

# **PREVENTING *CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING* IN ALABAMA**



**Celebrating Alabama's Progress  
Certified Public Manager® Program  
CPM Solutions Alabama 2024**



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# **PREVENTING CHILD SEX TRAFFICKING IN ALABAMA**

## ***Introduction***

Our research examines the definition of child sex trafficking (CST), its prevalence, and the legislative frameworks that exist at the federal and state level, particularly Alabama. The purpose of this paper is to formulate a tangible and accountable plan to increase awareness, reporting, and the prevention of the sex trafficking of children. Child sex trafficking is a crime under both federal and state law. Federal law defines CST as any action involving the recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a minor (under age 18) for a commercial sex act, which encompasses activities such as prostitution and child pornography. State governments complement federal efforts by enacting their own CST laws and regulations tailored to their specific contexts and challenges, closing gaps that may exist in federal provisions. Alabama's legal framework recognizes the heightened risk of exploitation for minors and extends protections to individuals under 19 years old.

Commercial sex refers to any sexual act where something of value is given or received by any person (U.S. Department of State, 2009). Federal law stipulates that minors involved in commercial sex are considered victims of trafficking, regardless of the presence of force, fraud, or coercion, due to their inability to consent. This exchange may not always involve money; it could include provisions such as shelter, food, and other necessities. Minors cannot legally consent to sexual activity, accentuating the severe nature of these acts and recognizing the inherent vulnerability of children.

At the federal level, the United States has enacted several laws to combat child sex trafficking. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 forms the cornerstone of federal anti-trafficking efforts (United States Congress, 2000). The penalties for child sex trafficking are stringent, with mandatory minimum sentences ranging from 10 years to life imprisonment, depending on the victim's age and circumstances. Alabama defines human trafficking in the first degree under several conditions, including knowingly subjecting another person to labor or sexual servitude, engaging in activities to cause a minor to engage in sexual servitude, or offering something of value in exchange for engaging in sexual conduct with a minor (Alabama Legislature, 2024). Like federal law, the element of coercion or deception is not required to establish the trafficking of a minor. Notably, the statute does not require the defendant's awareness of the victim's age, and ignorance or mistakes about the victim's age are not accepted as a defense. Alabama, like many states, faces significant challenges regarding child sex trafficking. The state's central location in the southeast and vast highway infrastructure makes it a strategic pass-through point for traffickers. In Alabama, there is a significant lack of comprehensive data on child sex trafficking, contributing to widespread unawareness among citizens regarding the prevalent criminal activities along interstates and highways. Particularly notorious is the I-20 corridor between Birmingham, AL, and Atlanta, GA, referred to as the "Sex Trafficking Superhighway" (Polaris Project, 2024). Victims are often forced to travel on major highways like I-10 and I-65.



More recently, traffickers are utilizing backroads for transportation, demonstrating their operations' expansive reach and adaptability (Camille Place, 2019). This illegal trade often occurs in familiar locations such as hotels, truck stops, sporting events, and festivals. The Global Slavery Index estimates there are over 6,000 victims of human trafficking each day within the borders of Alabama, involving various forms of exploitation, including CST (Moseley, 2022).

Alabama continues to strengthen its legislative framework, enhancing penalties for traffickers and increasing support services for victims. Effective October 1, 2024, individuals found guilty of trafficking a minor will face mandatory life imprisonment in Alabama. This enhancement demonstrates the state's commitment to fighting CST and protecting minors. Additionally, the Alabama Human Trafficking Task Force coordinates efforts among various stakeholders, including law enforcement, social services, and advocacy groups. There are numerous programs and services across Alabama that offer victim support to minors who are subjected to child sex trafficking. Enhancing CST education and resources can serve as a robust preventive barrier by equipping the children of Alabama with the necessary tools and skills to recognize and report instances of suspected sex trafficking. Officials at both the federal and state levels have demonstrated a solid commitment to reducing CST. In Alabama, lawmakers have enacted some of the strictest CST offender penalties in the country. The public plays a pivotal role in providing children with awareness and resources to defend against predators. By working together, parents, educators, and the community can create a safer environment for children and help prevent the devastating impact of child sex trafficking in Alabama.

