

WORKING WITH HT SURVIVORS: FOSTER YOUTH

Overview

There is a high risk of trafficking for children involved in Child Welfare Services given various factors, including prior trauma history, instability of living arrangements, social connections and failure to have their basic needs met, particularly when a youth is missing from care.¹ Several studies show that from 50 to more than 90 percent of children who were victims of child sex trafficking had been involved with child welfare services. Additionally, according to reports, 70 percent to 90 percent of commercially sexually exploited youth have a history of child sexual abuse and children who experience sexual abuse are 28 times more likely to be arrested for prostitution at some point in their lives than children who did not.²

Considerations

Trauma

There is a heightened need for trauma informed care when working with foster youth who are also survivors of human trafficking, given the fact that many of these youth have experienced many layers of trauma related to their involvement with child welfare services.

- The Administration for Children and Families suggests that there is a need for use of universal, valid, and reliable screening for trauma history and assessment of social-emotional functioning for children and youth who come into contact with the child welfare system.²

Child Development

There are developmental differences between children and adults, and some studies indicate that children's brains are not fully developed until the age of 26. The part of the brain that is still developing is the part needed for making rational long-term decisions. This is important because a child may not fully understand and weigh the long-term consequences of their choices given that their brain has not fully developed that ability.

Child Welfare Professionals

There are often many professionals involved in a foster child's life. These professionals may include social workers, attorneys, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), foster parents, group home staff, medical providers, and counseling professionals. It is important to become familiar with these supports and understand each role in supporting youth.

¹ Interagency Collaboration to Address Human Trafficking Podcast (n.d.)

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/trafficking/>

² Human Trafficking and Child Welfare: A Guide for Child Welfare Agencies (n.d.)

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/trafficking-agencies/>



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Basic Needs

Children who have been victims of trafficking have many needs similar to those of children who enter the child welfare system through other circumstances. For instance, children who have been trafficked need health care, mental health services, a safe place to live, help with education, and facilitated reconnections with family members.

- For foster children, meeting these basic needs might require communication with the child’s social worker or attorney. For example, with regard to housing, there may be specialized programs specifically aimed at foster youth and identifying a safe place to live may require communication with the child’s social worker and attorney to ensure the child is not exposed to greater risk.
- Providers should also be mindful of the relationships children might have with a trafficker due to their dependence on their trafficker for basic needs and attachment to their trafficker. Given their dependence, child victims might be less likely to self-identify as victims and may have difficulty providing information about the circumstances of their trafficking.

Mentorship/Support Network

Youth who have been trafficked will often need help with basic life skills (e.g., opening a bank account, keeping medical records) as well as training for a job and basic job skills. For many, having a mentor or someone who is willing and available to provide guidance over the long term is often essential to ensure that the youth is able to pursue a life away from trafficking.

Specialized Resources

There may be specialized resources for children who have been victims of human trafficking, such as medical specialists, legal resources for children, and social services specifically for children. For example, there are specialized courts for commercially sexually exploited children.

- Some jurisdictions have a specialized court specifically for commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC), sometimes labeled as “girls court,” although CSEC survivors may be any gender. For example, in Los Angeles, there is the Succeed Through Achievement and Resilience “STAR” Court for children involved in juvenile delinquency as well as the Dedication to Restoration through Empowerment, Advocacy, and Mentoring “DREAM” Court for child victims in the juvenile dependency system. The purpose of these courts is to address the needs of children as victims, rather than criminalizing their behavior.



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Child Advocacy Center (CAC)

Child Advocacy Centers offer child-friendly, multidisciplinary services for children and families impacted by sexual abuse and physical abuse. These Centers usually offer forensic interviews, medical evaluations, and mental health services for victims of abuse. They bring together different professionals to coordinate care, including social workers, law enforcement, attorneys, medical professionals, and mental health professionals.

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Resources

National Children's Advocacy Center. Search for Child Advocacy Centers in each state using this website.

<https://www.nationalcac.org/find-a-cac/>

Office For Victims of Crime - Justice Programs. Provides extensive multidisciplinary resources, case studies, training guidance, and best practices.

<https://www.ovctac.gov/taskforceguide/eguide/4-supporting-victims/45-victim-populations/minors-a-adolescents/>

Child Welfare Information Gateway. This website is a service of the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It provides access to print and electronic publications, websites, databases, and online learning tools for improving child welfare practice, including this page, which is specific to human trafficking.

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/trafficking/>

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Provides a collection of resources for professionals to learn about culture and trauma.

<https://www.nctsn.org/trauma-informed-care/culture-and-trauma/nctsn-resources>

California Courts. The Judicial Branch of California. Girl's Courts. Provides a listing of CSEC Courts in California.

<https://www.courts.ca.gov/37353.htm>

This fact sheet provides legal information, not advice.

