

# **Red Flags and Characteristics of Sex Trafficking Incidents in South Carolina**

*A Summary of Analytical Findings on  
Sex Trafficking Incident Reports 2015-2020*

## **Data Report**

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Introduction**

To better protect children from sex trafficking in South Carolina, the Children's Law Center at the University of South Carolina School of Law conducted the data project to examine prevalent red flags and characteristics among sex trafficking incidents in South Carolina. This data analysis was conducted using de-identified law enforcement sex trafficking incident reports from 2015-2020 provided by two law enforcement agencies in the Midlands and Upstate regions of South Carolina. A total of 59 reports were provided for analysis, and 39 of them involved sex trafficking. Of the 39 sex trafficking incident reports, 22 reports (56%) involved child victims.

### **Victims**

A total of 44 victims were involved in the 39 sex trafficking incident reports. Based on the available demographic data for the victims (n=42), 64% (n=27) were Caucasian females, and 29% (n=12) were African American females. In terms of ethnicity (n=36), the majority of victims were non-Hispanic (n=27, 75%) and nine (25%) were Hispanic. The average age of victims was 21 years old, ranging from 12 to 40 years.

Approximately 57% (n=25) of the 44 victims were child victims. Based on the available demographic data for child victims (n=23), 12 (52%) of the child victims were Caucasian females, and nine (39%) were African American females. In terms of ethnicity (n=19), the majority of child victims were non-Hispanic (n=13, 68%) and six (32%) were Hispanic. The average age of child victims was 16 years old, ranging from 12 to 17 years.

### **Suspects**

A total of 40 suspects were reported in the 39 sex trafficking incident reports. Based on the available demographic data for subjects (n=38), 58% (n=22) were African American males, and 24% (n=9) were Caucasian females. In terms of ethnicity (n=33), the majority of suspects were non-Hispanic (n=28, 85%) and five (15%) were Hispanic. The average age of suspects was 30 years old, ranging from 17 to 52 years.

### **Red Flags and Characteristics**

The narratives of the incident reports were analyzed to identify prevalent red flags and characteristics of sex trafficking. The primary red flags identified among the 44 victims were 1) victim was involved in commercial sex or prostitution (n=34), 2) victim was recovered in a hotel (n=19), 3) victim traveled to/from a different city or state (n=18), 4) victim exhibited sexually explicit behaviors (n=17), and 5) victim had a history of DSS and/or DJJ involvement (n=14).

The primary red flags identified in the 22 sex trafficking reports that involved child victims were 1) child victim was involved in commercial sex or prostitution (n=14) and had a history of DSS/DJJ involvement (n=14), 2) child victim exhibited sexually explicit behaviors (n=7), and 3) child victim had a history of running away (n=6).

Additional characteristics were also identified from the narrative to include trafficker tactics and victim experiences. The use of social media (e.g., Facebook, Plenty of Fish) was commonly used by traffickers (n=6) to recruit victims who lacked a support system. Traffickers often developed a "romantic" relationship with victims (n=3) to create a false sense of protection

and security. Family members (e.g., parents) and peers (e.g., classmates) were also identified as traffickers in some child sex trafficking cases (n=2). After victims were lured into the industry, some tactics used by traffickers to keep victims under control included threats (n=19) (e.g., threats of victim's life, threats of victim's family, threats to deport victim), physical violence (n=8), physical control (n=7) (e.g., constant surveillance of victim, sleep deprivation of victim, control of victim's identification), and economic control (n=7) (e.g., victim did not have access to money, victim owed "debt" to traffickers). Social media, such as Backpage (n=5) and Skipthegames.com (n=3), was often used by traffickers to advertise commercial sex and get sex buyers. In terms of victim experiences, victims often suffered from sexual assaults (n=10). Some victims were pregnant (n=5), expressed fear for safety (n=3), and reported various injuries (e.g., head trauma, shoulder injury, lacerations) (n=2). Some victims were also charged with offenses such as prostitution, shoplifting, and trafficking in drugs (n=6) as a result of traffickers' manipulation and control tactics during the trafficking victimization.

