

The Use of the Internet to Facilitate the Recruitment of Minors for Sex Trafficking

~ A Complete Prevention Guide ~



The Internet: A Recruitment Tool for Child Sex Trafficking

The internet has revolutionized the way traffickers recruit victims, and children are especially vulnerable. Sex traffickers increasingly turn to social media and online platforms to recruit children for trafficking schemes. Traffickers can now use websites and social media to recruit children while also advertising them to an increased range of customers for sexual encounters.

In 2020, considering the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, the National Human Trafficking Hotline identified a 22% increase in online recruitment into trafficking schemes and reported the internet as the top recruitment location for all forms of trafficking.¹

Although traditional methods of recruitment continue, the internet allows traffickers increased access to a larger number of potential child victims, thereby exposing children to greater risks and dangers.

According to the 2021 Federal Human Trafficking Report, more than half (57%) of all criminal trafficking cases involved child victims, with the primary method of buying and recruiting victims happening online.²

The U.S. government recognizes the impact of technology on the recruitment of trafficking victims; in 2013, the special note of the United States Global Report on Trafficking in Persons recognized that technology has the potential to be used for good and evil: traffickers use technology to advance their activities, including for purposes of recruitment of minors, while the government, along with anti-trafficking advocates, use technology to fight back against traffickers.

This Prevention Guide examines how traffickers misuse internet websites and social media platforms to facilitate the recruitment of children for sex trafficking and explores the methods employed by traffickers to exercise control and deception over child victims, convincing or persuading them (in some cases, to leave their home countries) using fraudulent promises made over the internet for their recruitment.

Traffickers are now executing recruitment tactics remotely.

Global Statistics

Online recruitment is a trafficking act affecting almost half of the total victims in court cases considered by the 2020 UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons.

31 of 79 court cases worldwide have reported online recruitment, with half of the total trafficking victims affected.³

The 112 victims in these cases were comprised of 40 men, 32 girls, 23 women, 11 boys, and 6 undefined.

National Statistics

In the United States, approximately 40% of sex trafficking victims are recruited online.⁴

From 2019 to 2020, there was a 125% increase in recruitment on Facebook and a 95% increase on Instagram.⁵

In 2021, Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook were the most common venues.⁶

Children are Easy to Target

Traffickers take advantage of the vulnerabilities of children, which can be of any kind, whether physical, psychological, emotional, family-related, social, or economic, to lure them and recruit them for their exploitation.

By taking advantage of that child's vulnerable position, traffickers induce compliance.

Traffickers give or promise the child gifts, money, or other benefits.

Typical venues include social media platforms, web-based messaging applications, chat rooms, dating apps, classified advertisements, or job boards as tools to target and recruit child victims for sex trafficking.

Traffickers can simultaneously recruit many child victims, reaching a wider audience, within and across nations.

Vulnerabilities and Online Recruitment

Traffickers connect with vulnerable youth by understanding the child's vulnerabilities and filling their corresponding needs, thereby inducing the child into a controlling relationship and, eventually, exploitation.

Examples of how grooming strategies interplay with online child exploitation and online recruitment of child victims include:⁷

| Emotion | Trafficker's Response |
|------------------------|---|
| Need understanding | I understand you. |
| Emptiness/lack of love | I love you. |
| Need for desire/allure | You are beautiful. |
| Disappointment | I am proud of you/You are enough. |
| Lack of connection | I care about you. |
| Lack of freedom | You are an adult who can make your own choices. |
| Fear | I will protect you. |
| Strive for success | I will make you successful. |
| Insecure | Trust me. |

Traffickers often look for people who feel misunderstood or dissatisfied; social media allows longer conversations and more intimate relationships to form between traffickers and potential victims.

Children who live in poverty, foster care, or struggling with addiction, trauma, abuse, or unstable housing are all at comparatively higher risks of becoming victims of human trafficking.

Two Main Recruiting Strategies Used by Traffickers

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has identified two primary online exploitative strategies that traffickers use to recruit victims, including children:⁸

| Hunting Strategies | Fishing Strategies |
|---|---|
| Proactive pursuit of specific victims (on social media, online chat rooms, or datingapps) and potential buyers online. | Passive pursuit of victims – posting advertisements online available to everyone (e.g., false job advertisements or fake employment agencies) |
| Trafficker initiates contact based on information/characteristics such as economic, emotional, or other vulnerabilities, making them susceptible to exploitation. | Victims initiate contact by responding to online advertisements promising high pay or other benefits (e.g., travel) with little job information. |
| Initially friendly → more aggressive as the relationship develops | Advertise jobs to attract any number of victims through online classified advertisements, social media platforms, job boards, and specialized websites for sexual services. |

Globally, according to cases collected by the UNODC in 2020, the majority of cases to recruit victims involved fishing strategies rather than hunting strategies.⁹

Common Tactics Used by Traffickers to Recruit Children Online

Traffickers can employ various tactics to groom children, such as building a “true friendship,” to gain control over them to engage in sexual activities or recruit them for commercial exploitation. Offenders may use social media platforms, chat rooms, or online gaming communities to initiate contact with potential victims.

