

# Sex Trafficking of Minors



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## KEYWORDS

- Domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST)
- Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) • Sexual abuse
- Sexual exploitation • Sexually transmitted infection (STI)

## KEY POINTS

- Youth involved in domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) have serious immediate and long-term physical and mental health consequences.
- A coordinated multidisciplinary team response is needed.
- Standardized national medical protocols for DMST youth are needed to improve the prevention, identification, and effective interventions (medical and service provisions).

## DEFINITIONS

### *Sex Trafficking*

Sex trafficking is an increasingly recognized global health crisis affecting every country and region in the world. By definition, sex trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in exchange for anything of value, by means of threat, force, fraud, or coercion.<sup>1</sup> Survivors include adults, adolescents, and children. The International Labor Organization estimates that 2.5 million adults and children are at risk for trafficking worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

### *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children*

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is sex trafficking of children and is defined as the engagement of minors (<18 years of age) in sexual acts for items of value (eg, food, shelter, drugs, money). The identification of minors as victims does

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not require evidence of threat, force, fraud, or coercion.<sup>1,3</sup> Within this definition, sexual acts are broadly defined to include street-based and Internet-based sex, escorting, stripping, pornography, or any act completed for sexual purposes in any venue.<sup>3</sup>

CSEC occurs both internationally (international sex trafficking) and domestically (domestic minor sex trafficking [DMST]). These adolescents can be trafficked across national borders (transnational trafficking), or within a country, a state, or even within a single neighborhood.<sup>3</sup> Until recently, human trafficking and CSEC have been perceived to be problems that occur in other countries, or involving the trafficking of international minors when it occurs within the United States.<sup>4</sup> However, over the last several years there has been increasing recognition of a previously unidentified population of children who are US citizens or residents living in and sex trafficked within the United States; this is known as DMST.

### ***Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking***

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As a subset of CSEC, DMST specifically involves US citizens or legal residents victimized within US borders.<sup>3</sup> It is conservatively estimated that approximately 150,000 to 300,000 US children are at risk for commercial sexual exploitation each year.<sup>5,6</sup> These minors have not been brought from other countries for the purpose of commercial sex acts, and are therefore not survivors of international sex trafficking.<sup>7</sup> This distinction is important as survivors of domestic sex trafficking differ significantly from survivors of international sex trafficking, including a higher association with poorer health outcomes (physical injuries, sexually transmitted infections [STIs]), histories of child physical and/or sexual abuse, alcohol/drug addiction, and reported suicidal ideations for domestic survivors.<sup>8</sup> This article focuses on issues related to DMST within the United States.

Minors involved in the commercial sex trade may erroneously be referred to as child prostitutes. The use of this terminology frames youth as criminals instead of correctly identifying them as vulnerable youth in need of support and services.<sup>7</sup> With greater awareness of this issue, there will continue to be an appropriate shift away from the disparaging paradigm of juvenile delinquent behavior to a conception of involved youth as survivors of child sexual abuse.

## **RISK**

### ***Epidemiology***

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Obtaining accurate figures for the prevalence and incidence of sex trafficking has been challenging given the hidden nature of these crimes, survivors denying involvement, lack of collaboration across multiple disciplines, and the application of different definitions and laws.<sup>3</sup> The incidence of DMST is thought to be underreported, similar to cases of child sex abuse, and in particular there is a paucity of reporting by male survivors.<sup>3,7</sup> Accurate identification may improve with a uniform approach to this problem across the country, including more frequent screening, especially in high-risk populations.

In general, all adolescents are at risk of attempted recruitment because the average age of entry into the commercial sex industry is reported to be 12 to 16 years.<sup>5,9</sup>

### ***Normative Adolescent Psychosocial Development***

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Normal adolescent development involves the progression of independence from parents; peer relationships; sexual experimentation; intellectual advancement from concrete to abstract thinking; in combination with impulsivity, risk-taking behaviors, and a sense of invulnerability.<sup>10</sup> Traffickers prey on these normal adolescent vulnerabilities, thereby placing all adolescents at risk for DMST recruitment and subsequent involvement.

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