

The Dark Web and Human Trafficking

The Dark Web is a hidden, intentionally concealed part of the internet (a subset of the “Deep Web”) accessed through specific networks. It offers strong anonymity and is used both for legitimate purposes, such as privacy and secure communication, and for illegal activities, including drug, arms, and human trafficking.

What is the Dark Web?

Today, around 60% of the Dark Web websites are linked to illegal activity. As per the 2023 data, the Dark Web attracted approximately 2.7 million daily visitors.

Key Characteristics

- 🌐 Sites and services cannot be searched or listed through normal/legal search platforms.
- 🌐 Many resources require passwords or invitations to gain entry.
- 🌐 User identities, IP addresses, and network traffic are deliberately hidden.

Human Trafficking and Dark Web - Key Facts

- There is limited academic research specifically examining how the dark web is used for human trafficking, largely because of its hidden nature.
- Some trafficking operations do use the dark web—including for anonymous communication, coordination, and in some cases advertising or illicit transactions—but the scale of this activity remains unclear.
- Cryptocurrencies are often used by traffickers to move or conceal proceeds, though their use varies by case and does not apply to all trafficking operations.

Most Common Forms of Trafficking on the Dark Web



Sex Trafficking

In the context of sex trafficking, the dark web is mainly used for making contacts, organizing operations, finding partners for crimes, recruiting new “employees” to conduct crimes and arranging “services” or transport.



Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)

CSAM includes images, videos, or livestreams depicting the sexual exploitation of children. Some offenders use the Tor network and dark-web platforms to access and share this material because of the anonymity they provide. Certain hidden forums have also been found to include discussions on evading detection or facilitating abuse. CSAM is both a product of trafficking and a tool traffickers use for control, recruitment, and financial gain. The demand for CSAM can drive trafficking, and online platforms often facilitate both simultaneously.

CSAM on the Dark Web

In 2023, globally, more than 36.2 million reports of suspected online child sexual abuse represented a historical peak. Research shows significant availability of CSAM on Dark Web, even if large amounts also circulate on more accessible parts of the internet.

A 2024 peer-reviewed study of self-identified CSAM users on the Tor network, has reflected important facts about CSAM.

- About **two-thirds respondents first saw CSAM when they were minors**, and roughly half encountered it accidentally, suggesting early and unintended exposure is common among this group.
- Almost half respondents expressed wanting to stop viewing CSAM, but **most who sought help were unable to access effective support**, showing significant gaps in intervention services.
- Some respondents reported that viewing CSAM influenced their thoughts or intentions regarding contact with children.

AI-generated CSAM including deepfakes, “nudified” photos, or fully synthetic images — is increasingly being detected online. According to a 2023/2024 report by the Internet Watch Foundation, tens of thousands of AI-generated images appeared on a single dark-web forum during a one-month period, some of which were realistic enough to be treated under the same laws as real CSAM.

What is TOR ?

Tor (The Onion Router) is a free, open-source network designed to enable anonymous internet communication. It protects privacy by routing traffic through several volunteer-run servers and encrypting each step—like layers of an onion—to hide the IP address and online activity.

The Tor Browser is a separate application built on Firefox that connects to the Tor network automatically. It includes additional privacy features, such as anti-tracking and anti-fingerprinting protections, making it the easiest and safest way for most people to use Tor.

Open Web vs. Deep Web vs. Dark Web

While the **dark web** can be used to facilitate anonymous communication and illicit transactions, current evidence shows that most online human-trafficking activity actually occurs on the **open web**. Traffickers often use coded language, misleading advertisements, and other tactics to avoid detection on widely used public websites and social media platforms.

Some trafficking activity can also take place on the **deep web**, which includes password-protected sites, private forums, and non-indexed pages that are not searchable via standard search engines. Although the dark web does play a role — mainly for hidden marketplaces or encrypted communications — the open web remains the more commonly exploited space because of its accessibility and large audiences.

Trends on sex trafficking

On the dark web, sex traffickers use anonymous platforms to **coordinate logistics, advertise victims, and communicate with buyers**, often using cryptocurrencies to obscure payments. Recent studies show these networks are increasingly exploited to traffic and exploit victims across borders, making detection challenging. While **dark web activity is smaller than trafficking on the open web**, law enforcement has successfully identified perpetrators and rescued victims. Researchers and agencies are expanding monitoring and digital-forensics tools to disrupt these networks.



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