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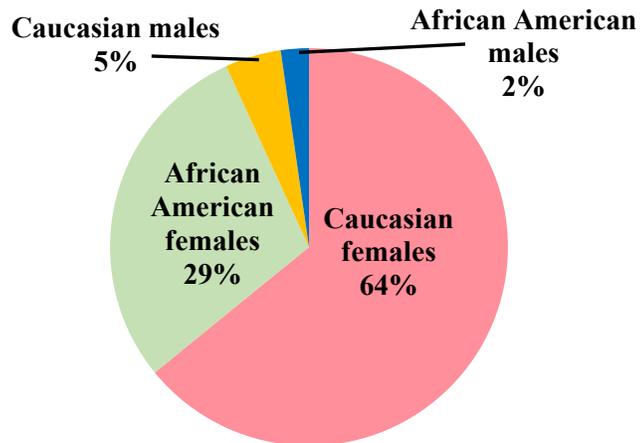
## Overall Sex Trafficking Incident Reports Findings

### Introduction

- Total number of incident reports received: n=59
  - Sex trafficking incident reports: n=39 (66%)
  - Non-sex trafficking incident reports (after investigation): n=20 (34%)
- Hotels/motels were the most common incident report locations (n=14), followed by residences/homes (n=10)

### Victims

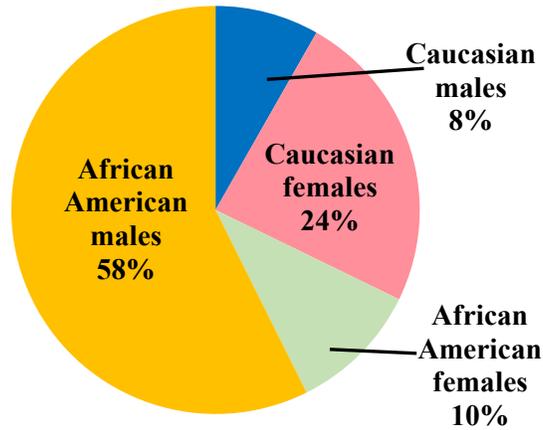
- Total number of victims: n=44
- Victim race and gender (available data n=42): 27 were Caucasian females, followed by 12 African American females, 2 Caucasian males, and 1 African American male



- Victim ethnicity (available data n=36): 9 (25%) were Hispanic and 27 (75%) were non-Hispanic
- Victim age: The average age was 21 years old, ranging from 12 to 40 years
- Victim state: The majority of victims in the incident reports were from South Carolina (n=35)

## Suspects

- Total number of suspects: n=40
- Suspect race and gender (available data n=38): 22 were African American males, followed by 9 Caucasian females, 4 African American females, and 3 Caucasian males.



- Suspect ethnicity (available data n=33): 5 (15%) were Hispanic and 28 (85%) were non-Hispanic
- Suspect age: The average age of suspects was 30 years old, ranging from 17 to 52 years
- Suspect state: The majority of suspects in the incident reports were from South Carolina (n=33)

## Red Flags and Characteristics<sup>1</sup>

### Analysis Using the Child Sex Trafficking Flagging Tool for Law Enforcement<sup>2</sup>

#### Child Sex Trafficking Flagging Tool for Law Enforcement

- Has child engaged in sexual act in exchange for shelter, drugs, money, alcohol, transportation, or any other items of value?
- Was child recovered in a hotel/inn/motel with unrelated adults?
- Does child have a runaway history?
- Did child lie about age and/or identity?
- Are there concerns of substance abuse issues?
- Did child travel to/from a different city or state?
- Does child have a history of DSS and/or DJJ involvement?
- Does child have tattoos, scarring or branding that is unexplained?
- Is child in possession of a large amount of cash, prepaid credit cards, multiple cellphones or other items of value that cannot be explained?
- Does child let others speak for them, or use eye contact or hand signals to communicate with others who are present?
- Has child exhibited sexually explicit behaviors such as sexual online profile, possession of unusual sexual paraphernalia, inappropriate sexual knowledge or oversexualized attire?

