

Child Sex Trafficking On-Ramps and Off-Ramps Fact Sheet

The following themes were developed through a roundtable discussion of 39 stakeholders who provided training and/or technical assistance on child sexual exploitation, youth interventions across the country, and youth survivors.



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Foundation**

Factors That Act as On-Ramps to Child-Sex Trafficking



Poverty and Its Effects

- A need for money to afford food, rent, and other necessities is often the impetus for exploitation of children who are trafficked by their families or made more vulnerable to manipulation, especially if unaccompanied.
- Poverty also interacts with other social structures to create additional on-ramps, such as poverty acting as a barrier to health care or the cost of immigrating to the United States creating debt for people who are undocumented.

Immigration

- Immigration poses direct and indirect on-ramps as many undocumented immigrants are uniquely vulnerable to the coercive tactics used to recruit people and keep them ensnared in sex trafficking.
- Immigrants face myriad structural inequalities that interact and combine with the previously mentioned on-ramps. Many undocumented immigrants experienced poverty and/or community violence in the countries where they were born. Depending on the immigration route, they may have faced further violence or become deeply indebted to those who smuggled them across the border. Once they arrive in the United States they may face profound social isolation and vulnerability to exploitation due to their fears of deportation and limited English proficiency.





Adverse Childhood Experiences, Historical Trauma, Lack of Parental Involvement, and Discrimination

- Youths' experience of physical abuse, sexual abuse, family rejection, and caregiver substance use are all described as on-ramps to child sex trafficking.
- Experiences of discrimination, particularly historical and generational histories of trauma and racism, homophobia, and misogyny are not only direct on-ramps but also amplify other on-ramps to sex trafficking. The resulting trauma, mental health needs, and associated behaviors – such as highly-sexualized behavior – are risk factors, as traffickers seek out traumatized youth and intellectually disabled youth who are more vulnerable. Systemic discrimination is a barrier that prevents young people at risk of sex trafficking from accessing critical resources.

Current or Past Involvement in the Child Welfare or Juvenile Justice Systems Increases the Risk of Exploitation

- Involvement in social services and justice systems can indicate that a child has had adverse experiences that put them at higher risk for child sex trafficking. These systems may also create adverse experiences (e.g., parent incarceration) that put them at higher risk.
- More directly, there are high-profile examples of how these systems put young people into the hands of traffickers, including meeting traffickers among staff, other youth, or foster care families.

Community Violence and the Fragmenting of Trust and Social Support Create More Opportunities for Youth to Be Exploited

- The impact of entrenched community violence breaks down community networks of care, leads to poor health outcomes such as depression and PTSD, and limits youths' positive future orientation or their ability to hope and plan for positive futures. Young people can feel trapped by their environment and circumstances and may be unable to see any options.
- Gangs, which are pervasive within the United States and along immigration routes, can manipulate and force children into sex trafficking.

Lack of Access to Adequate Education

- Lack of access to education is a social determinant of many poor health outcomes, and it can also be an on-ramp to sex trafficking. Schools often do not meet the educational needs of young people who fall behind academically and the education system does not identify and properly provide services to these young people. Inadequate education becomes an on-ramp for young people who are not receiving quality individualized education.

Social Isolation and Manipulation Through Relationships and/or Social Media

- Social isolation deprives youth of friendship, love, care, and acceptance making youth more vulnerable to manipulations by family, friends, and other individuals, including those online.
- Isolation from family and friends makes young people desperate for a sense of belonging. This need can create an increased dependence on social media for connection and support. Traffickers and abusers who recognize vulnerabilities and prey on their basic human needs use social media as a tool to exploit them and ensure they cannot escape.



Factors To Identify, Build, and Maintain Off-Ramps



Facilitate Access to Services that Build Economic Empowerment and Offer Assistance with Employment, Housing, and Benefits

- Poverty can limit a family's or an individual's ability to fulfill their fundamental physiological and safety needs like food, water, and shelter. Therefore economic empowerment is a critical prevention and intervention tool. Examples include employment services and reconnection to educational resources.
- Sex trafficking intervention must include a housing-first model. Safe shelter is a fundamental physiological need and assistance with housing for youth and families can prevent opportunities for manipulation and coercion – providing a foundation for success in exiting sex trafficking.

Cultivate Trauma-Responsive Systems and Communities to Help Youth Heal from Their Experiences

- Provide training and education to social workers, attorneys, foster parents, service providers, judges, and probation officers across the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. Ensure that the systems have the knowledge needed to be trauma-responsive and to promote healing.

Offer Culturally Appropriate Diversion Programs

- Diversion programs help youth recover without introducing them to the juvenile justice system and limit their exposure to additional on-ramps.
- Diversion programs can keep young people who are survivors of sex trafficking out of detention centers and connected to community-based teams and service providers. Specialized teams should be composed of social workers trained to deal with the high levels of trauma. These teams should also have limited caseloads. Diversion program practitioners must also be trained in cultural humility, be welcoming to LGBTQIA+ youth, and be a constant source of empathy and support allowing youth to feel a level of consistency and safety.





Communities of Support

- Community-based resources for treatment are critical components of building the off-ramps to child sex trafficking. These resources include counseling, family support groups, and reproductive and general health services. Programs must be culturally and linguistically appropriate and trauma-informed. Communities of support facilitate youth building healthy relationships and healing from their trauma.

