



**United States House of Representatives
Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance**

WRITTEN TESTIMONY BY

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For a Hearing Entitled: Children are Not for Sale: Examining the Threat of
Exploitation of Children in the U.S. and Abroad

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Dear Chairman Biggs, Ranking Member Jackson Lee, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee.

Thank you for inviting me and my distinguished colleagues here today to discuss how our nation can better protect children in the United States and overseas. My name is Lori Cohen, and I am the Chief Executive Officer at PACT, Protect All Children from Trafficking, previously known as “ECPAT-USA,” the first organization in this country to raise awareness about the dangers of child sex trafficking and exploitation. PACT recently updated our name to emphasize that all children, regardless of their background or circumstances, have a fundamental right to grow up free from trafficking and exploitation. We advance this mission through advocacy, private-sector engagement, and education, all of which are informed by the women and men who serve on our Survivors’ Council.



We are deeply appreciative that this subcommittee is examining the well-being not only of children residing in the United States but also those living abroad. PACT remains a proud member of the global ECPAT network, active in over 100 countries worldwide, and we work closely both with ECPAT International's central office in Thailand and with regional members, most significantly, with our sister organizations in Latin America. As a result, our research, outreach, and educational material reflects these domestic and international perspectives and is available in a broad range of languages.

SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM AND THE CHALLENGES OF DATA COLLECTION

Every year, millions of children are victims of human trafficking. While [reliable data is difficult to come by](#) because of the illicit nature of this crime¹, the most recent report published in 2022 by the International Labor Organization (ILO), estimated that some [3 million children](#) were trafficked globally, with over half of them trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation.² The ILO report noted that trafficking occurs in almost every country of the world. In the United States, we similarly see that trafficking happens in all communities, in every state, and in every city. In 2022, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) received [18,336](#) reports of child sex trafficking.³ Other US estimates include a 2021 National Human Trafficking Hotline identification of [2,365](#) trafficked children,⁴ and the Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Trafficking in Persons certification of 2,226 foreign national minors as victims of human trafficking in 2022.

Unfortunately, the reality is much worse than what is being captured by the federal government. A 2016 study done in Texas found that there were almost [79,000 child victims](#) of sex trafficking in the state.⁵ In a survey of 600 runaway and homeless youth in Atlanta, GA, [39.9%](#) experienced some form of trafficking.⁶ And in my hometown of New

¹ <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/25614/chapter/6>

² <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2023/January/global-report-on-trafficking-in-persons-2022.html>

³ <https://www.missingkids.org/cybertiplinedata>

⁴ <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en/statistics>

⁵ <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/44597/idvsa-2016-human-trafficking-by-the-numbers.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/10/2/32>



York City, [the Administration for Children and Families](#) estimated that over two thousand young people are believed to have been sexually exploited or at risk for sexual exploitation in 2019.⁷ These estimates are widely believed to undercount the real scope of the problem in this country. Improved data collection is essential to providing meaningful interventions.

While the trafficking of even one child is alarming, the scope of this crisis is dwarfed by the terrifying proliferation of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) during the pandemic. In 2022, NCMEC, received more than [32 million](#) reports of suspected child sexual exploitation, an increase of more than 10 million reports since the pandemic's start in 2020, 99.5% of which regarded incidents of suspected CSAM.⁸ Other forms of exploitation included an 82% increase in online enticement of children for sexual acts, fueled by the doubly predatory practice of sextortion, where an exploiter demands money or further images of sexual acts under threat of exposing the child to friends and family. This criminal scheme has deadly consequences, as a growing number of boys have [taken their lives](#) rather than suffer exposure or the fear of harm to loved ones.⁹

Migration, Child Sex Trafficking, and CSAM

PACT is also deeply concerned about the welfare of unaccompanied minor children traveling to the United States. As an attorney who has devoted nearly three decades to representing migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and survivors of human trafficking from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America, I have learned from my clients the perils of traveling to the United States in search of safety. Significantly, most of my clients did not want to leave their homes, but gang violence, war, repressive government regimes, gender-based persecution, and catastrophic climate events left them with an impossible choice: face death, sexual abuse, or torture if they remain in their home country, or risk

⁷ <https://ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/news-all-day/2023/01/24/human-trafficking-continues-to-plague-city>

⁸ <https://www.missingkids.org/cybertiplinedata>

⁹ <https://nypost.com/2023/08/30/parents-reveal-teen-sons-committed-suicide-after-sexortion/>



their lives through a perilous journey to the US in the hopes of securing safety and freedom.

