



**Children's Law Center**

School of Law

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

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

*A Summary of Analytical Results on  
Law Enforcement Runaway and Incurability Incident Reports  
2016-2019*

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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 of sex trafficking among runaway and incorrigibility incident reports in South Carolina. This data analysis was conducted using de-identified incident reports from 2016-2019 provided by five law enforcement agencies in the Midlands, Upstate, and Lowcountry regions of South Carolina. A total of 2,677 reports were included for analysis, involving 2,418 running away reports and 259 incorrigibility reports.

### **Results**

Of all the reports analyzed (n=2,677), 88 reports or 3.3% were flagged as having red flags for sex trafficking. Among the flagged reports, 81 were for running away, two were for incorrigibility, and five were for both running away and incorrigibility. The primary red flags and characteristics identified among the flagged incident reports were 1) subject had a history of DSS/DJJ involvement (n=35), 2) incidents involved other individuals such as an adult male (n=27), 3) subject had a history of running away (n=19), 4) subject traveled to/from another city/state (n=14), and 5) subject had a previous charge of prostitution or was involved in commercial sex (n=12). Data of the project suggested the co-existence of multiple red flags in the flagged incident reports.

The most prevalent characteristics identified among the un-flagged incident reports (n=2,589) were 1) subject had a history of DSS/DJJ involvement (n=582 reports), 2) subject had a history of running away (n=342 reports), 3) subject was experiencing family conflict during the incident (n=295 reports), 4) the incident involved other individuals such as peers or relatives (n=210 reports), and 5) subject used substances (n=38 reports).

### **Recommendations**

Results of the data project urged further investigation of the flagged cases and follow-up with children at risk for sex trafficking so appropriate community resources could be provided. To further test the findings of this analysis and more closely examine the prevalent red flags and characteristics of child sex trafficking in South Carolina, collection and analysis of data from additional years and counties is needed. More training and screening tools should be provided to law enforcement officers to assist them with identifying and reporting red flags of child sex trafficking in incident reports in a more detailed manner, especially when handling runaway and incorrigibility cases.

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## **I. 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 of sex trafficking among runaway and incorrigibility incidents in South Carolina. This project is part of a larger grant project awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice through the South Carolina Department of Public Safety. The purpose of the grant project is to provide law enforcement officers with knowledge and tools for identifying and responding to child victims and children at high risk for sex trafficking.

## **II. Method**

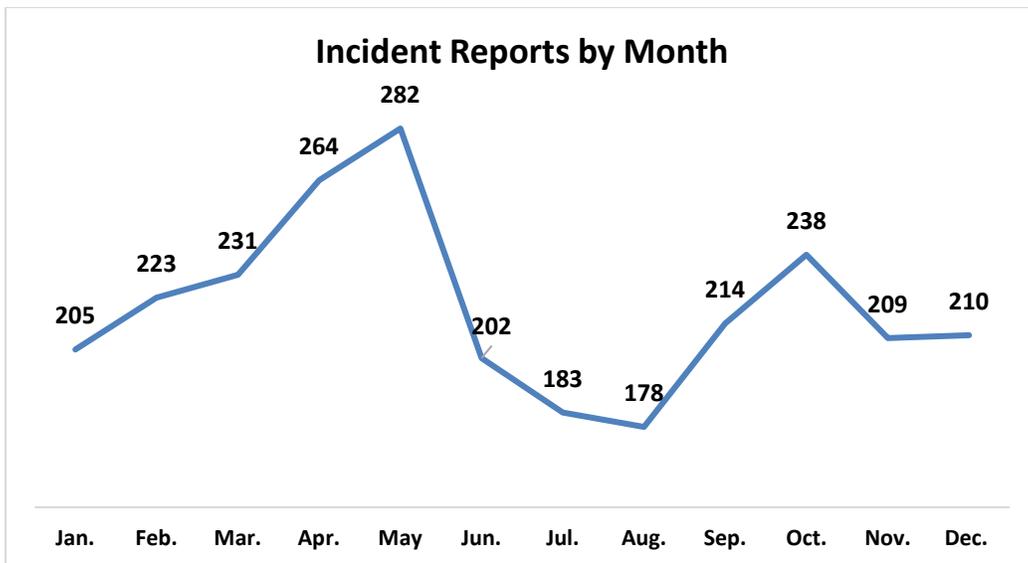
This data project was conducted using law enforcement runaway and incorrigibility incident reports from 2016-2019. The reports were provided by five law enforcement agencies in the Midlands, Upstate, and Lowcountry regions of South Carolina. A total of 2,677 reports were included for analysis, involving 2,418 runaway reports and 259 incorrigibility reports. Identifiable information in the incident reports was redacted by the agencies before reports were provided for analysis.