#### Important Steps:

- In your incident report, detail the facts that support any existing red flags and refer case to agency investigator.
- If child is identified as a victim of sex trafficking, a report must be made to the S.C. Department of Social Services.

**S.C. Code Ann. § 16-3-2010 (7)** "Sex trafficking" means the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person when it is induced by force, fraud, or coercion or the person performing the act is under the age of eighteen years and anything of value is given, promised to, or received, directly or indirectly, by any person."

**\*\* Proof of "force, fraud, or coercion" is NOT REQUIRED when the person performing the sexual act is under age 18.**

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Out of the 44 victims in the incident reports, the following red flags were identified based on information provided by the available narrative:

- Has victim engaged in sexual act in exchange for shelter, drugs, money, alcohol, transportation, or any other items of value? **(Yes=34)**
- Was victim recovered in a hotel/inn/motel with unrelated adults? **(Yes=19)**
- Did victim travel to/from a different city or state? **(Yes=18)**
- Has victim exhibited sexually explicit behaviors such as sexual online profile, possession of unusual sexual paraphernalia, inappropriate sexual knowledge or oversexualized attire? **(Yes=17)**
- Does victim have a history of DSS and/or DJJ involvement? **(Yes=14)**
- Are there concerns of substance abuse issues? **(Yes=13)**
- Does victim have a runaway history? **(Yes=6)**
- Did victim lie about age and/or identity? **(Yes=4)**
- Does victim have tattoos, scarring or branding that is unexplained? **(Yes=1)**
- Is victim in possession of a large amount of cash, prepaid credit cards, multiple cellphones or other items of value that cannot be explained? **(Yes=1)**

<sup>1</sup> The data in the Red Flags and Characteristics section reflects the number of victims. Several incident reports contain more than one victim.

<sup>2</sup> A codebook with a total of 11 red flags was utilized to help identify red flags and characteristics of sex trafficking in the incident reports. The codebook was adapted from the Child Sex Trafficking Flagging Tool for Law Enforcement, which was developed by the Children's Law Center with input from the Child Sex Trafficking Law Enforcement Workgroup. The Workgroup was convened by the grant project and includes law enforcement representatives from city, county, state, and federal levels.

## Red Flags and Characteristics

### Other Characteristics: Traffickers, Tactics and Trafficking Evidence<sup>3</sup>

Recruitment and grooming	Control tactics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Use of social media: n=7</b> Facebook (n=4) Plenty of Fish (n=2) Unspecified social media (n=1)</li><li>• <b>Development of a “romantic” relationship: n=3</b> Met on a dating site (n=2) Victim started to support “boyfriend” through prostitution (n=1)</li><li>• <b>Family members as traffickers: n=2</b></li><li>• <b>Peer recruitment: n=2</b></li><li>• <b>Promise victims a good life: n=1</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Use of threats: n=18</b> Threatened victim’s life (n=9) Threatened victim’s family (n=6) Threatened to deport victim (n=3)</li><li>• <b>Physical violence: n=8</b></li><li>• <b>Physical control: n=7</b> Constant surveillance (n=2) Not allowed to leave (n=2) Sleep deprivation (n=2) Control of identification (n=1)</li><li>• <b>Economic control: n=7</b> Victim did not have access to money (n=5) Victim owed “debt” to traffickers (n=2)</li><li>• <b>Create dependence: n=2</b> Victim was pregnant with trafficker’s baby (n=1) Victim was constantly told she would be taken care of (n=1)</li></ul>
Advertising and getting buyers	Trafficking evidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Use of social media: n=14</b> Backpage (n=5) Skipthegames.com (n=3) Facebook (n=1) Plenty of Fish (n=1) Unspecified social media (n=4)</li><li>• <b>Word of mouth: n=2</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Evidence collected in incident locations: n=3</b> Condoms, lube commonly used in sexual encounters, and large amounts of cash in vehicle (n=1) Receipts of travel (n=1) Sheet of paper with phone numbers and figures for sex acts (n=1)</li></ul>

<sup>3</sup> The narrative of the incident reports was analyzed to identify prevalent characteristics of sex trafficking that were not included in the codebook adapted from the Child Sex Trafficking Flagging Tool for Law Enforcement.