Positive Relationship Formation with Survivor Mentors and Peer Supports

- Survivor mentors and peer supports provide youth with opportunities to learn from other survivors who have succeeded after escaping sex trafficking.
- To be successful off-ramps, support and services must incorporate the voice and leadership of survivors. Survivor leaders are not only uniquely positioned to ensure services meet the needs of young people, they also serve as real-world examples that exiting sex trafficking is possible. Furthermore, youth need to be given the opportunity to build healthy, stable, and trustworthy relationships with peers and mentors who have had shared experiences.

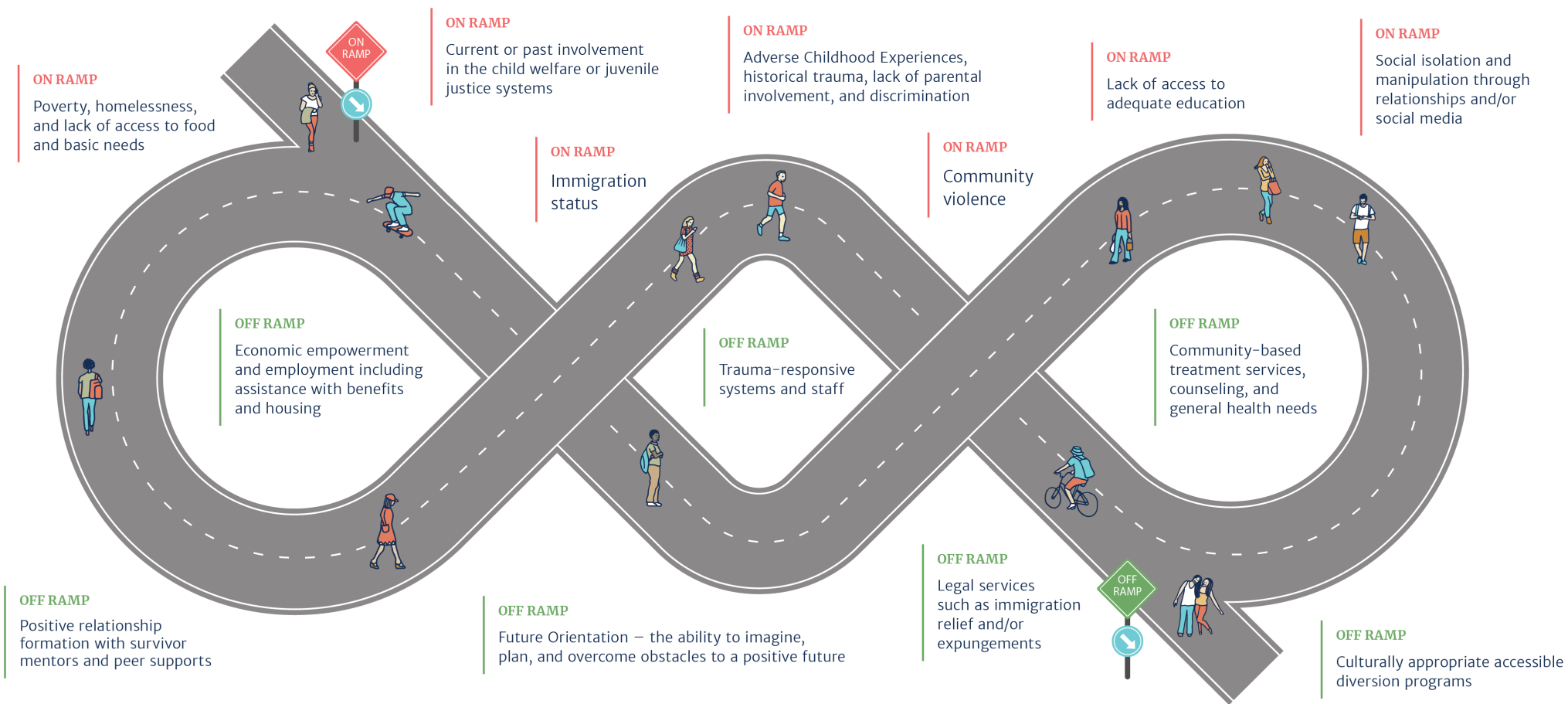
Inspire Each Child's Future Orientation

- A young person's ability to imagine, hope, plan, and overcome obstacles allows them to plan for a successful future and exit sex trafficking.
- Empower survivors and provide space for them to develop skills, lead programs, build new self-concepts, and create their own plans for their futures.

Offer Legal Services

- The system must also adapt to provide the legal services that survivors need in order to access the off-ramps of child sex trafficking, including records sealing, expungement, vacatur, and support in obtaining visas and other immigration relief. These legal services ensure young people are not viewed as criminals but as survivors of crime. This helps build faith in the court system as a place that helps survivors. Immigration protections offer a critical off-ramp to child sex trafficking as immigration relief provides young immigrant children with the opportunity to work and live without fear of deportation.

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Children across the U.S. are being manipulated, coerced, and forced by family members, friends, partners, and individuals, including those on the internet, to exchange sex. Child sex trafficking occurs within various systems and community-level factors that create on-ramps where young people are exploited, but there are also solutions and off-ramps in those systems and communities.

