

Identifying & Responding to **Child Labor Trafficking**



Preventing and Addressing Child Trafficking Labor Trafficking Quick Guide

Updated October 2025



Identifying & Responding to Child Labor Trafficking

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 and may also involve forced criminality.

Preventing & Addressing Child Trafficking (PACT) developed the **Child Labor Trafficking Quick Screening Guide** adapted from a tool created by the Minnesota Department of Human Services. This guide highlights commonly observed signs and potential indicators of labor trafficking. Designed as an add-on to existing CSE screening processes, it helps fill gaps where fully integrated screening tools are limited. When possible, CFPIC PACT encourages the use of a fully integrated tool that screens for both CSE and child labor trafficking, given the frequent intersections between the two.

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.

TRAUMA INFORMED IDENTIFICATION & SCREENING

It is 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.***



For more info about PACT & Additional Resources visit PACT.CFPIC.ORG

Identifying & Responding to Child Labor Trafficking



About Labor Trafficking:

Child Labor Trafficking is the use of force, fraud, or coercion, leading a child to perform labor or services.

"Work" can include formal employment, informal services or even criminal activities.

Sex trafficking and labor trafficking often co-occur, and victims experience similar forms of control. Yet an important legal distinction is that force, fraud, and/or coercion must be present in labor trafficking, while any minor induced into performing a commercial sex act is automatically considered a victim by law.

Why is Child Labor Trafficking Relevant to Child Welfare and Probation?

- Youth with experience in foster care or the juvenile justice system are at high risk of labor exploitation and trafficking.
- Child labor trafficking frequently intersects with commercial sexual exploitation.
- Child labor trafficking may involve the failure or inability of the parent or guardian to adequately supervise or protect the child [WIC 300(b) (1)]. This includes but is not limited to children who were labor trafficked by a parent or guardian.

Identification

Victims may be of any gender or ethnicity, U.S. citizens or have any immigration status.

- Early identification is key to establishing a local response and connecting children and families to support.
- [When concerns are present, consider the safety risks and plan to address immediate needs that focus on the well-being of the child or youth. Due to fear victims rarely self-disclose and rapport building is critical.](#)
- Children and youth who have experienced any form of human trafficking suffer from severe and complex trauma that impacts their physical, emotional, and mental health, leading to challenges in achieving stability and well-being.

Common Indicators

Children may experience one or more of the following indicators. No single indicator is typically sufficient to determine trafficking.

- Abuse & Neglect signs: emotional, financial, physical, sexual, spiritual &/or tech- facilitated
- Has ties to gangs and/or previous criminal activity; money goes to a third party
- Cannot move freely, is monitored, or has transportation controlled by someone else
- Controlling work environment (i.e. bars, camera monitors, and secured facility, threats and violence to self/others)
- Does not receive work breaks
- Explanation of the work situation is scripted or contradictory
- Living with people who are not parents/guardians, and/or whose relationship is unclear.
- Exhaustion from working long hours or lack of sleep
- Missing school because they "must work"
- Not in control of identification documents (as age-appropriate)
- Communication with outside supports is restricted, controlled, or monitored
- Overly fearful or protective of individuals or an organized group (intimate partner, cult/gang, employer, family)
- Owes a debt to someone they are "working for"
- Fearful to answer questions
- Money is controlled by someone else and does not receive earnings promised to them
- Someone else may speak for them/translate for them.
- Unattended at night
- Wears' the same clothes daily, or can be inconsistent for age, weather or context

See the Signs? Continue to the Child Labor Trafficking Quick Screening.

CHILD LABOR TRAFFICKING QUICK SCREENING



The screening tool consists of two questions.

The first question is about whether the child is working for someone else.

The second is about whether the child has been compelled to work.

If the answer to both questions is yes, the child in question may be a victim of labor trafficking.*

**The screening tool is intended for the screener to use in reviewing information known about a child who shows signs of labor trafficking. It should not be used to conduct an interview of a child or family, nor is it intended as a self-assessment.*

1. Is the child or youth providing labor or services for another person?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure

Examples:

- The child or youth is formally employed by the alleged trafficker.
- The child or youth is formally employed by another person and the alleged trafficker is benefiting.
- The child or youth is engaged in illegal activities for the benefit of the alleged trafficker, such as theft, drug cultivation/smuggling/sales, peer recruitment, identity theft.
- The child or youth provides informal services for the benefit of the alleged trafficker, such as babysitting, housework, health care, day labor or working "off the books."

2. Does the child or youth appear to be compelled in any way to provide the labor or services?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure

Examples:

- The child or youth is unable to access their personal documents.
- The child or youth is physically confined, monitored, or isolated to keep them working.
- The child or youth owes money to their boss/employer, the person who is housing them or the person who helped them find the job & they are unable to reduce the debt through reasonable work. For instance, when money is taken directly from their pay to cover a debt or for travel and the amount, they owe increases or does not decrease.
- The child or youth is afraid that something bad will happen to them or someone else if they stop providing the labor or service. This includes actual or threatened physical harm or death, loss of housing and blackmail.
- The child or youth has been threatened with legal consequences, such as arrest, immigration, enforcement actions, reports to child protection or civil actions.
- The child or youth is providing labor or services due to a false promise of a benefit such as pay, education, immigration status or a better life.
- The child or youth is missing school because someone is requiring them to work.
- The child or youth is being pressured through an close emotional or familial relationship to provide labor or services that go beyond typical roles and responsibilities.