The onset of COVID-19 exacerbated many of the factors leading to migration, and we began to note an increase in migrant arrivals as early as April 2020. In 2022, [PACT published a study](#) conducted in partnership with ECPAT México, ECPAT Guatemala, and Yale University that explored the impact of COVID-19 on child migration and the vulnerability to trafficking and sexual exploitation. We surveyed 164 experts from nongovernmental organizations, shelters, and government officials in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Respondents painted a dire picture of the lives of youth from those regions, listing multiple forms of violence as a primary push factor for migration, as well as a risk factor for child trafficking. When asked if COVID-19 spurred an increase in child trafficking, 50% replied “yes” and only 6% replied “no.” What is most significant, perhaps, is that 44% of these experts could not answer the question. Similarly, a whopping 67% of respondents could not answer whether the migrant children they served were directly affected by sexual exploitation. These individuals, charged with protecting migrant children, lacked the basic training and tools to recognize and identify trafficking indicators. We titled the report “Undetected” because the people and institutions meant to prevent and stop trafficking don’t even know how to screen for trafficking.

This lack of information exists on both sides of the border. When I traveled with a team of Yale students to visit transitional shelter facilities for migrant children and their families in Southern California, we learned that screening for trafficking was not incorporated into safety protocols. PACT also learned that our own government institutions like Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) receive very limited training on human trafficking, resulting in missed opportunities to identify at-risk children. In FY22, CBP processed over [120,000 unaccompanied minors](#) but reported only a handful of instances of child trafficking to the Office on Trafficking in Persons as mandated by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act.¹⁰

¹⁰ <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters-by-component>

[The 'Undetected'](#) report also explored the role that technology played in youth migration and found that 71% of the children served had access to some type of smartphone. Approximately one-quarter of respondents found this technology helped children stay in contact with loved ones, learn of safe passage routes, and connect with other children, slightly over one-third found that technology hindered child safety, and 40% found that cell phones offered both benefits and risks. In the words of one UN worker in Guatemala, “technology will always be a double-edged sword.”

As with the challenges in identifying trafficking, however, fully 50% of the experts surveyed could not answer the specific question of whether any of the children they were assisting had been affected by online grooming for sexual purposes. This figure is of particular concern, as current research indicates that nearly all CSAM is created outside the United States. NCMEC found that, of the 32 million reports that the CyberTipline received in 2022, **89.9%** resolved to locations outside the US. The prevalence of extraterritorial CSAM creation is further underscored by the [report](#) published last week by the International Justice Mission, which found that **half a million** children in the Philippines were trafficked into producing CSAM.

The prevalence of CSAM content creation abroad should rightly remain a concern of this subcommittee, as there exists a strong nexus to the United States. Our existing regulatory structure, and unchecked demand for pedophilic content, have created a permissive environment in which US-based exploiters can access CSAM with ease. The [Internet Watch Foundation](#) recently noted that, by the end of March 2022, the US held the dubious distinction of accounting for 30% of the global total of child sexual abuse material URLs, taking the title from the Netherlands after the country cracked down on illicit websites.¹¹ Similarly, the International Justice Mission (IJM) noted that the live streaming of a child being sexually abused was typically broadcast to a viewer from

11

<https://www.iwf.org.uk/news-media/iwf-in-the-news/the-us-now-hosts-more-child-sexual-abuse-material-online-than-any-other-country/#:~:text=any%20other%20country-,The%20US%20now%20hosts%20more%20child%20sexual,online%20than%20any%20other%20country&text=Experts%20predict%20that%20without%20new,world%2C%20new%20research%20has%20found>



a Western country, who paid as little as \$25 to watch. If we want to get serious about shutting down CSAM, we need to pass legislation that stops it from being hosted on US-based URLs and enforce penalties against US citizens who are fueling the demand for this despicable content.

