

## Know the Facts: Abductions and Human Trafficking

By Eliza McCoy

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### Preview:

There are many myths to overcome when it comes to child abductions, child victimization and human trafficking—this article will focus on the facts that should drive our efforts to protect kids.

### Article:

“I don’t know how you do it,” is what most people say when I tell them my professional career spans over two decades focused on child protection. From interviewing child abuse victims as an investigator to developing data-driven child safety resources, my work is something others see as emotionally challenging. But, my dedication to these difficult issues comes from one specific goal—ensuring that we focus our attention and resources on proven risks to the safety of children and youth so we can most effectively protect them.

Let’s start with some “myth-busting”—it can feel overwhelming to sort through apps, articles and posts, so we’ll focus first on some key facts about missing children based on data from the [National Center for Missing & Exploited Children](#) (NCMEC) :<sup>1</sup>

- Fact: About 100 kids per year are abducted by strangers, nationwide. News stories can hyperfocus on abductions by strangers, generating fear of these statistically rare instances. Reports actually show that most children are taken by people they know somehow, which is true of almost all forms of child victimization (including sexual abuse).
- Fact: The most common way children go missing is to run away, or be enticed to run away by someone they think they know or even trust, rather than stranger abductions. More than 80% of the missing children reported to NCMEC are those who have left home of their own accord (even if they were coerced to leave by others).

Pop culture, and sometimes the media, contradict these facts regularly. Online and box office sources of misinformation often highlight specific and dramatic crimes to grab our attention. Human trafficking—especially that of children—frequently takes center stage in this way, especially recently. Now the repeated questions I hear are: “Does that really happen?” And, “How do we stop it?”

Let’s start with what we know: human trafficking is a specific form of exploitation, when a perpetrator uses force, fraud or coercion to compel a person into commercial sex acts

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.missingkids.org/home>

or labor or services against their will. However, if the victim is a minor, it is human trafficking regardless of the presence of force, fraud or coercion.<sup>2</sup>

Not every person who has been abducted experiences trafficking; and not every victim of trafficking was abducted. The dynamics of this crime mirror what I already shared above—it most often occurs at the hands of someone known to the victim, perpetrated far less dramatically and visibly than movies or TV shows lead us to believe. In fact, there are more than 40 typologies, or ways in which trafficking can occur, such as sexual exploitation, forced labor, pornography, escort services and more.<sup>3</sup>

Again, it is easy to go from informed to overwhelmed—how can you use this knowledge to keep the kids in your life safe? To help, let's look at what these dangers have in common.

Human trafficking can happen to anyone, anywhere, and occurs within all demographics and in all kinds of communities. Traffickers often focus their energy on identifying potential victims with vulnerabilities they can leverage. For example, traffickers may seek out a child who doesn't know where their next meal is coming from and will fulfill this basic need as a means of control and manipulation. We know that any criminal calculates opportunity and risk—those who exploit children are no different. Traffickers see their targets, people, as low-risk, high-reward commodities that are easily replaceable.

Our ultimate goal in the child protection field is to reduce vulnerabilities that perpetrators see as opportunities—but solving societal problems like food and housing instability is a “long game” strategy, even if the most effective.

Right now, we can keep kids safe by decreasing opportunities for perpetrators and increasing their risks of detection in several ways:

1. **Take action based on facts.** If fewer than 1% of abductions are by strangers,<sup>4</sup> but the majority of children are sexually abused by someone they know,<sup>5</sup> be proactive when it comes to adults and children interacting in your life, whether at school, in church or at home. Watch for any warning signs of inappropriate behavior by adults, or any behavioral indicators in children and youth that something might be wrong. If you become aware of something concerning, take action to communicate your concerns, regardless of your relationship with that person you know.
2. **Focus equally on physical and online safety.** Children see no difference between their online and real-world lives, so we should look with the same lens. Safety rules should translate whether they apply to traveling to hotels and amusement parks, or to being on cell phones and gaming platforms. Be as proactive about

<sup>2</sup> <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en/human-trafficking>

<sup>3</sup> <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Polaris-Analysis-of-2021-Data-from-the-National-Human-Trafficking-Hotline.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.missingkids.org/footer/about/annual-report>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Child-Sexual-Abuse-Updates.pdf>



their online safety as you are about making sure they lock the front door and teaching them how to cross the street safely. If you are an employee or volunteer, ensure your behaviors are just as transparent in communicating with youth online as they are in person, and always follow the rules of the organization. [Common Sense Media](#)<sup>6</sup> offers excellent tips regarding online safety, as well as [Netsmartz](#).<sup>7</sup>

3. Encourage safety through knowledge and empowerment, not fear. Think about how we show our kids to ride safely in the car—first with a car seat we buckle for them, to them putting on their seatbelt themselves. We can't control the dangers around them, but we can support them in learning about and developing skills to identify and establish healthy boundaries, listen to their intuition, and how to ask for help when they're in over their heads—at any age.
4. Trust your instincts and observations—communicate your concerns and then let the professionals do what they do best. We all know what it feels like to think something is “just not right,” or to observe or become aware of inappropriate behavior, yet feeling ill-equipped to do something about it. No matter where you are—know what to do if you spot concerning behavior .and This can include someone who:
  - a. seems to be often in the company of someone to whom he or she defers,
  - b. is in the company of someone who appears to be in control of them, such as who they talk to, or what they can say,
  - c. A appears confused or disoriented, and perhaps exhibits signs of abuse,
  - d. Seems fearful or timid, especially around a particular person,
  - e. appears disconnected from their social circle, including their family, friends or community.

For a more detailed list of possible indicators of human trafficking, please visit <https://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/indicators-human-trafficking>.<sup>8</sup>

5. Don't be afraid to share what you've seen or heard with those who are trained to investigate, such as local law enforcement, child protective services, or security personnel on site. For example, if you're on property at a hotel, you can ask to speak with a member of the security team, but if you see someone in immediate danger, call local law enforcement via 911.

As an adult who cares about keeping kids safe, you are not expected to know everything or do everything by yourself. Focus on the basics, based on data and research, and spend your energy where it is most likely to reduce risk and opportunity—not only with the children in your family circles, but also those in your

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.common sense media.org/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.missingkids.org/netsmartz/home>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/indicators-human-trafficking>



broader community. Keeping them safe requires as many informed eyes and ears as possible.