CHILD TRAFFICKING INDICATOR CHART

PACT.
PREVENTING & ADDRESSING CHILD TRAFFICKING

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Celebrating 20 Years

Preventing and Addressing Child Trafficking CHILD TRAFFICKING INDICATOR CHART

Updated October 2025

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CHILD TRAFFICKING INDICATOR CHART

OVERVIEW

Children and young people may experience one or both forms of trafficking, including sex trafficking–also known as commercial sexual exploitation (CSE)–and labor trafficking, which can occur in both formal and informal settings or involve forced criminality.

Preventing & Addressing Child Trafficking (PACT) developed the Child Trafficking Indicator Chart, informed by a review of existing tools and input from community providers and leaders with lived expertise. The chart highlights commonly observed signs and potential overlaps where intersectional experiences of trafficking may co-occur.

Early identification is key to establishing a local response and connecting children and families to support. Recognizing potential indicators can support timely intervention and identification efforts, especially when combined with screening tools and comprehensive needs assessments. Identifying concerns early creates more opportunities for intervention and reduces the risk of further harm.

The chart [page 8] organizes indicators into three broad categories: **socio-environmental, behavioral, and physical & health.**

TRAUMA INFORMED IDENTIFICATION & SCREENING

It's important to remember that children who have experienced trafficking are often unable or unwilling to self-identify due to fear, shame, pressure, lack of awareness about the crime, or loyalty to those exploiting them. Building rapport and trust, understanding the impacts of trauma, and asking thoughtful, clarifying questions are essential to effectively identifying immediate needs and providing longer-term support.

Collaboration with local advocacy agencies–especially those trained in motivational interviewing –is critical. These partners can assist with engagement and provide vital, community-driven care.

***Every child's experience is unique, and no single indicator is typically sufficient to determine trafficking.**

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WHAT IS HUMAN TRAFFICKING?

Federal law defines human trafficking as the use of force, fraud, or coercion to compel a person into commercial sex acts or labor against their will. Individuals may experience one or both forms of trafficking.

SEX TRAFFICKING

The recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, obtaining, soliciting, or patronizing of a child for the purpose of engaging in a commercial sex act.*

Child Trafficking

LABOR TRAFFICKING

The recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, or obtaining of a child for labor or services through the use of **force, fraud, or coercion** for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.

- **The Action-Means-Purpose (AMP) Model illustrates how human trafficking occurs.**
- To establish a potential trafficking situation, at least one element from each category: *Action, Means, and Purpose*–must be present.

***An important exception applies to minors:** any youth under 18 involved in commercial sex is automatically considered a victim of trafficking, regardless of force, fraud, or coercion.

	ACTION	MEANS	PURPOSE
Child Labor Trafficking	Recruiting, harboring, transportating, providing, obtaining	→ Force, fraud, or coercion	→ Labor or Services
Child Sex Trafficking	Recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, obtaining, soliciting, patronizing	→ Proof of force, fraud, or coercion not needed if under 18.	Commercial sex act(s)

What is a commercial sex act?

A **commercial sex act** is any sexual activity where something of value – such as money, food, drugs or a place to stay – is given to or received by any person.

What are "labor or services"?

Labor or services is *work* that includes any effort where something of value - such as money, food, drugs or a place to stay - is given to or received by any person. "Work" can be formal, informal and include illegal activities.

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WHERE DOES IT HAPPEN & TO WHO?

Where does trafficking occur?

Trafficking occurs in communities of all sizes and across diverse industries and locations. Children who experience trafficking can be of any gender, ethnicity, or immigration status, including U.S. citizens.

Who are the traffickers?