Through these strategies, which often involve blackmailing victims using compromising images, victims are deterred from complaining to law enforcement authorities or escaping, and they feel that the only option is to submit to the trafficker’s requests, including meeting offline.

Other commonly used tactics include:

- 1. False identities:** Traffickers often create fake profiles, pretending to be someone the child knows or can relate to, such as a peer or a trustworthy adult. Offenders may use attractive profile pictures and fabricate personal details to deceive the child into believing they are interacting with a genuine person.
- 2. Exploiting vulnerabilities:** Traffickers identify and exploit vulnerabilities in children’s lives, such as low self-esteem, emotional distress, or a need for attention. Offenders may provide emotional support, offer compliments, or exploit the child’s desire for affection to manipulate and control them.
- 3. Sharing explicit content:** Predators may request or exchange explicit images or videos with children, often starting with innocent or flirty conversations and gradually escalating to more explicit content. Once the predator obtains compromising material, they can use it as leverage to manipulate and blackmail the child into further exploitation.
- 4. Online coercion and threats:** Traffickers may employ coercion, threats, or intimidation tactics to force children to comply with their demands. They may threaten to harm the child, their family, or their reputation if they do not comply with their requests.

- 5. Exploiting parental absence or ignorance:** Traffickers often target children whose parents are absent, not adequately monitoring their online activities, or unaware of the potential risks of trafficking and exploitation online. Offenders take advantage of the lack of parental supervision to establish contact and groom the child without detection.

- 6. Online peer pressure:** Some traffickers recruit children by leveraging peer pressure: they may introduce the child to a group or online community where exploitation is normalized, and other children are already involved. Through manipulation and the desire to fit in, the child may be coerced into engaging in sexual activities or agree to meet offline.

Commonly Used Recruitment Websites for Child Sex Trafficking

Traffickers misuse any apps, social media, and other online platforms.

The following online platforms often link to online recruitment and child sexual exploitation:¹⁰

| Conversational Websites | |
|---|---|
| WhatsApp | KIK |
| Encrypted messaging app in which messages are not saved on a server (only those communicating can access messages). | Messaging app without a phone number, messages not saved on a server. |
| Must be at least 16 years old, but WhatsApp does not have an age verification mechanism. | Must be at least 13 years old. |

End-to-end encryption communications present a lower risk of immediate detection of child traffickers by law enforcement authorities.

Common characteristic: Grooming or solicitation of children can occur. Grooming interactions can lead to recruitment. Conversations can happen with children and youth, and traffickers may gather information on a view & comment site before reaching out or after finding out their name.

| View and Comment Social Media Sites | | |
|---|---|--|
| Instagram | Facebook | Snapchat |
| Post photos/videos to profile, comment on each other's posts, send and receive private messages from friends or others. | Post photos/videos to profile, comment on each other's posts, post statuses/life updates, send texts through messenger. | Post pictures/videos publicly for 24 hours, share pictures/videos and messages privately that may disappear or last indefinitely (at sender's discretion). |
| Can have second account with different name/username making it harder to find. | Private or public profiles | |
| "finstagram" or "fake Instagram" | | |

Common characteristic: Traffickers will gather information children post about their lives and themselves and then like, comment, and build a relationship with them to groom and recruit.

Stages of Human Trafficking Recruitment Through the Internet

The process of grooming and recruiting victims online for exploitation involves several stages:

