

What is Child Trafficking

Every year, thousands of children are trafficked around the world. While the exact numbers are difficult to measure, the reality is undeniable: child trafficking is a global crisis. Children are among the most vulnerable, and the consequences — both immediate and long-term — can profoundly harm their safety, well-being, and development.

What is Child Trafficking?

Child trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of a child (any person under 18) for the purpose of exploitation. **Unlike adult trafficking, no element of coercion or consent is required.** Child trafficking is recognized as a grave violation of children's rights and a serious crime under international law. Exploitation may include sexual exploitation, forced labor, domestic servitude, forced begging, or involvement in criminal activities.

Key Points



- **Child trafficking has risen globally**, with cases up 31% since before COVID-19. Once mainly tied to low-income countries, it is now increasingly seen in high-income countries too. Stronger victim identification and a real rise in cases may both drive this trend.



- In child trafficking, a **child's consent is irrelevant**: only the act (e.g., recruitment) and purpose (exploitation) must be proven; the means (e.g., coercion) are not required (Palermo Protocol, Art. 3(b)).

Please note that in some countries, like the US, this is only true for child sex trafficking



- If a child migrates independently to find work and uses intermediaries, they are not considered trafficked unless there is an intention to subject them to exploitation.

Forms of Child Trafficking

Child Forced Labour

Children are compelled to work under threat, coercion, or deception. It denies them education, endangers their health and development, and violates their fundamental rights.

Child Sexual Exploitation

Occurs when an adult or older person manipulates, coerces, or grooms a child for sexual purposes. It may involve gifts, money, or attention, but always entails abuse of power, as children cannot give free and full consent. While girls are most often identified as victims, boys are also trafficked for sex.

Forced Criminality and Begging

Children are often forced into illegal activities like drug distribution or begging, with exploiters (often their family members) seizing their earnings and maintaining control through threats, violence, or manipulation.

Child Forced Marriage / Early Marriage

Early marriage is when at least one party to the marriage or union is a child. This is considered forced marriage and is illegal under international law as a child is unable to give free and full consent to marry and, exposes children to abuse, neglect, and loss of education and childhood.

Orphanage trafficking / Illegal adoptions

A form of child trafficking involving the deliberate recruitment, transfer, or placement of children into orphanages, residential care institutions, or through illegal adoptions, for the purpose of exploitation or profit.

Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (CAAFAG)

Children associated with armed forces and armed groups are unlawfully recruited or forced into combat, labor, spying, or sexual exploitation, exposing them to severe violence and trauma.

Trafficking for organ removal

This involves the illegal recruitment or abduction of children to remove their organs for sale or transplant. Not all countries classify it as human trafficking.

The UN Definition

The UN Palermo Protocol defines child trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation.

Why Children Are at Risk?

Children are particularly vulnerable to trafficking because they rely on adults for safety and support —yet many lack stable protection. Poverty, family breakdown, and past trauma heighten their risk, while conflict, economic hardship, and disasters expose even more children to danger. Traffickers deliberately exploit this dependence and absence of protection.

Key Numbers



In 2022, children accounted for 38% of identified victims worldwide (22% girls, and 16% boys).



Children are more likely than adults to be trafficked by family members. In 40% of identified cases, traffickers are relatives.



In Central America, the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, and North Africa, children represent the highest share of detected victims at approximately 60%.

UNDOC (2024), Trafficking in Persons
JTIP Report (2024)

Who is Most at Risk?

While any child can be a victim, certain situations expose them to trafficking risks:

- Crisis and Displacement
- Poverty and Discrimination
- Dysfunctional Family Environments
- Social and Political Instability
- Children Born into Trafficking

Important: Patterns exist but shouldn't lead to assumptions—any child can be exploited, both boys and girls are trafficked, and gender bias can hinder proper identification and support.

Emerging Trend



Technology as a Tool for Traffickers

With growing online access and few safeguards, children face risks of technology-facilitated trafficking, as predators use platforms, apps, and games to groom and recruit them.



Learn more at:
antitraffickingresponse.com

