

Pimp-Controlled Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking

Pimp-controlled trafficking is the most talked about form of trafficking in the U.S. Though the focus of these conversations remains largely on the trafficking of girls, pimps who exploit minors for Commercial Sexual Exploitation are human traffickers and can be anyone, man or woman and even a youth themselves. Pimp-controlled trafficking is extremely dangerous as it specifically targets vulnerable youth and involves severe levels of manipulation and violence.

How Pimps Groom and Control Youth:

One common tactic utilized by pimps to exploit youth is to develop a connection or special relationship with the youth, such as a strong friendship, romantic relationship or family-like bond. Over time the relationship changes to one of power and abuse, much like domestic violence, until, ultimately, the youth is forced to engage in sex work. Conversely, however, many pimps do not go through this process and instead utilize force from the onset. Pimps may use fear, intimidation, and threats of violence to force youth into prostitution, absent of a “special relationship.”

- Pimps make deliberate choices to target certain youth based on their vulnerabilities. Oftentimes, traffickers zero in on youth who demonstrate having unfulfilled physical or emotional need. The pimp can then pose as a friend, mother/father figure, romantic partner, or even a good Samaritan and offer to provide such needs.
- Pimps focus on youth in desperate or unwanted situations. This includes youth who have left home, youth in abusive homes, or youth in child welfare. Even teens who may show anger and frustration toward their parents for giving them the freedom they desire can be targets for pimp who can make promises of love, freedom, independence, family, safety, and even commercial goods.
- Pimps start by fulfilling these promises, thus manipulating the youth into trusting them. The youth then believes that the pimp is truly someone who cares for them. Often youth don't recognize that what they are experiencing is a form of control or manipulation, because they feel they love and/or depend on their pimp. This is similar to the dynamics of domestic violence. Pimps may utilize control mechanisms such as:
 - Providing basic needs such as housing and food
 - Providing gifts, drugs, technology, beauty makeovers
 - Making false promises of a career in modeling, acting, or dancing
 - Making false offers of love, marriage, family
 - Providing a false sense of safety and/or understanding
 - Normalizing past, current, and/or ongoing abuse.

Why Don't Youth Leave a Pimp-Controlled Trafficking Situation?

Youth are often traumatized and blame themselves for victimization. Youth may believe that there is no way out of their trafficking situation. Additional reasons why youth may feel compelled to stay in a trafficking situation include the following. The youth:

- Are unaware what is being done to them is a crime
- Do not consider themselves victims (abuse is normalized from past experiences)
- Develop positive feelings toward trafficker as coping mechanism
- Distrust of Authorities
- May try to protect trafficker from authorities
- Do not know where they are, because traffickers frequently move youth
- Blackmail and fear for safety of family

Assessment Questions for Youth in a Potential Pimp-Controlled Sex Trafficking Situation

Professionals working with vulnerable youth may use the following questions to help determine if the youth is or has been in a trafficking situation. Assessment questions may be asked upon entry into the program, but are best to use after building rapport with the youth throughout the time the youth receives services. Often, professionals may use the term “running away” when describing a situation when a youth left home or a placement. This terminology may create a sense of blame on the youth, and may also have legal connotations if a youth admits to this. A preferred term is “to leave/to leave home.”

- Have you ever left home?
- What made you leave home?
- How many times did you leave home?
- What were some of the ways you took care of yourself while you were away from home?
- Did you ever do any traveling while you were gone? What places did you go to?
- While traveling, who did you go with?
- How long were you gone?
- While you were away from home did anybody keep you from coming back?
- Did anyone introduce you to stripping? If so where did you strip? (98% of trafficked youth at Courtney House stripped before engaging in prostitution)
- Did you ever go to any shopping malls while you were gone? (This question could provide proof of trafficking in court in the trafficker made excessive purchases at a mall which has video footage)

Any youth may be targeted by pimps, who can set themselves up outside of schools or reach out to youth through social media. Service providers must be vigilant of youth, especially vulnerable populations, to ensure protection from pimps and other traffickers.

For more information on recognizing if a youth has been trafficked, please refer to our Red Flags fact sheet.