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](#)

”

“

[Harm Reduction Series, CA Department of Social Services](#)

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.

”

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



REPORTING & RESOURCES

For more info about PACT &
Additional Resources visit
[PACT.CFPIC.ORG](https://pact.cfpic.org)

Labor Trafficking Screening Tools

For a complete list of available validated screening tools visit [See PACT's Labor Trafficking Tool Kit](#) . Review [PACT's Indicator Checklist](#) TO better understand co-occurrence of sex, labor trafficking & labor trafficking by forced criminality.

Local Services

Search for local advocacy and service supports on [PACT's Statewide Provider List](#).

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 of concerns of 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 gain resources 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
- Resources: www.missingkids.org/cstt

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](https://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.

Thank You.

*This resource would not have been possible without the input and support of our PACT Consultant Network, PACT Staff and County Members who contributed their expertise.

Understanding Child Trafficking Quick Learning Resources

Page 1 - What is Human Trafficking?

Page 2- Methods of Control

Page 3- Where & Who does this happen to?



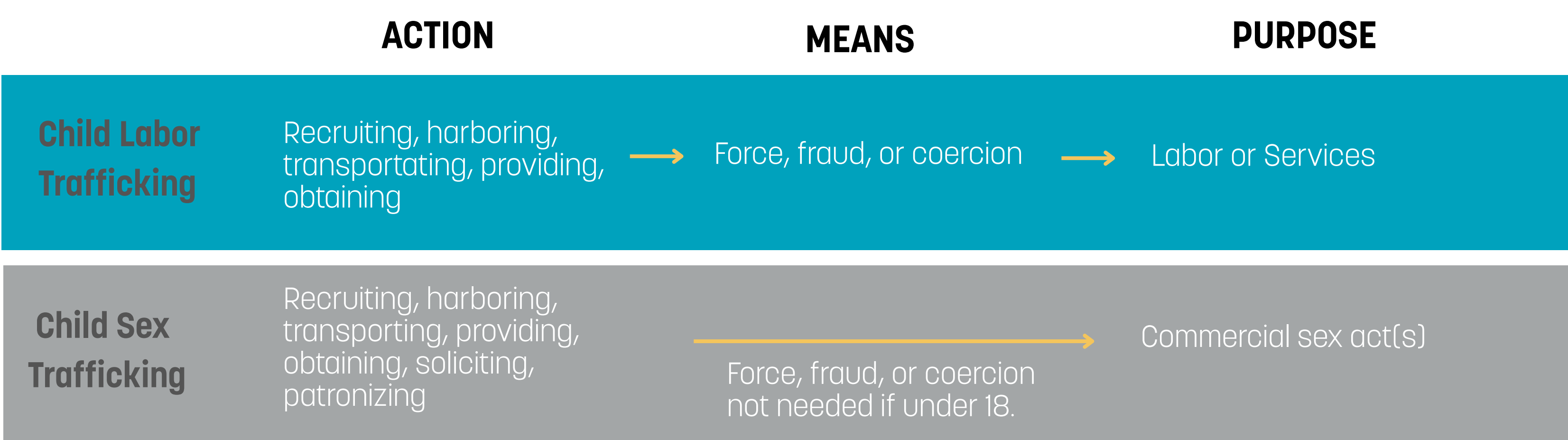
WHAT IS HUMAN TRAFFICKING?

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.



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.



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”?

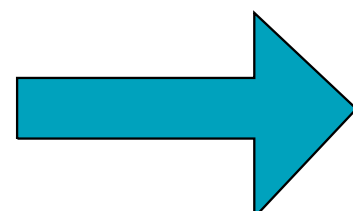
Labor or services is *work* that includes any effort where something of value – such as money, food, drugs or a place to stay – is given to or received by any person. “Work” can be formal, informal and include illegal activities.

METHODS OF CONTROL

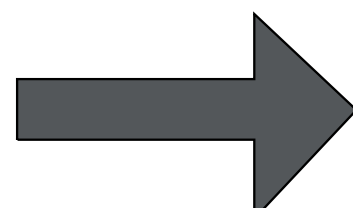


Traffickers use *control tactics* to continue the cycle of abuse and exploitation.*

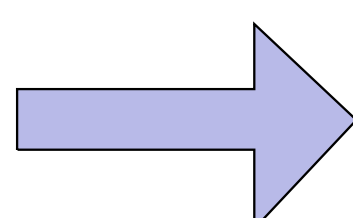
*Under U.S. federal law, when a person under 18 years old is compelled to perform a commercial sex act, it is a crime regardless of whether there is any force, fraud, or coercion.



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.

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

”

“

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

”

“

“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

”

WHERE & WHO DOES IT HAPPEN TO?



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, 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