Data collected from the incident reports in this project included case information (e.g., case number, incident county, incident date, offense number, incident type), child subject information (e.g., sex, race, age, city, recovery status), and incident narratives. A codebook with a total of 11 red flags was utilized to help identify red flags of child sex trafficking in the incident reports (Appendix 1). 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 included law enforcement representatives from city, county, state and federal levels. Red flags in the codebook refer to facts that are indicative of child sex trafficking. They are not exhaustive or cumulative in nature, and each red flag, taken alone, may not indicate a potential trafficking situation. Data collected from the incident reports was quantified following the codebook before analysis. All flagged reports were carefully reviewed by the grant team before being included in the final analysis.

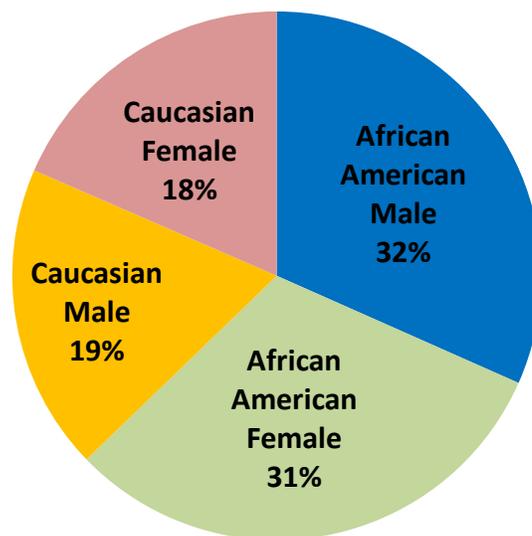
## **III. Results**

### **Overview of runaway and incorrigibility incident reports**

A total of 2,677 incident reports were analyzed, including 2,418 runaway reports and 259 incorrigibility reports. It should be noted that one incident report could involve multiple child subjects. Analytical results demonstrated that May (n=282), April (n=264), and October (n=238) had the most incident reports compared to other months. In addition to runaway and incorrigibility, incident reports also included offenses such as larceny, shoplifting, simple assault, assault and battery, malicious damage to personal property, disturbing school, use of vehicle without consent, city code violation, trespassing, truancy, and destruction of property.