We also need to look ahead to the next development in child exploitation: the use of Artificial Intelligence to generate sexually explicit imagery of children. Last week, [attorneys general](#) from all 50 states and four territories sent a letter to Congress asking for the establishment of an expert commission to study how generative AI may potentially be used to exploit children through the creation of child sexual abuse material (CSAM). The AG's also seek to expand existing laws against CSAM that explicitly cover AI-generated materials. PACT supports efforts to shut down AI-generated CSAM immediately.

PACT's Response to Preventing Child Sex Trafficking and Online Exploitation

Knowledge is key to the prevention of child sex trafficking and online exploitation, and PACT has worked closely with key partners to launch free online training for students and businesses where trafficking has been known to occur. A free e-learning course, developed in partnership with the American Hotel and Lodging Association, has been completed by over 1 million members of the hotel industry since February of 2020, and an online game, the 'Social Identity Quest', created with Hard Rock International that teaches the consequences of healthy and unhealthy social media practices has been accessed by over 1.2 million students over the past year. We've also scaled out online safety workshops for parents and caregivers, to provide them with the tools to ensure that their children are using internet technology safely. PACT has hosted workshops, both online and in person, in 28 states to teach parents about topics such as catfishing and sextortion, but also how to navigate challenging conversations with their kids and create an environment of trust and safety.

We are also deeply engaged in seeking to stop the exploitation of migrant children arriving in this country. While the overwhelming majority of them are arriving here in



search of safety, PACT remains concerned that the lack of screening and safety protocols, combined with a shortage of safe housing, economic stability and social services, puts these recent arrivals at risk of trafficking and exploitation. Thanks to the support from the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children and Families, Office of Trafficking in Persons, our bilingual Educational Team has worked closely with the Brentwood Union Free School District to develop Spanish and English language curricula to serve Brentwood students, a significant percentage of whom are from Central America. Similarly, PACT is conducting outreach to recently arrived children in New York City to make them aware of the risks of trafficking and avenues for assistance. Nationally, thanks to a grant from the Department of Transportation's Federal Transit Administration, we are working with experts to develop an impactful communications campaign to educate commuters and transit workers about the identification and safe reporting of child trafficking. Our hope is that Congress will support increased outreach and access to preventive services to ensure that none of these recently arrived children are trafficked for sex.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The movement to end child sex trafficking and exploitation requires coordinated efforts among government entities, the nonprofit sector, private enterprise, and community members. It must incorporate the insights of survivors, women, and men with lived experience, who choose to draw upon the worst experiences of their lives to ensure that no other human being is ever exploited. And we must listen to the voices of our children. I invite all of you to join PACT and ECPAT International as we host a UN Panel on October 12 that features youth leaders in the global movement to protect all children. The event will be held in New York City in person and live-streamed, and you can visit our [webpage](#) to learn more about it.

PACT urges Congress to pass the child protection bills that have been introduced, including the EARN IT Act, Project Safe Childhood Act, the No Trafficking in School Zones Act, and STOP CSAM Act so we can prevent human trafficking, online child



sexual exploitation and abuse (OSEAC), and enable survivors to access justice. PACT also encourages the federal government to improve training and education for CBP and other federal agencies involved in child welfare. Similarly, PACT seeks improved, coordinated data collection so that policymakers, service providers, and law enforcement can understand the true scope of this problem and better respond to human trafficking in the U.S. and abroad.

Because human trafficking is a global phenomenon, the US cannot stop human trafficking alone. By supporting international programs that train front-line workers about human trafficking, we also can help to prevent the exploitation of youth in their home countries. And, drawing upon the findings of our report, Undetected, there must be increased investment in those countries to ensure that children have a safety net and the ability to remain in their homes without fear. For those children who are in this country, whether foreign national or US citizen, recent arrival or lifelong resident, we have an obligation to provide them with the essential care that allows them to thrive.

Again, thank you for allowing me and my colleagues to speak on the realities of human trafficking abroad and in the U.S. PACT will continue to engage with Congress and the White House in an effort to inform and help develop policy solutions that uplift, strengthen, and support survivors. I thank you for taking the time to listen and I hope that we can all come together to protect all children from trafficking.