

## Combatting Child Trafficking in the United States – The Road Ahead

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Human trafficking affects more than 20 million men, women, and children worldwide. While much media attention is focused on human trafficking abroad, children are trafficked right here in the U.S. for both labor and sex. The State Department recently released the [2014 Trafficking in Persons \(TIP\) Report](#), which annually reviews global government efforts to combat trafficking. Although our government has taken substantial steps to address human trafficking domestically, there is much more work to be done to adequately protect and service children who are trafficked in the U.S. Currently, too few children are being identified as victims, and there are not enough prevention efforts specifically targeting children. Below are some recommendations that will improve prevention and identification of the human trafficking of children.

- 1. Safe harbor laws.** The TIP report indicates that children continue to be arrested for human trafficking crimes, including prostitution, in violation of federal and many state “safe harbor” laws designed to protect them from such arrest and prosecution. We, therefore, need better training for first responders, including law enforcement, child welfare systems, and juvenile court systems. No child, whether 9, 12, or 17 years old, engaged in commercial sexual activity should be punished. Instead, these children should be treated as victims and referred to appropriate systems and services to assist them.
- 2. Protecting vulnerable minors migrating alone.** A steadily increasing (and unprecedented) number of [unaccompanied minors](#) are entering the U.S.—an estimated 60,000 this year alone. These vulnerable children, some of whom are as young as 4 or 5, are especially susceptible to abuse and exploitation. Many are escaping extreme violence or trafficking abroad. Advocates and service providers working with these children suspect that much larger numbers of these children have been trafficked, or are entering the U.S. for the purposes of trafficking, than are being formally recognized. Few options currently exist for these children, and most are charged with breaking the law and sent home to the unsafe environments they left. While the TIP report does refer to screening efforts in place to identify trafficked children, due to the increasing volume of unaccompanied minors, more needs to be done, including developmentally appropriate screening, access to trained attorneys and advocates, and access to protection and services both in the U.S. and in source countries.
- 3. Child labor.** Child labor trafficking and exploitation is prevalent in our country and remains largely unaddressed. For example, a recent Human Rights Watch report, [Tobacco’s Hidden Children](#), documents children working on tobacco farms in four states where 90 percent of U.S. tobacco is grown: North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia. Children reported symptoms consistent with acute nicotine poisoning, laboring for 50-60 hours a week without overtime pay, and using dangerous tools and machinery in heavy heat. While many organizations, including the [International Labour Organization \(ILO\)](#), have deemed agricultural work to be the most dangerous work sector for children, posing mental and physical health threats, the U.S. does not provide the

same protections to children working in agriculture as it affords to children working in other sectors. We need to ensure that children are protected from dangerous and hazardous work in the agriculture sector, as well as review other existing forms of labor exploitation and trafficking of children.

- 4. Lack of data.** While the government has made efforts to expand capacity and services for victims of human trafficking, there is currently no universal mechanism to collect data on child trafficking within existing child-serving systems. This is problematic because current research indicates that youth who are homeless, runaways, and/or system-involved (both U.S. citizens and foreign nationals), are at much higher risk of being trafficked. Without adequate data collection, we will never actually know how many of these youth are being trafficked for commercial sex and/or labor. This means we are extremely limited in our response to serving these children and preventing the crime from occurring.
- 5. Lack of meaningful prevention efforts.** While the TIP report highlights increases in provision of services, investigations, and prosecutions, the government should improve efforts to prevent child trafficking from occurring in the first place. Frequently, the victims are children who were sexually abused at home by a family member or family friend, children who ran away or were thrown out of their homes, children who are in foster care, or children fleeing not just their homes and communities, but their countries, to escape from violence, abuse, neglect and poverty. Unfortunately, these boys and girls continue to be identified and treated as “bad kids” in our country—truants, runaways, juvenile prostitutes, or illegal aliens—and undeserving of assistance. We must review existing systems and policies, including child protection, education, immigration, and labor to ensure adequate measures are in place to prevent and identify child trafficking cases. This, combined with ongoing education, advocacy, and research devoted to this issue, will ensure that the rights and dignity of these children are protected and preserved.

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[The Center for the Human Rights of Children](#) at Loyola University Chicago works on critical issues affecting children both nationally and globally, including child trafficking and exploitation. Our mission is to advance and protect the rights of children, and is guided by principles derived from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Catholic and Jesuit principles of social justice.

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