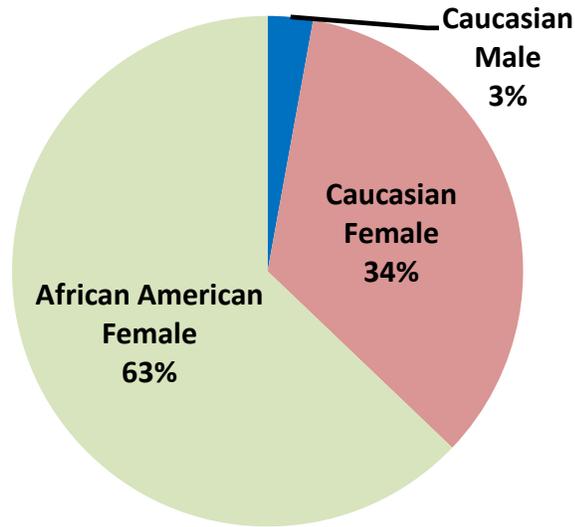


Based on the available demographic data (n=2,133), approximately 32% (n=675) of the child subjects were African American males, followed by African American females (n=664, 31%), Caucasian males (n=400, 19%), and Caucasian females (n=394, 18%). The average age of the child subjects was 15 years old, ranging from five to 18 years old. In terms of ethnicity (n=1,450), the majority of subjects were non-Hispanic, with a total of 186 (13%) subjects who were Hispanic. Based on the available information provided on recovery status in the incident reports (n=1,942), a total of 1,743 (90%) child subjects were located, and 1,057 (61%) of the located subjects were reported to have returned to their pre-runaway location.

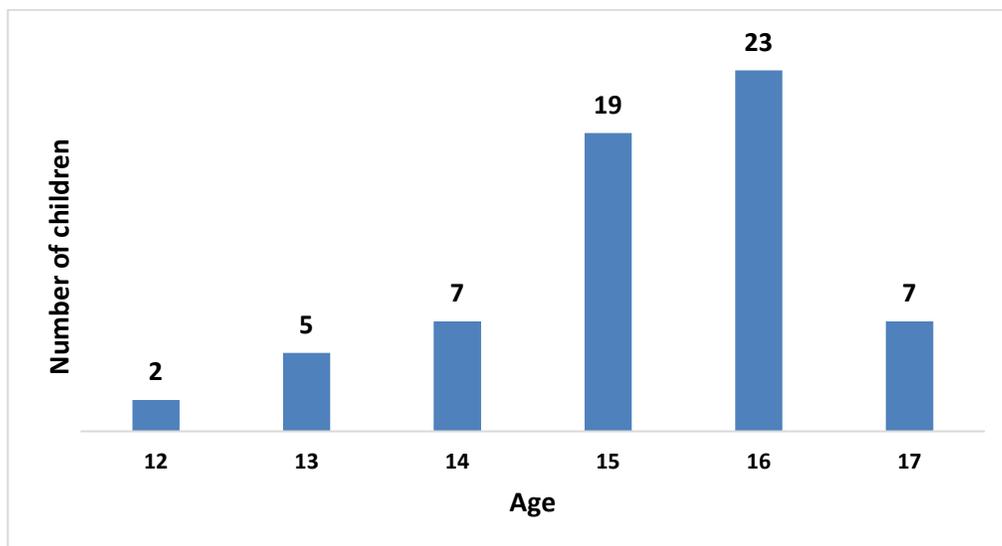


**Flagged incident reports**

Of all the reports analyzed (n=2,677), 88 reports or 3.3% were flagged as having red flags for sex trafficking. Of the 88 reports, 81 were for running away, two were for incorrigibility, and five were for both running away and incorrigibility. Based on the available demographic data in the flagged reports (n=70), approximately 63% (n=44) of the child subjects were African American females, followed by Caucasian females (n=24, 34%) and Caucasian males (n=2, 3%).



The average age of child subjects from the flagged reports was 15 years old, ranging from 12 to 17 years old. In terms of ethnicity, based on the available ethnicity data (n=62), 7 or 11% of the child subjects were Hispanic.



Of the 88 flagged incident reports, 12 reported child subjects either had a previous charge of prostitution or were involved in commercial sex. For example, one child subject was reported as being on probation for “solicitation of prostitution and theft” during the incident. Another flagged report detailed a child subject was scared and pregnant in a different county and was listed on the “Backpage” website for commercial sex. A third report detailed a child subject was found with a male and a female in a hotel room, and the law enforcement officer believed that the female was possibly using the child subject to make money off sex.

