

Child Sex Trafficking article continued...

According to representatives from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, US Department of Homeland Security, US 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 service 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; are chemically dependent; or 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 child abuse during the pandemic due to an increase in risk factors like 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. Youth are spending more time on the internet due to the pandemic. Children that are already vulnerable are at increased risk of being groomed by traffickers on the internet. Additionally, the pandemic has highlighted these vulnerabilities due to lack of safety nets – many families and children are stretched thin on needed resources and are left insecure. 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 helping to reduce vulnerability. Learn more at www.pcaiowa.org/training and www.iowanaht.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 in outcomes for a child at risk, fostering their growth into productive, stable adults.

Reach out to the Iowa Network Against Human Trafficking to learn more about what you can do to join the fight to end human trafficking in Iowa. To report suspected child abuse, call the Iowa Department of Human Services Child Abuse Reporting Hotline: 1-800-362-2178. To report suspected child sex trafficking, call the National Human Trafficking Hotline: 888-3737-888. If you would like to talk through suspected trafficking, or you are a victim looking for help, call the Iowa Victim Service Call Center: 1-800-770-1650 or text *iowahelp* to 20121.