

# OPINION

## COVID-19 increases risks of child sex trafficking



### Your Turn

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Guest columnists

Recent social media posts have led to a heightened awareness of child sex trafficking. However, many of these posts contain inaccurate information that misleads the public on how child sex trafficking takes place, thereby harming anti-trafficking education efforts.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in children being at greater risk of child abuse and sex trafficking. However, the increase in risk is not due to any of these reasons that have spread on social media: "Snatch and grab" kidnapping or abduction to bring children into sex trafficking; children wearing masks being more likely to become victims of sex trafficking; or children wearing masks inhibiting the ability for others to notice warning signs of abuse.

According to representatives from the FBI, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. Department of Justice, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, online sex trafficking has doubled since the start of COVID-19 lockdowns. Traffickers have quickly adapted their methods of online trafficking. Human services agencies have also seen increased reports of parents and relatives trafficking children.

Traffickers prey on vulnerable children: runaway and homeless youth; those with low social supports; children who have been sexually or physically abused or are chemically dependent; or children who have a history in the foster care system or juvenile detention. It's not just sex trafficking: Children are at greater risk of all forms of abuse during the pandemic because of an increase in risk factors such as stress, financial difficulties, food insecurity and isolation.

Social distancing has removed many children and adolescents from social supports including schools, summer programs, and community services, decreasing opportunities for mandatory reporters and concerned citizens to notice

warning signs of child abuse and take appropriate reporting action.

The internet is a primary recruiting mechanism for child sex trafficking. Youths are spending more time on the internet. Children who are already vulnerable are at increased risk of being groomed by traffickers on the internet. Child sex traffickers most commonly are adults who provide a promise to vulnerable children of relationship, love, or other means of support.

It is critically important that Iowa communities are responding to this increased risk by supporting kids and families. Trafficking stems from systemic issues of poverty, inequity, drug addiction, and lack of resources.

A complicated problem has complex solutions. Community members can help eliminate human trafficking by addressing the systemic issues that leave children vulnerable:

- Support programs that help eliminate food insecurity, provide children and adolescents with safe, stable, and supportive housing, support victims of domestic violence, and provide treatment for mental illness and substance abuse.

- Advocate against human trafficking by bringing church, school, or community members together for a training about sexual abuse prevention, including warning signs for grooming behavior and best practices in reducing vulnerability. Learn more at [www.peaiowa.org/training](http://www.peaiowa.org/training) and [www.iowanah.org](http://www.iowanah.org).

- Make small steps in your own life to provide kids you know with a lifeline when they need it most: The presence of just one caring and supportive adult in a child's life can make all the difference.

To report suspected child abuse or child sex trafficking, call the Iowa Department of Human Services Child Abuse Reporting Hotline: 800-362-2178. If you would like to talk through suspected trafficking, or you are a victim looking for help, call the Iowa Victim Service Call Center at 800-770-1650 or text [iowahelp](http://iowahelp) to 20121.

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