

# TRAFFICKING & FOSTER CARE

## EQUIPPING FOSTER FAMILIES TO SUPPORT YOUTH EXPERIENCING EXPLOITATION

- 18% of children reported missing from a child welfare placement in 2022 are likely victims of child sex trafficking.
- At least one in six youth experience sex trafficking victimization during a foster care runaway episode.
- 50% of youth in foster care report running away from their care placement at least once and many report running multiple times. Runaway episodes are even more common among youth with histories of trafficking victimization.
- Youth who have experienced sex trafficking are significantly more likely to have run from home compared to those who experienced sexual abuse or sexual assault (81% vs. 12%).
- More than half of identified female survivors of sex trafficking report being trafficked after they ran away from home.
- 20% of youth transitioning out of foster care report experiencing homelessness between the ages of 17 and 19. 29% report experiencing homelessness from ages 19 to 21.
- 23% of youths experiencing homelessness are victimized through sex trafficking or engage in survival sex to meet their basic needs.
- 51% of identified survivors of sex trafficking report participating in survival sex before being trafficked.
- 48% of minor survivors of sex trafficking say they engaged in survival sex in exchange for a safe place to sleep.

Of all the children living in the United States, 6% will go through the foster care system before turning 18. In 2021, that meant 391,000 children and youth were removed or had previously been removed from their homes for mistreatment or abuse.


Children in foster care are more vulnerable in a variety of ways, including mental, behavioral, emotional, and social challenges. Unfortunately, foster children are also far more likely to

experience sexual exploitation before, during, and after they exit the system.

The current child welfare system in the United States does not provide the training or education necessary to prepare foster families to take in a child who has experienced sexual exploitation or trafficking. Many families receive generalized information about child sex trafficking during the licensing process but are commonly underprepared to approach the specific challenges or traumas a child might bring with them.

There is a critical need to develop in-depth training for foster families who are preparing to take in a child who has experienced sex trafficking or sexual exploitation. Incorporating the following recommendations will help child welfare programs protect vulnerable children and support them as they grow into adulthood:

- ⊕ **Prioritize step-down options for placement, such as placing minor survivors in foster families.** Through this one-to-one ratio, survivors more often experience the creation of familial bonds and unconditionally loving relationships. Children moving out of trafficking often have a complicated emotional relationship with the foster care system. On one hand, all children want to be accepted into a loving family, but the majority of survivors experience difficulty understanding or trusting healthy affection. When children are placed in group homes or other residential care for extended periods of time because of a lack of step-down options, it is more difficult for them to form strong emotional bonds with their caregivers. The lack of these bonds can contribute to the likelihood of running away from care, which heightens the risk of other types of victimization.
- ⊕ **Develop and incorporate comprehensive training programs for foster parents willing to take in a child who has experienced human trafficking.** Most foster families are given a brief overview training during the initial licensing process, but it is unrealistic to expect these families to be prepared to address the specific challenges and traumas of a



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child survivor. Considering the high likelihood that the child will experience mental health challenges or run away while placed in a foster home, there is a significant need for follow-up training and professional support for foster families. It is also critically important the foster families of children who have experienced human trafficking have strong support systems in place. These support systems can be made up of friends, family, community members, or professionals, but they are crucial to helping a foster family remain realistic about their expectations and consistent in their relationship with the child. Members of support systems can offer perspective and one-on-one support in a way that reinforces a foster family's ability to care for minor survivors well over time.

- ⊕ **Teach foster families about the realities of complex trauma to help them develop healthy expectations.** Children who have experienced sex trafficking are far more likely to run away than children who have not, but they also have a much higher foster home turnover rate. These survivors often do not stay in a single resourced home for very long, and this reality can be disappointing or discouraging for foster families. To help prepare families to manage healthy reactions and expectations, it is vital to teach them about the symptoms of complex trauma and how it presents in minors. Working with families to walk through what a normal timeline for behavioral changes looks like in this context can support realistic expectations for the child's recovery.

Serving survivors of sexual exploitation requires comprehensive, holistic care, and minor survivors living in the child welfare system deserve to have a foster experience that is educated, prepared, and empathetic to the challenges they face. By incorporating trauma-informed and comprehensive training strategies for foster families, communities can better support both families and minor survivors in the healing journey.