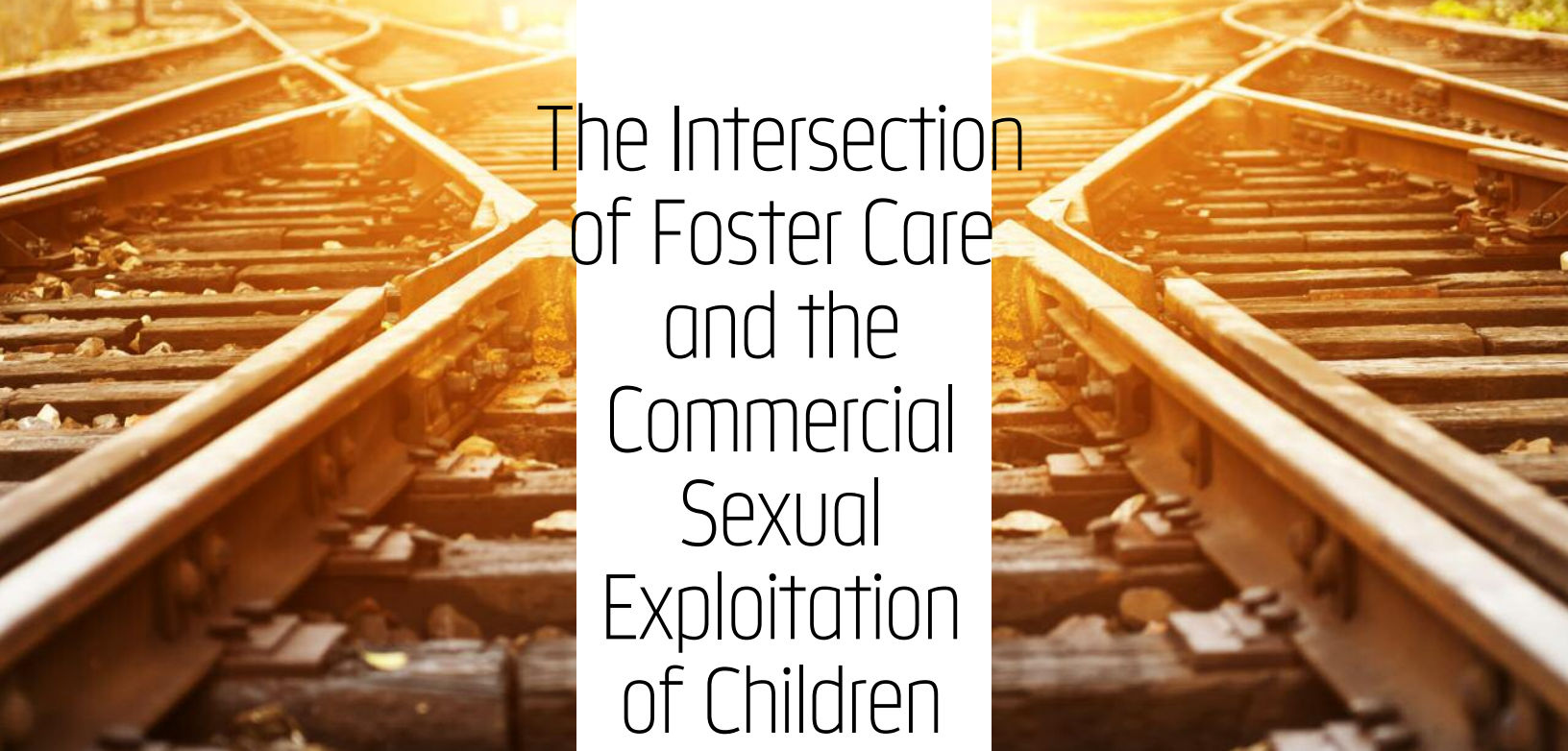
## Resources

<https://humantraffickinghotline.org/>  
<https://sharedhope.org/>  
<https://polarisproject.org/>  
<https://www.turnaroundinc.org>

*Mothyna James-Brightful is Director of Community Education and Rachel Sye is Director of Anti-Trafficking Services at TurnAround, Inc.*