## Overview

According to the International Organization for Migration, human trafficking generates billions of dollars worldwide through commercial sex, preying on men, women, and children of all ages.

This paper focuses solely on Child Sex Trafficking (CST). Gaining insight into the harm caused by CST demands understanding its prevalence and effects at both national and statewide levels.

The Safe House Project reports that 300,000 American children are victims of commercial sexual exploitation each year (Safe House Project, 2024). Alarming, incidents of child sex trafficking

are prevalent across every state in the United States, representing a severe public crisis. The

Polaris Project indicates that 40% of sex trafficking hubs and smuggling locations are situated in the southeastern region of the United States. Numerous misunderstandings exist around CST

such as the belief that the victims are primarily targeted by strangers. Evidence shows that most

victims are trafficked by individuals they know, such as friends, family, neighbors, or romantic partners (Save the Children, 2024). Moreover, trafficking does not always involve crossing

borders; children can be trafficked and exploited within their own homes and neighborhoods.

This unrecognized path permits traffickers to go undetected.

Additionally, traffickers often use social media platforms, chat rooms, messaging apps, and popular video games to identify and groom minor victims. They befriend and build trust



to manipulate children and teens into precarious situations (Polaris Project, 2024).



## *Vulnerable Demographics*

Child sex trafficking (CST) occurs across all landscapes— rural, urban, and suburban. It does not discriminate against gender, ethnicity, race, or socioeconomic level. The combination of multiple factors such as societal, community, relationship, and individual mental health status often can increase the risk of youth becoming victims of child sex trafficking (NCTSN, 2021). Societal factors include homophobia, racism, gender-based violence, and the sexualization of kids. Community factors like gang activity, community violence, under-resourced schools, high poverty rates, and increased levels of unemployment increase susceptibility. Relationship factors, including unstable home life and/or lack of supervision, coupled with individual factors like homelessness, truancy, intellectual disability, and unmonitored use of social media platforms,



create a perfect environment for trafficking predators.

Victims of child abuse and neglect sometimes end up in state-sponsored child welfare systems, like foster care. Children often must be moved around for various

reasons within the foster care system. Multiple placements can further exacerbate vulnerability (NCTSN, 2021). These vulnerable children and teens will naturally seek out their basic relational needs, like a sense of love and belonging. This vulnerability allows traffickers to exploit these needs by gaining trust and control under the guise of being a friend, caretaker, coach, or romantic partner (OJP, 2024). Traffickers manipulate their victims by slowly breaking down their psyches

and instituting full control over them using physical, sexual, mental, emotional, and economic abuse. Traffickers may even employ the use of illicit drugs to create a chemical dependency and make their victims more compliant during episodes of abuse. Once control is gained, traffickers may require nightly earning quotas from sexually exploitative acts. If quotas are not met, basic survival needs, like food and shelter, are often withheld from victims along with physical abuse (Polaris, 2019).

Youth that identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) are disproportionately impacted by trafficking due to increased reporting of abuse, homelessness, and familial rejection. Homeless LGBTQ+ youth are often estranged from their family and do not have the financial means to meet their basic needs. They may be lured by the false premise of a job, like modeling, before being forced into the act of survival sex. Survival sex is an act of sex work engaged in to secure a basic need for survival. A study shows that 24% of homeless LGBTQ+ youth are trafficked for sex, compared to 12% of their straight counterparts. Most anti-trafficking programs for homeless youth are geared towards female victims, alienating LGBTQ+ homeless youth and increasing their risk of being trafficked (Covenant House, 2016).