## Red Flags and Characteristics

### Other Characteristics: Victim Experiences

<b>Identification</b>	<b>Offenses committed during victimization</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Self-reported as a victim: n=6</li><li>• Unwilling/reluctant to report: n=3</li><li>• Being pulled over during traffic incident: n=2</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prostitution: n=4</li><li>• Shoplifting: n=1</li><li>• Trafficking in drugs: n=1</li></ul>
<b>Traveling to the U.S. from another country</b>	<b>Experiencing assault, pregnancy, and injuries during victimization</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Guatemala: n=2</li><li>• Mexico: n=2</li><li>• Puerto Rico: n=2</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sexual assault: n=10</li><li>• Pregnancy: n=5</li><li>• Injuries (e.g., head trauma, shoulder injury, lacerations): n=2</li></ul>
<b>Expressed feeling</b>	<b>Other experiences</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Feared for safety: n=3</li><li>• Felt as though there was no choice [but to continue to be trafficked]: n=1</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lack of support system: n=2</li><li>• Was a victim of sex trafficking in a previous case: n=1</li></ul>

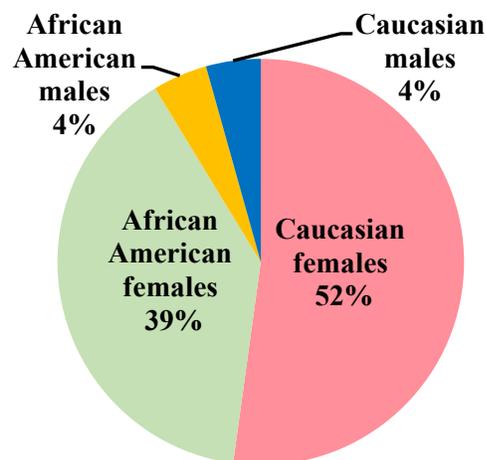
## Child Sex Trafficking Incident Reports Findings

### Introduction

- Number of incident reports that involved child sex trafficking: n=22 (56% of total 39 sex trafficking incident reports analyzed)
- Residences/homes were the most common incident locations (n=8), followed by hotels/motels (n=3)

### Victims

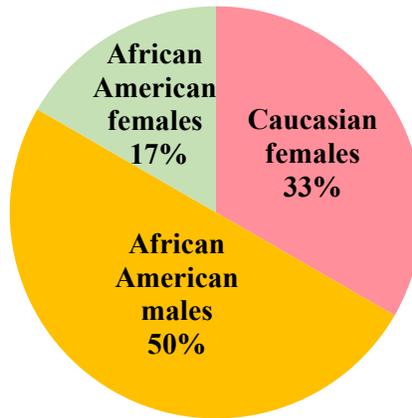
- Total number of child victims: n=25
- Victim race and gender (available data n=23): 12 were Caucasian females, followed by 9 African American females, 1 African American male, and 1 Caucasian male.



- Victim ethnicity (available data n=19): 6 (32%) were Hispanic and 13 (68%) were non-Hispanic
- Victim age: The average age was 16 years old, ranging from 12 to 17 years
- Victim state: The majority of victims in the incident reports were from South Carolina (n=22)

## Suspects

- Total number of suspects: n=24
- Suspect race and gender (available data: n=24): 12 were African American males, followed by 8 Caucasian females, and 4 African American females



- Suspect ethnicity (available data n=21): 3 (14%) were Hispanic and 18 (86%) were non-Hispanic
- Suspect age: The average age was 29 years old, ranging from 17 to 52 years
- Suspect state: The majority of suspects in the incident reports were from South Carolina (n=22)

## Red Flags and Characteristics<sup>4</sup>

### Analysis Using the Child Sex Trafficking Flagging Tool for Law Enforcement<sup>5</sup>

#### Child Sex Trafficking Flagging Tool for Law Enforcement

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- Does child have a runaway history?
- Did child lie about age and/or identity?
- Are there concerns of substance abuse issues?
- Did child travel to/from a different city or state?
- Does child have a history of DSS and/or DJJ involvement?
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**\*\* Proof of "force, fraud, or coercion" is NOT REQUIRED when the person performing the sexual act is under age 18.**