- 1. Identification (online):** Predators or traffickers identify potential victims through various means, such as social media platforms, chat rooms, online forums, or gaming communities. Offenders may search for vulnerable individuals, in particular children based on age, location, interests, or other factors.
- 2. Grooming and exploitation (online):** Once a potential victim is identified, the predator initiates contact. Offenders may use fake profiles or adopt false identities to establish a connection. The predator aims to engage the victim in conversation and build a rapport with them. Grooming is a manipulative process in which the predator gradually gains the victim's trust and establishes emotional connections. Offenders may shower the victim with attention, compliments, gifts, or sympathy. Grooming can involve building a false sense of friendship, love, or mentorship. As the grooming process progresses, the predator introduces sexual content into the interactions. They may ask for personal information, share explicit material, or request the victim to send compromising images or videos. The predator exploits the victim's vulnerabilities and may escalate the requests or demands over time.
- 3. Control and Manipulation (online):** The predator exerts control over the victim through various tactics, including emotional manipulation, threats, blackmail, or coercion. They may use the explicit material obtained from the child to blackmail the victim into further compliance or to keep them silent about the exploitation. The trafficker arranges an in-person meeting with the victim. Victims are forced or lured by fraudulent promises made over the internet to have an in-person meeting and sometimes even leave their home countries.
- 4. Meeting in Person (recruitment):** A face-to-face encounter occurs between the trafficker and the minor during which the child is actually recruited.
- 5. Transportation (optional):** Minors can be moved to a different location, where they are forced to or are deceived into engaging in commercial sex acts. Children can be transported only a short distance away from their homes or over long distances, even across borders.
- 6. Exploitation (Physical):** The exploitation transitions from online to offline. The victim may be subjected to ongoing sexual or labor exploitation, generating illicit profits for traffickers.

It is important to note that these stages can occur in different sequences and may vary based on individual circumstances. Additionally, not all victims progress through all stages, as some may be exploited solely online without physical meetings.

Human Trafficking and Money Laundering

Human trafficking is often associated with money laundering. According to a country's domestic legal system, money laundering may be charged separately or utilized as alternative charges to increase the chances of a conviction.

Offenders should be held accountable for laundering money—illicit profits—generated by trafficking activities, as money laundering can help to prove that the trafficking crime was committed so that it can be considered among a group of offenses that are part of underlying offenses.¹¹

The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) mandates its states parties to establish offenses relating to money laundering, including human trafficking.¹²

Due to the association between trafficking and money laundering crimes, countries should criminalize the laundering of the proceeds of trafficking in persons' offenses, often associated with organized crime groups, at the domestic level.

Online Recruitment and Control Methods

Traffickers manipulate and exploit children through psychological coercion. They may use charm, promises of money, affection, attention, romantic love, and an offer of a place to stay and feel included, targeting vulnerable victims, including those they perceive as potential romantic partners. They can also engage in gaslighting, threats, or manipulating emotions to maintain control, instill fear, and prevent the victim from seeking help.

Some common internet coercive and manipulative methods used by online traffickers to recruit victims into sexual exploitation include:

- 1. The “lover boy” method:** Traffickers may lure underage victims by showering their targets with excessive compliments, attention, and affection to create a false sense of intimacy and connection, and a sense of attachment and dependency on the trafficker.
- 2. Lying and twisting facts or gaslighting:** This control technique involves manipulating the child's perception of reality, making them doubt their own

experiences or feelings. Predators may use gaslighting tactics to confuse and control their child victims, making them question their own judgment and increasing their reliance on the predator. Traffickers may make promises of a better life and opportunities, including in some cases leading the child to leave their own country. Traffickers often target people who do not have strong family or support systems.

- 3. Fake job offers or employment:** Traffickers create deceptive job advertisements on online platforms or job boards. These postings may promise high-paying or easy-to-obtain positions to attract potential victims. Through this tactic, traffickers may initiate the recruitment process by asking victims to submit online applications or conduct virtual interviews, leading victims to believe they are pursuing a genuine job opportunity. Traffickers may also request to victims' sensitive personal information such as social security numbers, bank account details, or copies of identification documents. Traffickers use this information for identity theft, financial fraud, or other illicit purposes.

Through these power and control techniques, traffickers manipulate the emotions and psychological well-being of their victims and lure individuals, including children, gradually to normalize their actions and make their victims more compliant.

Can Technology be Used to Control Victims After they are Recruited?

Once the victims are physically in the hands of traffickers, the traffickers can keep using technology to monitor and control their victims.

Offenders can use victims' phone records (manually or through spyware), location-tracking applications, and cameras in smartphones (e.g., video calls such as through FaceTime, WhatsApp, and Skype) to monitor their victims and surroundings.

Are Online Recruiters Traffickers?

Traffickers are individuals who commit any trafficking act, including but not limited to the recruitment, transportation, or provision of a person for the purpose of their exploitation.

Different individuals actively or passively can play a trafficker role throughout the process of trafficking: Anyone intentionally engaged in the trafficking process—including online recruiters at the beginning of the chain—is a trafficker.

During the trafficking process, all recruiters, including online recruiters, who exercise control over victims for their exploitation should be held accountable.