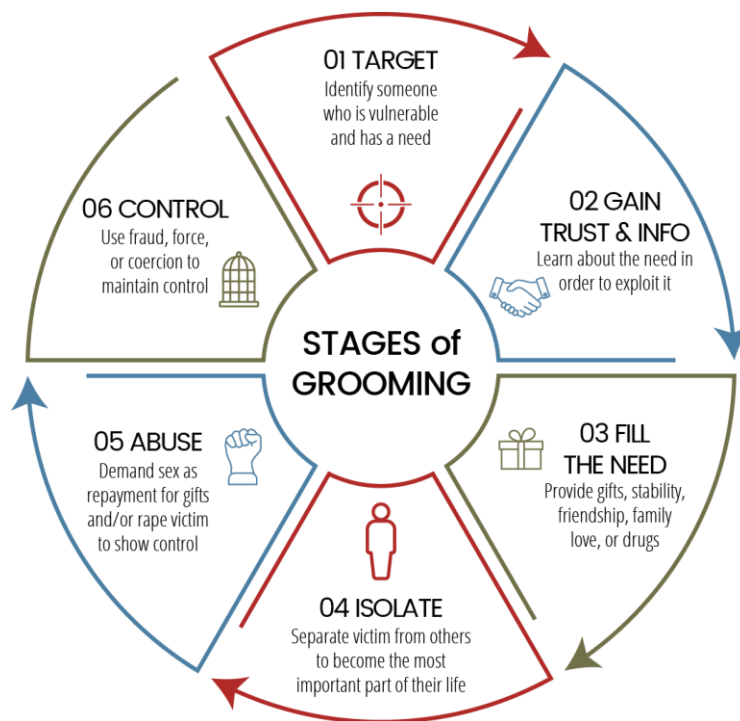
Immigrant and refugee children in the United States are especially susceptible to sex traffickers due to language barriers, lack of understanding of their legal rights, feariness of law enforcement, and their unknown geographical surroundings (NCTSN, 2021). Some children may have entered the country without a parent or guardian, have little to no support system, and may have left their country due to gang activity or civil unrest. Without a safe, multilevel support system, they are further at risk of exploitation into a trafficking environment as they seek to meet their basic needs.

## *Trafficker Methods*

There is a broad misconception that all sex traffickers are strangers who use tactics like kidnapping and abduction as their means of finding their victims. However, statistics prove that children are more likely to be trafficked by someone they know. A trafficker's method of acquiring their victims is often not a quick act; rather, they groom the child or children over time to gain their trust. A trafficker may take advantage of young children they have access to through caregiver and familial connections- neighbors, nieces, nephews, siblings, stepchildren, or even their own children. In instances of generational abuse, the abuse may be normalized within the household. Family members directly involved with the child can be either unaware of or complicit in the abuse and trafficking activities (NCTSN, 2021). This allows the trafficker to continue the abuse over prolonged periods of time. A study of 457 sex trafficking survivors found that 37% of respondents experienced familial sex trafficking (Polaris, 2023), and family members and caregivers make up 33% of the recruiters worldwide in child sex trafficking cases (Polaris, 2021). Despite being the most common method of child sex trafficking, this is perhaps the least publicized form. Often this is because the children involved are too young to understand what is occurring. Because this type of trafficking occurs within the home, it is more easily concealed. Familial trafficking can include a lack of supervision that leads to the child's exploitation or the use of the child to be trafficked via sexual acts or to produce pornography in exchange for money, drugs, or other items of value.



Roughly 28% of traffickers begin as the victim's intimate partner (Polaris, 2021). The traffickers build a relationship with the victim, showering them with gifts and affection to gain trust and control. They may attempt to isolate the victim from their friends and family by cutting off contact with those they are closest to. They may even isolate them in hotel rooms, taking away phones and any access to the outside world. They will then force their victim into an escort type service or some other form of sexual exploitation. The trafficker will confiscate all earnings from the activity and force their victim to be reliant on them to meet all their basic needs.