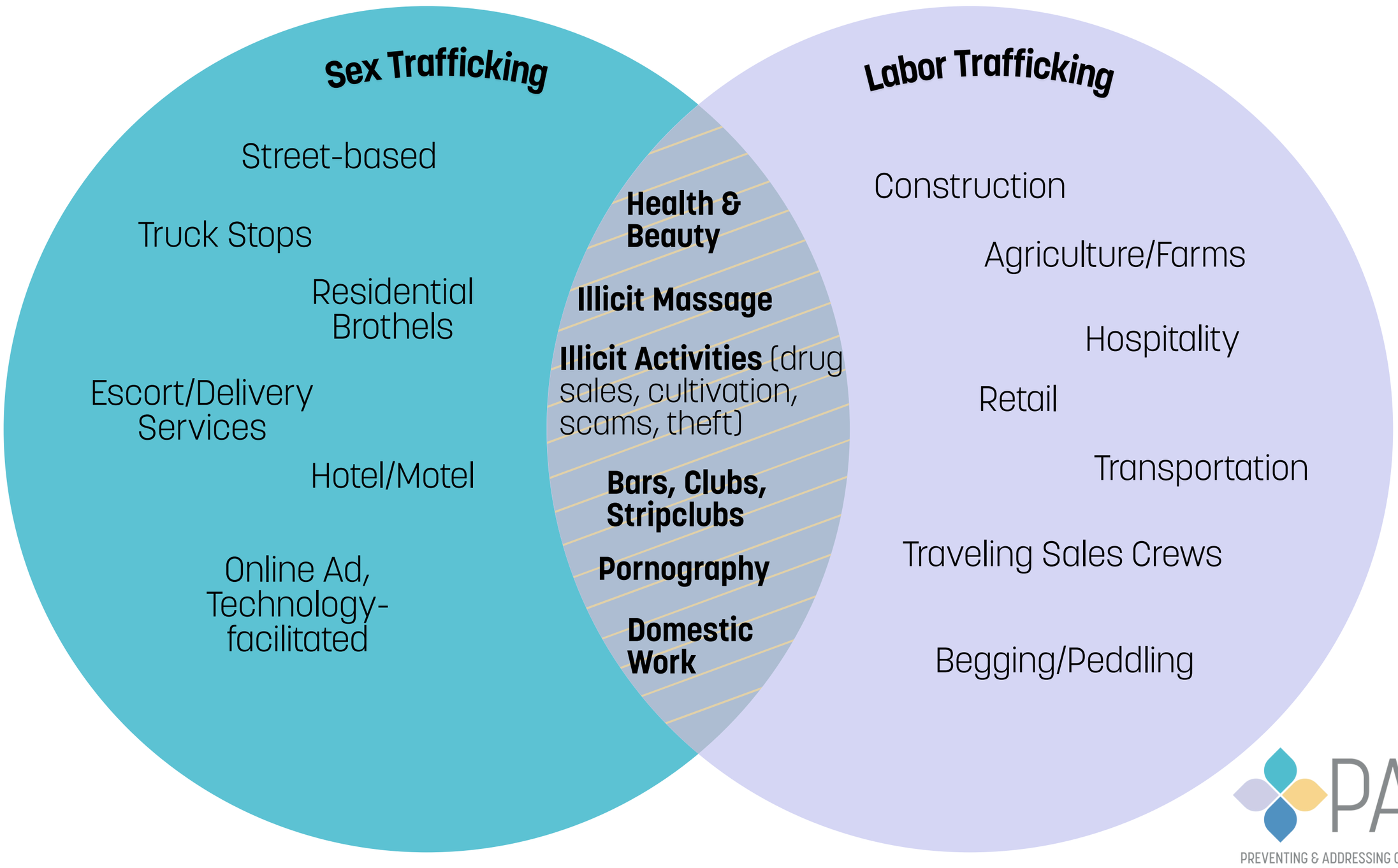
Traffickers can be anyone - but are often people who have a close relationship with the child or inherent power dynamics. This can be intimate partners, peers, family members, foster parents, employers, landlords, gang - organized crime, cult members or perceived "friends."

Disproportionality and Vulnerabilities

While trafficking can happen to anyone, *youth involved in the foster care or juvenile justice systems, as well as 2SLGBTQIA+ and BIPOC youth, are disproportionately affected.* Youth may experience one form, or multiple forms of trafficking simultaneously.