Recommendations for Electronic Service Providers

As part of its prevention measures, it is crucial that electronic service providers embrace more robust scanning practices and accelerate the development of methods for detecting trafficking activities online, including online recruitment.

Electronic service providers should implement human rights due diligence policies and processes to identify and address cases of child sex trafficking and exploitation in their services and platforms, such as traffickers utilizing technology to recruit child victims.

Recommendations for Law and Policy

Human trafficking is an adaptable crime: The recruitment of child victims evolves based on new opportunities offered by the evolution of the internet and digital technologies.

Governments should enact comprehensive laws and regulations to ensure the protection of children from trafficking activities occurring online, including detecting and investigating recruitment.

Stricter national online child protection frameworks are needed, preferably harmonized at the international level, to address the legislative challenges related to online and technology-facilitated child sex trafficking.

Governments should improve coordination among executive departments, agencies, and offices to maximize effectiveness in addressing child trafficking and online child exploitation, including online child sexual abuse material and other forms of child exploitation.

Governments should strengthen the capacity of law enforcement authorities through adequate training and resources to effectively investigate methods to combat human trafficking online (at all the stages, including online recruitment), prosecute traffickers, and identify victims.

Governments should increase cross-border cooperation; Online child exploitation often crosses national boundaries, so that international cooperation is crucial. Governments should collaborate with other countries to share information, intelligence, and best practices to track down and prosecute offenders.

Governments should enhance and expand data collection and research regarding online crimes against children for sexual purposes.

Efforts to combat the online recruitment of child victims for sexual exploitation require stricter legal frameworks, strict law enforcement, improved technology safeguards, support services for child victims, education on online safety, and public awareness campaigns.

Conclusion

Preventing the recruitment of children by online traffickers requires a multi-faceted approach involving various stakeholders that includes implementing stricter laws and regulations to hold predators accountable and protect child victims, promoting open communication, fostering digital literacy, and educating parents, educators, and children about online safety.

Collaborative efforts involving electronic service providers, social media platforms, law enforcement agencies, and community organizations are crucial in identifying and reporting suspicious activities and providing support for victims.

What is Human Trafficking Front Doing?

We at Human Trafficking Front recognize that the combat against online sexual exploitation of children requires ongoing efforts and collaboration from various stakeholders, as the nature of online crimes against children continually evolves.

Therefore, Human Trafficking Front provides expertise and advice to assist in the following key approaches to combat online child sex trafficking and child exploitation:

Prevention

- Conduct outreach and education (programs and public awareness campaigns).
- Build capacity of first responders and professionals to build sustainable responses to the misuse of technology by traffickers.
- Build capacity of individuals in the community, including parents and caregivers to minimize the exposure of children to technology-related risks for sexual exploitation.

Protection

- Promote victim-centered and trauma-informed approaches to engaging with victims.
- Promote victim assistance.
- Connect victims to social services.

Advocacy

- Influence legislation to comprehensively address all forms of online child exploitation.
- Influence legislation to safeguard victims, including child victims, from inappropriate penalization.
- Increase coordination among relevant stakeholders to increase accountability for human trafficking.
- Strengthen the understanding of human trafficking.
- Enhance information sharing.
- Disseminate evidence-based resources to prevent and combat human trafficking and child sex trafficking using technology.

Additional Details

This best-practices prevention guide and publication is part of the Human Trafficking Front's program: *Putting an End to the Online Sexual Exploitation of Children: Preventing Victimization and Strengthening Child Protection Systems*.*

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- ¹¹ UNODC. (2009). *Anti-human trafficking manual for criminal justice practitioners: Module 1*. United Nations. https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/TIP_module1_Ebook.pdf.
- ¹² See United Nations General Assembly. (2000). United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, Article 6, paras. 1 and 2. According to article 6, paragraph 2 (a), states parties shall seek to apply the money-laundering provisions to the “widest range of predicate offences,” including therefore to offences of the Convention itself and the Protocols, if the state has become a party, and also, to all “serious crime” (art. 6, para. 2 (b)) as defined by the Convention.

Human Trafficking Front is a non-profit organization with 501(c)(3) status with the IRS, committed to eliminating all forms of slavery and human trafficking, especially of women and children. Human Trafficking Front works to end these forms of exploitation by equipping professionals with best practices, empowering communities to be less vulnerable to exploitation, and promoting more effective implementation of legal and policy frameworks that address prevention and protection. Human Trafficking Front is under the leadership of Dr. Beatriz Susana Utts, who is the author of the book, [Sex Trafficking of Children Online: Modern Slavery in Cyberspace](#). For further information see: www.humantraffickingfront.org.

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