In addition to the reports that mentioned previous involvement in “prostitution” or commercial sex, other primary red flags and characteristics identified among the flagged cases were 1) subject had a history of DSS/DJJ involvement (n=35), 2) incidents involved other individuals such as an adult male (n=27), 3) subject had a history of running away (n=19), 4) subject traveled to/from another city/state (n=14), 5) subject was experiencing family conflict during the incident (n=11), 6) subject used substances (n=10), 7) subject was recovered in a hotel (n=9), 8) subject had mental health problems (n=8), and 9) subject lied about their age/identity (n=5).

Rank	Description	Number of Flagged Reports
1	The subject had a history of DSS/DJJ involvement.	35
2	The incident involved other individuals such as an adult male.	27
3	The subject had a history of running away.	19
4	The subject traveled to/from another city/state.	14
5	The subject had a previous charge of prostitution or was involved in commercial sex.	12
6	The subject was experiencing family conflict during the incident.	11
7	The subject used substances.	10
8	The subject was recovered in a hotel.	9
9	The subject had mental health problems.	8
10	The subject lied about their age/identity.	5
11	The subject exhibited sexually explicit behavior.	4
12	The subject missed school.	3
13	The subject had unexplained tattoos.	2
14	The subject possessed items of value that could not be explained.	1
14	The subject was reluctant to talk to law enforcement.	1

Data from the flagged cases also suggested the co-existence of multiple red flags in one incident report. Example 1:

*A runaway report was filed with law enforcement. The child subject was a 15-year-old African American girl with a history of behavioral issues, who was on probation. The child was found at a motel. Five months later, a missing person/runaway report related to the same child was filed with law enforcement. The subject's foster mother reported that the child had a history of running away and incorrigibility and had run away in the past with an adult who exploited her for money. The subject had a tattoo of unknown writing on her arm. A friend of the subject reported that the subject called her and stated that she was currently in a different county of South Carolina. The subject told her that she was*

*pregnant and scared. The friend was unable to find out where the child subject was. The subject also said that she was listed in the "Backpage" website.*

In this incident, multiple red flags for sex trafficking were identified. They included subject having a history of DSS and DJJ involvement, being found at a motel, running away in the past with an adult who exploited her for money, having a tattoo of unknown writing, traveling to a different county during the incident, and being listed in the "Backpage" website that was commonly used by traffickers and buyers for commercial sex. Although the subject was recovered after the first runaway report, it was unclear whether the child was found after the second runaway report.

Example 2:

*A runaway report was filed with law enforcement. Three child subjects were involved in the incident, including two 15-year-old Caucasian females and one 16-year-old Caucasian male. The subjects were in the care of a local residential and community-based service agency. A probation officer received a call from one of the female subjects and was advised that she "was involved in a sex trafficking incident and was being either 'rented or bought.'" The subject also informed the probation officer that she was in a vehicle and out of the state of South Carolina. The child was located in a vehicle driven by another individual and was later transported to the Department of Juvenile Justice.*

In this incident, red flags identified included possible involvement in commercial sex (i.e., subject mentioned being involved in a "sex trafficking incident" and being "rented or bought"), involving other individuals, and having DSS and DJJ involvement.

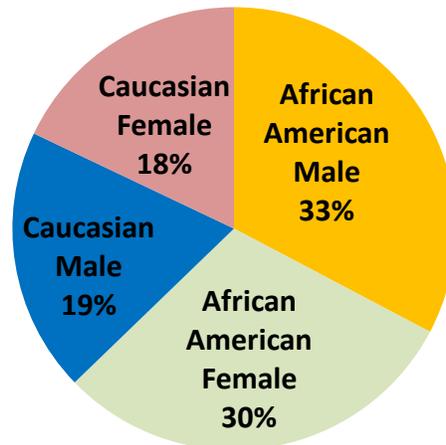
Example 3:

*A runaway report was filed with law enforcement. The subject was a 16-year-old African American girl. The subject was placed in her aunt's care by DSS and has run away multiple times in the past. The aunt reported that the subject was prescribed medicine for mental health issues but refuses to take it. The subject's aunt also stated that in the recent months, the subject "has been out of control and seeking sex from multiple young men." Someone who knows the subject stated that the subject visits some residences located at an area and is "often with a black male." The subject was recovered by a city police department in a different county after running away for 54 days.*