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Out of the 25 child victims in the incident reports, the following red flags were identified based on information provided by the available narrative:

- Has child engaged in sexual act in exchange for shelter, drugs, money, alcohol, transportation, or any other items of value? **(Yes=14)**
- Does child have a history of DSS and/or DJJ involvement? **(Yes=14)**
- Has child exhibited sexually explicit behaviors such as sexual online profile, possession of unusual sexual paraphernalia, inappropriate sexual knowledge or oversexualized attire? **(Yes=7)**
- Does child have a runaway history? **(Yes=6)**
- Was child recovered in a hotel/inn/motel with unrelated adults? **(Yes=5)**
- Are there concerns of substance abuse issues? **(Yes=5)**
- Did child travel to/from a different city or state? **(Yes=5)**
- Did child lie about age and/or identity? **(Yes =3)**

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<sup>4</sup> The data in the Red Flags and Characteristics section reflects the number of victims. Several incident reports contain more than one victim.

<sup>5</sup> A codebook with a total of 11 red flags and characteristics was utilized to help identify red flags of sex trafficking in the incident reports. The codebook was adapted from the Child Sex Trafficking Flagging Tool for Law Enforcement, which was developed by the Children's Law Center with input from the Child Sex Trafficking Law Enforcement Workgroup. The Workgroup was convened by the grant project and includes law enforcement representatives from city, county, state, and federal levels.

## Red Flags and Characteristics

### Other Characteristics: Traffickers, Tactics, and Trafficking Evidence<sup>6</sup>

<p><b>Recruitment and grooming</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Use of social media: n=2</b> Facebook (n=1) Plenty of Fish (n=1)</li> <li>• <b>Family members as traffickers: n=2</b></li> <li>• <b>Peer recruitment: n=2</b></li> </ul>	<p><b>Control tactics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Use of threats: n=5</b> Threatened victim's life (n=3) Threatened victim's family (n=1) Threatened to deport victim (n=1)</li> <li>• <b>Physical violence: n=22</b></li> <li>• <b>Economic control: n=2</b> Victim did not have access to money (n=1) Victim owed "debt" to traffickers (n=1)</li> <li>• <b>Create dependence: n=1</b> Victim is pregnant with trafficker's baby (n=1)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Advertising and getting buyers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Use of social media: n=6</b> Backpage (n=3) Skipthegames.com (n=1) Facebook (n=1) Plenty of Fish (n=1)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Trafficking evidence</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Condoms, lube commonly used in sexual encounters, and large amounts of cash in vehicle (n=1)</li> </ul>

### Other Characteristics: Victim Experiences

<p><b>Identification</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-reported as a victim: n=2</li> <li>• Unwilling/reluctant to report: n=2</li> <li>• Being pulled over during traffic incident: n=1</li> </ul>	<p><b>Offenses committed during victimization</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shoplifting: n=1</li> <li>• Trafficking in drugs: n=1</li> </ul>
<p><b>Traveling to the U.S. from another country</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guatemala: n=2</li> <li>• Puerto Rico: n=2</li> </ul>	<p><b>Experiencing assault, pregnancy, and injuries during victimization</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sexual assault: n=6</li> <li>• Pregnancy: n=3</li> <li>• Injuries (e.g., shoulder injury and lacerations): n=2</li> </ul>
<p><b>Expressed feeling</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feared for safety: n=1</li> <li>• Felt as though there was no choice [but to continue to be trafficked]: n=1</li> </ul>	<p><b>Other experiences</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of support system: n=1</li> <li>• Was a victim of sex trafficking in a previous case: n=1</li> </ul>

<sup>6</sup> The narrative of the incident reports was analyzed to identify prevalent characteristics of sex trafficking that were not included in the codebook adapted from the Child Sex Trafficking Flagging Tool for Law Enforcement.