*TurnAround is a social justice nonprofit organization based in Baltimore, Maryland, with a mission to build a community free of violence by working with adults and children affected by intimate-partner and sexual violence to address their needs and prevent further violence through advocacy and education.*





# The Intersection of Foster Care and the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children

—by Jennifer Hossler, MSW, and Camille Kramer, MPH

Many children who have experienced commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking have histories of child welfare involvement and high rates of foster care placement. These children have often experienced child maltreatment and neglect, traumatic loss and separation, exposure to violence, and other trauma and adversity that appear to increase the risk of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking and are common precipitants to foster care placement. In fact, many youth who run away and are subsequently trafficked have run directly from foster care and group home placements. Even youth who have never been in foster care prior to being trafficked may need foster care placement following recovery in order to ensure their safety and well-being. As a result, child welfare broadly, and the foster care system specifically, is poised to play a pivotal role in the identification of, prevention of, and response to child sex trafficking.

## What Is Sex Trafficking?

In simple terms, child sex trafficking is the giving or receiving of anything of value (money, drugs, shelter, food, clothing, etc.) to or by any person in exchange for a sex act with someone under the age of 18. More formally, according to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), child sex trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or solicitation of a person under the age of 18 for the purpose of a commercial sex act. It is critical to note that, unlike adult sex trafficking, there is no requirement to prove force, fraud, or coercion when a victim is under the age of 18. (Commercial sexual exploitation of children is another commonly used term.)

Victims of child sex trafficking may be of any age, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, community, or family circumstance and may have many different pathways by which they intersect with the child welfare and foster care systems. Examples include the following:

- A 6-year-old child whose caregiver receives drugs in exchange for sex acts with the child and who is placed in care following her mother's overdose and arrest.
- A 14-year-old homeless boy who engages in sex acts in order to secure food and shelter. When a concerned citizen makes a report to Child Protective Services (CPS), the boy's parents refuse to take him back in their home because of his sexual orientation, and he is placed in foster care.
- A 16-year-old girl who runs away from a foster home to join her boyfriend who posts ads on social media to facilitate cash purchases of sex with her at a hotel. She is arrested in a sting and returned to her prior foster home.

Girls and boys of color, children from economically disadvantaged families and communities, and LGBTQ youth are at especially high risk of sex trafficking. Homeless and runaway youth face additional vulnerabilities because their immediate needs are focused on basic survival strategies, which may involve engaging in sex acts for food, shelter, money, and safety or protection. LGBTQ youth may be at increased risk for homelessness as a result of family rejection because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, which may lead to an overrepresentation of LGBTQ youth among the homeless and runaway population.

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# The Intersection of Foster Care and the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children | continued from pg. 10

## What Are the Needs and Challenges of Trafficking Victims?

Children who have experienced sex trafficking may present with an array of complex medical, social-emotional, educational, legal, and mental health needs. Specifically, medical needs may be related to physical injuries (broken bones, concussion), sexually transmitted infections, malnutrition, and consequences of neglect of chronic health conditions during exploitation. Prominent mental health concerns include trauma exposure and related posttraumatic stress symptoms, depression, anxiety, self-injury, and substance use problems. Trafficked youth also often have significant educational challenges and needs that may be related to disruptions in education while being trafficked as well as prior discontinuities due to placement transitions and other adversities. The needs of trafficked youth, although sometimes daunting, heighten the importance of a high-quality, informed, and collaborative foster care response.

Many challenges, however, impede an effective response. Child welfare is an already overburdened system, and there is often a lack of infrastructure in place to meet new federal guidelines for identification, tracking, and service provision. There may also be jurisdictional issues involved in these cases because many youth are trafficked in multiple communities and/or states and may be involved with more than one system, especially juvenile justice and law enforcement.

## Systems Involvement

Trafficked youth may come into contact with law enforcement and the juvenile justice system for many reasons. Although there is movement away from practices that criminalize minors who engage in commercial sex, charging of minors with solicitation or prostitution still occurs in some jurisdictions. Trafficked youth may also become involved with the juvenile justice system because of actions unrelated to their trafficking experiences, such as running away and school truancy. Additional criminal offenses related to trafficking may include situations in which a youth's exploiter forced the child to participate in the robbery or assault of a purchaser as well as charges that may be unrelated to trafficking, including shoplifting for food or clothing while homeless.

