



From: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/endht/index.html>

**United Nations:** Office on Drugs and Crime

## Explainer: Understanding Child Trafficking



© UNODC / Alejandra Silva

A children's park in North Macedonia

### What is child trafficking?

Child trafficking involves the use of children for the purpose of exploitation in various ways. It is a serious crime and a severe violation of human rights.

It is irrelevant whether a child appears to have “consented” in some way to being exploited, especially when force, deception, coercion, or abuse of power or vulnerability are being used.

### What are the most common forms of child trafficking?

Vulnerable children may be exposed to many different forms of exploitation, including:

**Sexual exploitation:** this can include abusing children for commercial sexual exploitation or the production of child sexual abuse material.

**Forced labour:** when children work under harsh conditions in various sectors, including agriculture, factories, mining or as domestic workers.

**Begging and petty crimes:** putting children to beg on streets or commit other crimes, such as theft.

**Children in armed conflict:** children are recruited as fighters, sexually exploited, or kept in domestic servitude during a conflict.

**Child marriage:** girls are married off to third parties for money or social status, often as part of harmful traditional practices.

**Illegal adoption:** Trafficking babies and children for illegal adoption for their exploitation, often through deception or coercion of their parents or guardians.

Sometimes victims of child trafficking are exposed to multiple forms of exploitation at once. For example, a child made to beg on the streets may also be exploited sexually.

## How prevalent is child trafficking?

In 2020, nearly 20,000 children worldwide were identified as trafficking victims globally. However, due to significant challenges affecting detection and reporting, the actual number may be significantly higher.

Over the past 15 years, the proportion of children among detected victims has tripled. **Approximately one in every three trafficking victims detected is a child.** While both girls and boys are affected overall, human trafficking impacts children differently depending on their gender and location. Girls are mainly trafficked for sexual exploitation, while boys are mostly trafficked for forced labour.

## Where does child trafficking occur?

Child trafficking occurs globally, with significant regional variations:

In North and Sub-Saharan Africa, children account for the majority of trafficking victims, with forced labour most common in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In Central America and the Caribbean, meanwhile, most victims detected are girls, mainly teenagers trafficked for sexual exploitation, and in South Asia, nearly half of the victims are children, exploited for labour or forced into marriage.



© UNODC / Alejandra Silva

A children's park in North Macedonia

## How do children become vulnerable to exploitation?

Child trafficking thrives in environments of family dysfunction, lack of parental care, poverty, inequality and inadequate child protection. Traffickers often target children from extremely poor households or those who have been abandoned. Conflict, economic challenges and environmental disasters make children, especially unaccompanied and separated migrant children, increasingly vulnerable to trafficking.

While many traffickers have obvious criminal backgrounds, others include business owners, intimate partners and even family members.

Traffickers also use online platforms, social media and the dark web to approach, exploit and control children, taking advantage of modern technology to evade detection and disseminate exploitative content. Unsupervised use of the internet and social media by children, often without appropriate safeguards, can further expose them to traffickers.

## How does child trafficking affect victims and society?

This crime has devastating consequences for the physical, cognitive and socio-emotional development of children. Victims often suffer lifelong health issues, severe trauma-related disorders, anxiety, depression and difficulties in social integration. Children are nearly twice as likely to suffer extreme violence from traffickers compared to adult victims, with an even higher rate for girls.

Child trafficking undermines healthy societal structures and perpetuates cycles of poverty and exploitation. It destroys childhood and can trap trafficked children in a cycle of violence and exploitation when they become parents themselves; it disrupts education and hinders community development. Addressing child trafficking is crucial for achieving broader social and economic stability and societal cohesion.

## What is UNODC doing to address this problem?

The United Nations on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) works to raise awareness on this global issue and accelerate action to end child trafficking. UNODC also conducts research, such as the [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022](#), to highlight the impact of this crime on vulnerable people, including children, worldwide, and the responses of States.

Furthermore, UNODC provides technical support to States to prevent human trafficking, deliver justice and protect victims, and ensure the effective implementation of the Global Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2000. It is developing guidance on child-friendly justice and protection measures, to help trafficked children to recover from the emotional, physical and psychological trauma they have experienced. UNODC is also analysing case law on child trafficking to identify challenges in investigating, prosecuting and sentencing child traffickers and to advise countries accordingly.

UNODC also coordinates the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT), a UN policy forum on human trafficking. In 2023, ICAT, co-chaired by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children (OSRSG-VAC), called for accelerated action by 2025 [to prevent and end child trafficking](#).

## FURTHER INFORMATION

---

Child trafficking will be discussed at the 14th session of the UN Working Group on Trafficking in Persons (a subsidiary body of the UN Conference of Parties to the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), to be held on July 8-9, 2024, in Vienna, Austria. The Working Group is the principal forum within the UN system for discussion and exchange between State Practitioners about human trafficking. It was established to facilitate the exchange between crime prevention and criminal justice experts from the countries that have committed themselves to implementing the [UN's Trafficking in Persons Protocol](#). More than 90 per cent of States globally are implementing this international instrument.