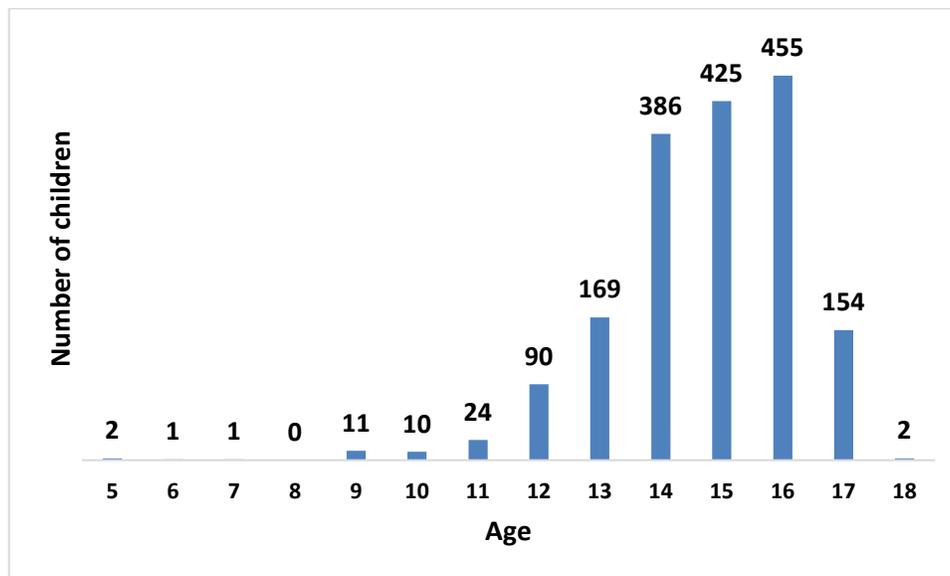
In this incident, several red flags were identified, including DSS involvement, a history of running away, and traveling to a different county.

### Un-flagged incident reports

Based on the available demographic data of the un-flagged reports (n=2,063), approximately 33% (n=675) of the child subjects were African American males, followed by African American females (n=620, 30%), Caucasian males (n=398, 19%), and Caucasian females (n=370, 18%).



The average age of child subjects from un-flagged reports was 15 years old, ranging from six to 17 years old. In terms of ethnicity (n=1,388), 127 or 9% of the subjects were Hispanic.



After excluding the flagged reports with red flags of child sex trafficking (n=88), characteristics were also examined among the un-flagged reports (n=2,589). The primary characteristics identified among the un-flagged cases were 1) subject had a history of DSS/DJJ involvement (n=582), 2) subject had a history of running away (n=342), 3) subject was experiencing family conflict during the incident (n=295), 4) incident involved other individuals such as peers or relatives (n=210), 5) subject used substances (n=138), 6) subject had mental

health problems (n=95), 7) subject traveled to/from another city/state (n=57), and 8) subject lied about their age/identity in order to avoid returning home (n=16).

Rank	Description	Number of Un-flagged Reports
1	The subject had a history of DSS/DJJ involvement.	582
2	The subject had a history of running away.	342
3	The subject was experiencing family conflict during the incident.	295
4	The incident involved other individuals such as peers or relatives.	210
5	The subject used substances.	138
6	The subject had mental health problems.	95
7	The subject traveled to/from another city/state.	57
8	The subject lied about their age/identity in order to avoid returning home.	16
9	The subject was recovered in a hotel.	5
9	The subject missed school.	5
10	The subject exhibited sexually explicit behavior.	4
10	The subject had unexplained tattoos.	4
11	The subject was expelled or suspended from school.	3

Below is an example of an un-flagged runaway report:

*A missing person/runaway report was filed with law enforcement by a child subject's foster parent. The subject was a 15-year-old African American male and was reported missing after he did not return home from a friend's house. The subject had an offense history and a 5 PM curfew set by the Department of Juvenile Justice. The subject returned home late that night and admitted to walking around a local boulevard.*

This incident subject was a child in foster care who had an offense history. While these characteristics were considered, they did not constitute a red flag for being a victim of sex trafficking based on the available information from the incident report.

