

6 Truths About Human Trafficking in Texas

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It's tempting to believe that human trafficking happens elsewhere, in some faraway country. You may think it doesn't affect your daily life. You may, understandably, wish to not think about human trafficking at all—the images are just too disturbing and painful.

The reality is that human trafficking, including child sex trafficking, *does* happen in the United States—and it is a real problem right here in Texas. These crimes leave a lasting impact on both their victims and our communities. That's why we're spreading the word for National Human Trafficking Awareness Day, marked annually on January 11.

Read on to learn what human trafficking is and how you can help.

1. About 25% of human trafficking victims are children.

Human trafficking is when a person is exploited for labor, services or commercial sex in exchange for money, drugs or anything else of value. A key feature of human trafficking is that it happens through fraud, force or coercion.

But force, fraud or coercion don't need to be present if the victim is a minor—which is about one-quarter of cases, both in Texas and worldwide. That's because the power imbalance between adults and children makes kids inherently vulnerable to human trafficking. (More on this below.)

2. Texas ranks second in the nation for reported cases of human trafficking.

In 2020, a total of 987 human trafficking cases in Texas were reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, the second-most of any U.S. state (after California).

But this is a fraction of the actual number of cases. By definition, human trafficking is difficult to detect and therefore difficult to measure. Researchers at the University of Texas School of Social Work estimate that, at any given time, 313,000 people are being trafficked in Texas. That includes 79,000 children and youth who are victims of sex trafficking and 234,00 adults who are victims of labor trafficking.

In Texas, human trafficking is believed to be highest within the “Texas Triangle” that connects the Houston, San Antonio and Dallas-Fort Worth metro areas, as well as in the lower Rio Grande Valley.

3. Child sex trafficking builds upon past trauma.

Human trafficking can happen to anyone—but some people are more at risk because, at its core, trafficking is about exploiting vulnerable people. Children and youth may be more susceptible to sex trafficking if they:

- Have a history of sexual or physical abuse.
- Are people of color or from indigenous communities.
- Are part of the LGBTQ+ community.
- Have experienced poverty or homelessness.
- Have a parent or caregiver with a history of substance use.
- Have been in the child welfare system, including foster care.
- Are an undocumented immigrant.

Sex traffickers groom their victims by providing what's missing from that person's life, such as attention, money, food or a place to sleep. Over time, the victim becomes dependent on their trafficker to provide these things. This manipulation can prevent victims from leaving or seeking help.

And while girls and young women are more likely to be targets of sex trafficking, it can happen to males too. According to the human rights organization [Love146](#), 15% of U.S. survivors in their care have been boys or youth who identify as non-binary.

4. The perpetrators aren't always strangers.

Sad as it is, sex traffickers are often someone the victim knows, loves and trusts. It can be a neighbor, religious leader, troop leader, even a family member. In these cases, close proximity gives the perpetrator regular access to their victim and makes it easy to avoid detection.

5. Child sex trafficking often happens (or starts) online.

Online platforms have made it far easier for strangers to gain access to children. According to the Houston-based organization United Against Human Trafficking, 55% of victims of U.S. sex trafficking aged 7 to 11 are recruited through social media apps and websites. Online sex trafficking is increasingly the norm; it's estimated that fewer than 10% of cases happen by kidnapping.

From there, the internet becomes a way for perpetrators to communicate with their victims, and for sexual content to be advertised, bought and sold. This is how sex trafficking can happen in plain sight. Children and youth may continue to lead a seemingly normal life—getting good grades at school, participating in extracurricular activities and so on—while being forced to engage in sexual activity online.

6. There's a statewide economic impact, too.

Like all forms of abuse, human trafficking insults our humanity—and that's reason enough to stop it. But sex and labor trafficking have a negative impact on our economy as well.

According to the same University of Texas study, child and youth sex trafficking costs Texas approximately \$6.6 billion. That includes the cost of caring for survivors over their lifetimes (mental and physical health care, other social services), plus the burden to law enforcement and the criminal justice system. And every year, labor traffickers exploit about \$600 million in lost wages from victims in Texas.

How You Can Help

Human trafficking, in every form, hurts our communities in deep, enduring ways. We all have a responsibility to help protect Texas children from exploitation and to break this cycle. At Upbring, help foster parents and caregivers learn about human trafficking so they can protect children from exploitation.

You can help, too—and you've taken the first step by learning more about it. From there, you can learn to recognize the signs of child sex trafficking. For more about human trafficking in Texas, view the resources from the [Texas Department of Family and Protective Services](#).

And as the saying goes, if you see something, say something. If you suspect you or someone you know is being exploited, contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888 or [humantraffickinghotline.org](https://www.humantraffickinghotline.org).