> **People often think there's a clear-cut experience of trafficking when a trafficker doesn't care how you make money, or how they are extracting a profit. For example, a trafficker could have someone stripping, selling sex, panhandling, working a regular job, or stealing simultaneously.**
>
> — *Jess Torres, Pact Consultant*

Commonly Reported Venues & Frequently Overlapping Industries



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METHODS OF CONTROL

Traffickers use *control tactics* to continue the cycle of abuse and exploitation.*

Force includes physical or sexual assault, confinement, isolation, or physical abuse.

Fraud includes false promises, fake employment offers, lying about working conditions, or withholding wages.

Coercion includes threats of serious harm or psychological manipulation, threats to loved ones' safety, increasing or compounding debt that's impossible to pay off, abuse or threatened abuse of the legal system.

*Under U.S. federal law, when a person under 18 years old is compelled to perform a commercial sex act, it is a crime regardless of force, fraud, or coercion.

QUOTES FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE

Saying 'NO' does not exist... it is not an option. You are at no point being asked- you are being told. Used as a strategic & disposable entity to shield the trafficker and keep their hands clean.

-Jess Torres, Pact Consultant

"Trafficking is not only about forced sex or labor–it exploits a young person's isolation, trauma, marginalization, and need for belonging. The same is often true for those who become traffickers, making public health, primary and prevention and intervention approaches the most equitable response to trafficking and other forms of violence."

-Jess Torres, Pact Consultant

When I was a child, I felt like I was in a bad dream and I knew that everyone's childhood was different than mine. I learned to accept it. I became numb and just survived.

-Angelica Zuniga, Pact Consultant

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TRAUMA INFORMED CARE & COLLABORATION

> "Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being."

Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration

> The harm reduction approach reflects a paradigm shift in service delivery, allowing for youth to be the curators of their own safety, including how they define safety. It involves promoting self-determination and essentially assisting youth in gaining, or re-establishing, their own sense of power.

Harm Reduction Series, CA Department of Social Services

Human trafficking is a public health issue affecting individuals, families, and communities across generations. Children and youth impacted by trafficking experience complex trauma that affects their body, mind, emotions, and behaviors. **Support should meet basic needs, be tailored to the individual, and address both immediate and long-term goals.** Service plans should be culturally responsive, linguistically appropriate, and include ongoing safety planning.

Collaboration is essential. Multidisciplinary teams–including social workers, probation, public health, mental health providers, immigration attorneys, school staff, law enforcement, and advocates–work best when guided by youth and families, leading to stronger support and better outcomes.

A harm reduction approach is valuable for youth who may be unable or unwilling to leave exploitative situations, often due to trauma bonds**.** This approach helps youth define their own safety, regain a sense of power, and gradually reduce risky behaviors over time. Research shows that quick "rescues" can be ineffective; building trust, teaching help-seeking behaviors, and keeping doors open create pathways to safety and long-term stability.

Trauma-informed care shifts the focus from *"What's wrong with you?"* to *"What happened to you?"*
This approach centers the young person and their safe caregivers–so providers can respond with compassion and understanding.
Healing is unique and rarely linear.

Visit the PACT website for a list of California Service Providers:
www.cfpic.org/projects/pact/specialized-services

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Child Trafficking Indicator Chart

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTAL INDICATORS (AS DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE)	SEX TRAFFICKING (CSEC)	LABOR TRAFFICKING	LABOR TRAFFICKING BY FORCED CRIMINALITY
Controlling work/living environment (secured facility and threats/violence to self or others)	X	X	X
Fearful of individuals or organized group (i.e. employer, family, intimate partner, cult, gang)	X	X	X
Communication with outside supports is restricted, controlled, or monitored	X	X	X
Lives at worksite (with employer or other employees)		X	
Living with people who are not parents or guardians, and/or whose relationship is unclear	X	X	X
Money is controlled by someone else or youth does not receive promised earnings	X	X	X
Protective of individuals or organized group (i.e. employer, family, intimate partner, cult, gang)	X	X	X
Romantic or inappropriate relationships with older adults	X	X	X
Secrecy regarding intimate partners, family, friends, associates	X	X	X
Spends time in areas associated with CSE	X		X
Ties to gangs, drugs or previous criminal activity	X		X
Unattended at night	X	X	X
Owes a debt to someone they are "working for"		X	X