Below is another example:

*A runaway report was filed with law enforcement by a child subject's mother. The subject was a 14-year-old African American female. The subject's mother stated she heard her daughter was "strung out on drugs." The subject had an offense history and was wearing an ankle monitor. The subject was found by an officer the same day the report was made, but the report did not state where. The subject was returned to her pre-runaway location.*

In this incident, the child subject used drugs and had an offense history. While these characteristics were considered, they did not constitute a red flag for being a victim of sex trafficking based on the available information from the incident report.

## **Comparison of flagged and un-flagged incident reports**

There were several common characteristics between the flagged and un-flagged reports, including subjects having a history of DSS/DJJ involvement, having a history of running away, traveling to/from another city/state, experiencing family conflict, and being involved in incidents with other individuals. Subjects being recovered in a hotel also appeared in both flagged and un-flagged incident reports. In flagged reports, subjects were often located with older or unknown people, which, when combined with other characteristics of child sex trafficking, became a more serious cause for concern. In several of the un-flagged reports, subjects were located with friends or family members and could provide a reasonable explanation as to why they were at the hotel.

Another similar characteristic between the flagged and un-flagged reports was subjects lying about their age or identity. In the flagged reports, subjects were lying about their age or identity in order to conceal that they were a minor. While in the un-flagged reports, subjects were often lying about their age or identity in order to avoid returning home after running away.

Finally, both flagged and un-flagged reports included some incidents of subjects exhibiting sexually explicit behaviors. In flagged reports, subjects were exhibiting sexually explicit behaviors such as soliciting people for sex, sending explicit photographs to older adults, and having sexually explicit online profiles. In un-flagged reports, subjects were engaging in sexual activities with peers, sending explicit photos to classmates, and engaging in other sexually explicit behaviors with people their own age.

Because characteristics between the flagged and un-flagged reports are similar, consideration of the context of the characteristics provided in the incident reports was necessary when determining whether or not a report should be flagged. Furthermore, special attention was paid to reports containing multiple red flags when making this determination.

## **IV. Discussion**

The amount of detail included in the incident reports varied among agencies as well as within each agency. Some reports included more detailed descriptions from law enforcement officers than others to allow identification of more red flags and characteristics of sex trafficking. In other reports, there was not as much contextual information available for identification. For example, some reports mentioned that a subject's parent suspected the child was a "prostitute" or officers suspected a child was being trafficked but did not provide reason as to why such conclusions were made. Some reports mentioned child subjects were with "older" individuals without specifying ages or if the involved individuals were adults or how they were related to the child subjects. Some reports mentioned that child subjects were recovered from hotels but did not report why the children were there or who they were with. These are some areas where more detailed incident reports would allow for better identification of red flags and characteristics of child sex trafficking.

## **Limitation**

It should be noted that incident reports analyzed in this project did not include results of whether or not a child was actually involved in sex trafficking. Therefore, direct and causal relationships between red flags and actual involvement in sex trafficking should not be assumed. Results should also be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size (e.g., the

number of flagged cases), and incomplete and inconsistent information noted on some incident reports.

### **Recommendations**

Results of the data project urged further investigation of the flagged cases and follow-up with children at risk for sex trafficking so appropriate community resources could be provided. To further test the findings of this analysis and more closely examine the prevalent red flags and characteristics of child sex trafficking in South Carolina, collection and analysis of data from additional years and counties is needed. More training and screening tools should be provided to law enforcement officers to assist them with identifying and reporting red flags of child sex trafficking in incident reports in a more detailed manner, especially when handling runaway and incorrigibility cases.

