MATT BURGESS SECURITY FEB 10, 2025 12:47 PM

US Funding Cuts Are Helping Criminals Get Away With Child Abuse and Human Trafficking

Services supporting victims of online child exploitation and trafficking around the world have faced USAID and State Department cuts—and children are suffering as a result, sources tell WIRED.



PHOTOGRAPH: JAM STA ROSA/GETTY IMAGES



As Elon Musk's <u>Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE)</u> has ravaged its way though the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), cutting its <u>workforce from 10,000 to just 300</u>, hundreds of organizations providing vital safety services have been upended. Multiple children's safety groups—including those fighting online child sexual abuse and exploitation—say their efforts have been severely hamstrung.

Groups identifying victims and providing care for those who have been subject to online exploitation or human trafficking are struggling to support the vulnerable children, multiple organizations tell WIRED. Such child safety projects often take place in poorer countries, which can have fewer resources to support victims or investigate crimes. Sources say that funding for safe houses has been paused, potentially exposing victims to more harm, and efforts that identify criminals behind child exploitation have been put on hold.

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"It will be very hard for us to identify the victims," says Chantal Yelu Mulop, from the Coordination for Youth and the Fight Against Sexual Violence and Trafficking in Persons (CJVFFT), in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. While the <u>war-torn</u> <u>country faces new fighting and humanitarian crises</u>, children have long been trafficked to work in cobalt mines linked to the <u>production of smartphone and EV</u> <u>batteries</u>.

As USAID funding was withdrawn over the past week, Mulop says her organization had just started helping around 25 newly identified victims of human trafficking—all of them aged under 17. The group was taken to a support shelter run by another organization. "When we bring them there, USAID was ready to help. A few hours later they cancel," Mulop says. "There's no food, no nothing that we can provide to them," she adds.

While the USAID cuts have been immediate, global child protection projects have also faced a funding pause from the State Department. This foreign aid "<u>pause</u>," issued by the Trump administration, is set to last for at least 90 days. USAID did not respond to WIRED's request for comment. The State Department had not provided a comment by time of publication.

Both government bodies have provided funding to help countries and people around the world. This includes USAID's vast swath of health care and education programs—their withdrawal is <u>putting millions of lives at risk</u> and <u>limits tackling the climate crisis</u>. In Southeast Asia, several patients at a migrant camp reportedly <u>died after medical support was removed</u>.

Counter-human-trafficking funding often includes money for projects that help to crack down on online child exploitation and sexual abuse. Funding can be provided to international organizations that coordinate efforts and work with partners, like Mulop's CJVFFT, on the ground. The funding can directly support victims, as well as providing expertise to officials in countries, and stop more children becoming targets.

"Many of these victims engage with their traffickers through electronic means," says Jessica Ryckman, the executive director of the nonprofit Lawyers Without Borders (LWOB), which works on trafficking and child exploitation programs and has been impacted by the funding changes. "It is exploitation that is advanced through digital technology."

Over the years, the programs have been effective. For instance, a four-year partnership between the US and the Philippines, which started under the first Trump

administration and ended in 2021, helped protect hundreds of children: More than <u>350 kids were rescued and supported and almost 100 potential criminals arrested</u>. The new cuts also come as <u>record levels</u> of online child sexual abuse imagery are being discovered.

"Victims and perpetrators alike originate from diverse regions and countries, underscoring the necessity for continued international engagement and coordinated efforts to address these crimes comprehensively," says an employee of a South American child protection group that works to combat trafficking and online sexual abuse. The organization, like others in this story, was granted anonymity to speak given the sensitive nature of the work and uncertainty about future funding. "The interruption of these funds inevitably limits the scope and reach of these critical services," it says.

One person, who works for an organization running multiple child protection projects, says operations in one southeastern European country have been widely disrupted. Within the country, the organization's projects have 147 victims of trafficking in its care, the person says. "The ongoing pause and potentially the cessation of funding would have significant and negative impact on our capacity and ability to provide essential services to these victims who are in fragile stages of their recovery; some of whom are in ongoing programs for psycho-social counseling related to their trauma," the person says.

Multiple members of LWOB say children are being put further at risk in the projects it runs in East Africa. "These children may not be identified, the practices to reduce their trauma aren't being supported right now," says Ryckman. "Even if they are identified, they may be put in a pipeline where they are going to have to face ongoing interviews about their trauma or face their traffickers again."

LWOB has, along with partner organizations, identified around 200 victims of human trafficking in Tanzania, with the majority referred to safe houses, says Lulu Makwale, a victim service coordinator at Lawyers Without Borders. "Most of the funding for the safe houses has been paused, meaning the services and the needs of the victim are also being paused too," Makwale says. She says the organization has been linking up shelters to investigators up until now. "Victims may not be connected well now to the law enforcement," Makwale says. As well as supporting victims directly, many of the efforts also provide training or technical assistance to police forces, allowing them to better investigate crimes. One program listed on the <u>State Department's list of counter-trafficking</u> funding says it is providing training to combat online child sexual exploitation for 10,000 police officers, prosecutors, and judges in 100 countries.

The person with links to work in a European country says their organization has 74 investigations into traffickers ongoing, plus 66 prosecutions that are underway. They say that the funding changes will have a "significant and negative impact on these criminal trials" and the safety of people who may give evidence in the cases.

Ryckman, from Lawyers Without Borders, says the organization recently completed work on an online database for identifying victims and tracking online child exploitation in Kenya. While the database is functional, Ryckman says, future work to train people has been paused, and there will be a slower uptake of the system. "I do believe it will be used, and it will be extremely useful," Ryckman says. "But these victims are there now. They shouldn't have to wait."

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