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS (AS DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE)			
Can't move freely or at will and/or isolated from family and friends	X	X	X
Concern or anxiety about paying a debt for themselves or a family member	X	X	X
Unusual or advanced knowledge of sexual fetishes or BDSM at a young age	X		
Explanation of work situation is scripted or contradictory	X	X	X
Fearful to answer questions	X	X	X
Frequent moves or uncertainty of home address, city, or location	X	X	X
Frequently missing or away from home, placement and/or school	X	X	X
Not in control of identification or important documents	X	X	
Missing school because they "must work"	X	X	X
Unexplained or non-consensual travel	X	X	X

Indicators not intended for use in direct conversations with youth. Instead, they should guide further screening or assessment. No single indicator is typically sufficient to determine trafficking.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS (AS DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE) CONTINUED	SEX TRAFFICKING (CSEC)	LABOR TRAFFICKING	LABOR TRAFFICKING BY FORCED CRIMINALITY
Unsure of day, month, year or location	X	X	X
Uses slang/shared language referencing exploitation	X		X
Someone else speaks for them, translates - not allowed to communicate directly	X	X	X

PHYSICAL & HEALTH INDICATORS			
Clothing inconsistent for age, weather or context	X	X	X
Denied medical treatment or access to health care	X	X	X
Exhaustion from working long hours or lack of sleep	X	X	X
Malnutrition, signs of hunger or food deprivation	X	X	X
Multiple cell phones and/or social media accounts under different names	X		X
Occupational injuries caused by exposure to chemicals, hazardous waste or machinery		X	
Recurrent STI or UTIs, urologic and reproductive conditions	X		
Multiple pregnancies or abortions	X		
Ritualistic abuse or mind control within shared ideology or religion	X	X	X
Self-harm or suicidal ideation	X	X	X
Sexually explicit images exchanged via messaging, gaming, social media accounts	X		
Signs of complex trauma & dissociation	X	X	X
Abuse & Neglect: emotional, financial, physical, sexual, spiritual &/or tech-facilitated	X	X	X
Sudden onset or increase in substance use or forced drug use	X	X	X
Tattoo Branding	X		X
Unexplained bruises, burns, cuts or visible physical trauma	X	X	X
Unexplained cash, gifts or virtual payments (i.e. Instacart, Uber, Roblox)	X		X
Wears same clothes daily	X	X	X
Does not receive break times at work	X	X	X

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REPORTING & RESOURCES

California Local Child Welfare 24/7 Hotlines - Report Child Abuse & Neglect

Contact the respective county child protective services hotline to consult or make a report on child abuse and/or neglect.

- www.cdss.ca.gov/reporting/report-abuse/child-protective-services/report-child-abuse

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC)

Report instances of missing & exploited children to NCMEC and check out specialized resources and training available to educate the community and first-responders on child sex trafficking and sextortion.

- 24/7 Hotline: 1-800-843-5678
- Cyber Tip report.cybertip.org

Office on Trafficking in Persons: Report Concerns Involving Foreign National Youth

Report concerns of foreign national youth who may have experienced trafficking on their journey to the United States or after arrival. Youth may be eligible to apply for certain assistance programs, and must first receive an Eligibility Letter or Interim Assistance Letter from the Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP).

- Ph: (202) 205-4582
- Email: childtrafficking@acf.hhs.gov
- OTIP Child Trafficking Eligibility Toolkit, https://acf.gov/otip

National Human Trafficking Hotline

Report tips, seek services & ask for help 24/7 (available in 200 languages).

- 24/7 Hotline & Tip Line: 1 - 888- 373-7888
- Textline: Text "BeFree" (233733)
- Live Chat: https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en/chat

Report Child Labor Violations

- CA Labor Commissioner's Office (415) 703-5300 | www.dir.ca.gov/DLSE
- US. Department of Labor (866) 487-9243 | www.dol.gov/whd
- YoungWorkers.org - A project of the California Partnership for Young Worker Health and Safety. Their goal is to prevent California's young workers from being injured or killed on the job. The site hosts downloadable materials regarding employment for young workers.

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Thank You.

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