### Appendix 1: Project Codebook

Column	Column label	Description
<b>Case information</b>	CaseNumber	Type complete case number on the incident report
	DateReported	Type date: month/date/year (e.g., 01/12/2016)
	DateLastSecure	Type date: month/date/year (e.g., 01/12/2016)
	DateFound	Type date: month/date/year (e.g., 01/12/2016)
	IncidentCounty	Type county
	LocationZip	Type zip code
	PremiseType	Type premise type
	OffenseNum	Type offense number (e.g., S190)
	IncidentType	Type incident type
<b>Juvenile information</b>	JuvenileAge	Type age
	JuvenileRace	Juvenile's race (Coding: 1=White, 2=African-American/Black, 3=Latino, 4=Other [specify with text])
	JuvenileRaceOtherText	Type other race
	JuvenileSex	Juvenile sex (Coding: 0 = male, 1= female, 2=other [specify with text] )
	JuvenileSexOtherTypeInText	Type other sex
	JuvenileEthnicity	Type juvenile ethnicity (Coding: 0=Non-Hispanic, 1=Hispanic, 2=Other [specify with text])
	JuvenileEthnicityOtherText	Type other ethnicity
<b>Located/Returned</b>	Located	The juvenile was located (Coding: 0 = no, 1 = yes) (Apply to runaway juveniles only)
	LocatedPlace	Type the place the juvenile was located (Apply to runaway juveniles only)
	LocatedCondition	Type juvenile's condition when located
	PostLocationPlacement	1=pre-runaway placement: 2=other
	PostLocationPlacementOtherText	Type in text
<b>Risk factors</b>	Risk1Commercialsex	Has child engaged in sexual act in exchange for shelter, drugs, money, alcohol, transportation, or any other items of value? (Coding: 0 = no, 1= yes)
	Risk1SpecifyInText	Specify the incident:
	Risk2Hotel	Was child recovered in a hotel/inn/motel with unrelated adults? (Coding: 0 = no, 1= yes)
	Risk2SpecifyInText	Specify the incident:
	Risk3Runaway	Does child have a runaway history? (Coding: 0 = no, 1= yes)
	Risk3SpecifyInText	Specify the incident:
	Risk4Lie	Did child lie about age and/or identity? (Coding: 0 = no, 1= yes)

Risk4SpecifyInText	Specify the incident:
Risk5SubstanceUse	Are there concerns of substance abuse issues? (Coding: 0 = no, 1= yes)
Risk5SpecifyInText	Specify the incident:
Risk6Travel	Did child travel to/from a different city or state? (Coding: 0 = no, 1= yes)
Risk6SpecifyInText	Specify the incident:
Risk7DJJ/DSS	Does child have a history of DSS and/or DJJ involvement? (Coding: 0 = no, 1= yes)
Risk7SpecifyInText	Specify the incident:
Risk8Tattoos	Does child have tattoos, scarring or branding that is unexplained? (Coding: 0 = no, 1= yes)
Risk8SpecifyInText	Specify the incident:
Risk9Unexplained	Is child in possession of a large amount of cash, prepaid credit cards, multiple cellphones or other items of value that cannot be explained? (Coding: 0 = no, 1= yes)
Risk9SpecifyInText	Specify the incident:
Risk10Communication	Does child let others speak for them, or use eye contact or hand signals to communicate with others who are present? (Coding: 0 = no, 1= yes)
Risk10SpecifyInText	Specify the incident:
Risk11SexuallyExplicit	Has child exhibited sexually explicit behaviors such as sexual online profile, possession of unusual sexual paraphernalia, inappropriate sexual knowledge, or oversexualized attire? (Coding: 0 = no, 1= yes)
Risk11SpecifyInText	Specify the behaviors:
<b>Notes</b>	Type notes if applicable.