



# YOUTH SEX TRAFFICKING AND GANGS



Gangs control a significant proportion of the youth sex trafficking <sup>1</sup> industry. Street gangs use sex trafficking as a source of income to fund their gangs. A National Institute of Justice (NIJ) study in San Diego found that sex trafficking produces an estimated \$810 million annually in San Diego, making it the city's second-largest underground economy after drug trafficking (\$4.76 billion annually). Gang members made up an estimated 85 percent of pimps/sex-trafficking facilitators in the area. <sup>2</sup> This is because gangs perceive sex trafficking as less risky, compared to weapons and drug trafficking, and thus view it as a lucrative market. In some gangs, prostitution is a central revenue source.

In gang-controlled trafficking, youth may engage in prostitution as initiation and/or to bring in revenue for the gang. Minors, in particular, can be vulnerable to involvement in such exploitative activities, as gangs prey on their vulnerability due to oftentimes making more money from minors engaged in commercial sexual exploitation than from adults. Gangs often manipulate young women into joining the gang but then do not fully consider them full members, and rather utilize them solely for exploitation.

## Youth are often manipulated into gangs through:

- Promises of protection/Survival
- Peer pressure and status
- Drugs and alcohol
- Money
- Loyalty
- Threats of physical harm to self and/or loved ones

## ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS WORKING IN A GANG-CONTROLLED SITUATION

Professionals working with vulnerable youth may use the following questions to help determine if the youth is or has been involved in a gang-related trafficking situation. Assessment questions may be asked upon entry into the program but are best used after building rapport with the youth throughout the time the youth receives services. Understanding language used by gangs is essential in conducting such assessments.

### Have you ever been asked to go to a skip party? How did you hear about it?

o Skip parties <sup>3</sup> are organized by gangs to lure youth into a setting where they are then exposed to violence or sexually assaulted, which is then used to make the youth feel trapped within the gang's activities.

<sup>1</sup> Sex Trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery and involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain a commercial sex act. For minors, individuals under the age of 18, the means of force, fraud, or coercion are not necessary to implicate engagement in sex trafficking.

<sup>2</sup> National Institute of Justice, "Gangs and Sex Trafficking in San Diego" September 20, 2016, from NIJ.gov:<http://nij.gov/topics/crime/human-trafficking/pages/gangs-sex-trafficking-in-san-diego.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Skip parties are parties organized by gangs during the day to encourage youth to skip school. These parties are usually advertised online and promise access to drugs and alcohol.

### **Were you asked to bring any friends?**

o Many teens feel a sense of comfort and perceived safety when bringing friends to a party. However, gangs take advantage of this, using it as an opportunity to recruit additional youth.

### **Did anyone ever show you pictures or videos either on social media, YouTube, in magazines, or through other outlets of them or someone else harming someone?**

o Youth involved with gangs are often exposed to footage of violence committed by the gang as a tactic to intimidate the youth. This footage includes crimes such as rape and murder.

### **Were you asked to bring any friends?**

o Women and girls who are trafficked in gangs are often unaware of the rules or how to move up the ranks in the gang. They may express affiliation with the gang but do not know and/or do not belong to a clique or set <sup>4</sup>. Not knowing/not belonging to a clique or set may indicate that they are being trafficked.

## **RED FLAGS SPECIFIC TO GANG-CONTROLLED TRAFFICKING**

### **Youth wanting to wear only a certain color or fixation on a certain color, ie. yellow, purple, or red; especially in relation to shoes.**

o Showing a specific color may be the earliest indicator that a youth has become involved in a gang. It is important for service providers and individuals engaging with youth to familiarize themselves with the local gang colors

### **Jewelry that is excessive or not the style the youth previously wore.**

### **New tattoos that are affiliated with gangs or are seen on other youth**

o Like colors and jewelry, tattoos can indicate affiliation with a gang

## **BARRIERS TO EXITING A GANG-CONTROLLED TRAFFICKING SITUATION:**

**Gang-controlled trafficking creates immense barriers to leaving the situations.**

**Practitioners need to be aware of and how to address threats of violence. Safety plans for youth and staff members is important.**

**It is often better for survivors to fade out—the process of gradually disengaging from the gang while still maintaining membership <sup>5</sup>—than to announce departure. For more information, consult the National Human Trafficking Hotline at (888)-373-7888 for referral information**

**It is essential to remain vigilant of the potential of some youth to be exploited by gangs - especially when these gangs exert a strong presence in communities. Direct service providers, school administrators and teachers, and parents must work together to understand the needs of individual youth, providing the essential resources to youth to reduce their vulnerability and ability to escape sex trafficking.**

<sup>4</sup> Cliques and sets are groups within individual gangs for which an individual can move up the ranks.

<sup>5</sup> Wiener, Valerie. (1999). "Winning the War Against Youth Gangs." Connecticut: Greenwood Press.