## Engaging Youth

There are often significant engagement challenges when working with trafficked youth. Many youth do not see themselves as victims or view their experiences as harmful and,

therefore, do not see themselves in need of help or intervention. Some youth who have been trafficked feel a sense of loyalty toward their exploiter that is often difficult for caring adults to understand. And, like many system-involved youth, trafficked youth may distrust systems because of previous experiences with child welfare, law enforcement, mental health, or other service providers, which can be particularly challenging for foster parents working to create new relationships.

## Safety Concerns

In addition, there may be significant safety concerns with children who have experienced sex trafficking. These concerns may include running away, self-injury, substance use, risky sexual behaviors, and trafficking revictimization. Concerns about safety in a youth's home may arise if the child's caregiver was the exploiter, as well as concerns about the local environment if the exploiter and/or purchaser are in the same community. These issues pose significant safety concerns for the youth and may contribute to a decision to place the child in foster care. Despite removal from home or community, these safety concerns may persist even while a youth is placed in foster care.

## Infrastructure Issues

In many communities there is a shortage of foster homes in general and especially for older youth who may present with a complex set of medical, social-emotional, educational, legal, and mental health needs and safety concerns. Another challenge for placement of trafficked youth is the current pay structure, which does not pay families if a youth has run away and is no longer staying in the home. Given placement shortages and financial considerations for the family, when a youth runs away there may be considerable need to fill the placement with another child. When the youth comes back, as often happens, that spot is often filled, and the youth is forced to change placements. Yet again, established relationships and educational, medical, and mental health services are disrupted.

These factors represent serious challenges, yet also reinforce the high value of and significant need for effective response by a committed, educated, and prepared foster care workforce and foster caregivers. Through training of the foster care workforce and caregivers, collaboration within and across child-serving systems, and the strengthening of social supports, services, and safety nets at the heart of the foster care system, the opportunity exists to increase and improve identification, intervention, and prevention of child sex trafficking.

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In recognition of the central role of foster care in responding to trafficking, a number of programs and projects are directing resources to this effort. Project Intersect in Atlanta, Georgia, was developed to address this need.

Project Intersect is a federally funded initiative of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) focused on improving the well-being of commercially sexually exploited and sex trafficked children. For the past 5 years Project Intersect has focused on identification and delivery of trauma-focused, evidence-based mental health treatments with trafficked children and their families as well as the training of mental health providers and professionals across child-serving systems to better identify and respond to the needs of trafficked children. However, it was recognized that child- and family-serving systems with which trafficked youth frequently intersect represent a critical intervention opportunity. Therefore, Project Intersect is additionally targeting collaborative partners in juvenile justice, foster care, and homeless/runaway and LGBTQ youth-serving organizations to improve their knowledge and awareness of child sex trafficking and of the impact of trauma and the principles of trauma-informed care and to increase access to trauma-informed and trauma-focused services.

Specifically regarding foster care, Project Intersect is developing a training series to improve knowledge of traumatic stress, trauma-informed care, and trafficking awareness in an effort to increase safe, supportive, and sustained foster care placements for trafficked youth. The initial training is intended for resource parents who are interested in learning more about commercially sexually exploited children, including who is exploited, where it occurs, how youth in foster care are at increased risk, and how resource parents can mitigate this risk. This training will also highlight the role of trauma and system involvement for youth who are at risk or who have been sexually exploited. The goals of the initial training are to increase knowledge and awareness for resource parents as well as engage a small group of caregivers for more in-depth and ongoing training and support. Using the NCTSN Resource Parent Curriculum, Project Intersect will educate resource parents about the impact of trauma on a child's development and behavior as well as provide knowledge and skills for responding to behavioral challenges, building healthy attachments, increasing psychological safety, and developing a child's strengths. This training is focused on resource parents who have (or want to have) sexually exploited youth in their care. The format of this training is intended to create a natural support system among resource parents and to provide additional and ongoing support for those who participate.

*Jennifer Hossler, MSW, is the project manager for Project Intersect. She will be presenting on this topic at the FFTA 32nd Annual Conference this July.*

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