[https://3rdmil.com/signs\\_someone\\_is\\_being\\_groomed\\_for\\_sex\\_trafficking/](https://3rdmil.com/signs_someone_is_being_groomed_for_sex_trafficking/)

Advancements in technology have led to the internet becoming the primary place of recruitment by sex traffickers. Older children and teenagers who may have access to the internet and cell phones are more likely to be victims of child sex trafficking (Human Trafficking Front, 2023). Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat allow traffickers to gain a wealth

of information about their potential victims, including their personal interests, habits, vulnerabilities, and location. Traffickers then use this information to develop online relationships and groom their victims over time. This method allows traffickers to reach children in their own homes and communities. While building trust via gifts or perceived romantic relationships, they may



coerce the child into sending nude photographs or videos. This sexual material can then be disseminated online for profit. The material may also be used to blackmail the child by threatening to expose them to their parents, friends, or classmates. Children threatened in this way may lead to self-destructive behavior and can cause severe psychological damage (Human Trafficking Front, 2023).

### *Alabama Partners*

To begin our research, our team explored what Alabama is already doing to fight, stop, and prevent Child Sex Trafficking. Alabama has taken an aggressive stance in this fight and has no shortage of partners teaming up to work together and make a difference. We looked at many different entities and have provided a summary of key stakeholders below.



ALABAMA LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCY  
ALABAMA FUSION CENTER



### **Alabama Law Enforcement Agency (ALEA) Fusion Center**

The Alabama Fusion Center fuses information and intelligence between federal government, state government, local government, private sector entities, and the overall intelligence

community to help deter crime from the State of Alabama. By processing vast amounts of information, the Fusion Center can better pinpoint which community of people needs to know what information and can disburse this information in a timely manner (*“Alabama Fusion Center | Alabama Law Enforcement Agency,”* n.d.). The Fusion Center can be defined as having three key functions. The provision of intelligence and analytical resources to various partners throughout the state is the first key function. This is accomplished with analysts having the ability to produce information for state agencies who would not otherwise have access due to the sensitive nature of the information being disclosed. The second key function is to provide a link between the federal government and local law enforcement partners. The final key function is to provide a collaborative environment for all local law enforcement partners which allows for multiple resources pulling together for the protection of the public (*“Alabama Fusion Center,”* n.d.). The Fusion Center houses multiple personnel with various specialties that are dedicated to critical infrastructure, such as the issuing of AMBER Alerts, rural crime, cybercrime, terrorism, narcotics, gangs, and human trafficking. It is also known for housing the more widely known Alabama Center for Missing and Exploited Children which is a collaboration between statewide partners and law enforcement sharing and disseminating information that helps find and discover missing and exploited children. The Fusion Center employees that are responsible for the pursuit of justice involving human trafficking work tirelessly to track hotspots throughout the state, follow leads that could result in rescuing exploited children, and tracking down the predators guilty of these terrible crimes (*“Alabama Fusion Center,”* n.d.).



## **Alabama Anti-Human Trafficking Alliance**

The Alabama Anti-Human Trafficking Alliance is a conglomeration between law enforcement, service providers, state agencies, and other community stakeholders. Their mission is to develop and implement a coordinated and collaborative, victim-centered, trauma-informed, multidisciplinary response to human trafficking in our state. The Alliance can be simply defined as having priorities and principles. They have four priorities which include comprehensive victim service coordination, collaborative investigations and prosecutions, provision of peer-to-peer mentoring and advanced training, and to supply stakeholders with an aggregate and analysis of statewide data. They are centered on being victim focused, trauma informed, offering partnership and collaboration, and making data-driven decisions (*About the Alliance – Alabama Anti-Human Trafficking Alliance – State of Alabama*, n.d.). Core partners of the alliance include the Alabama Attorney General’s Office, The Wellhouse, Homeland Security, the U.S. Attorney’s Office, FBI (Mobile & Birmingham), the Poarch Band of Creek Indians, Family Sunshine Center, and AshaKiran (*Core Partners of the Alliance – Alabama Anti-Human Trafficking Alliance – State of Alabama*, n.d.). Members of the Alliance include Hope UNITED, One Place Montgomery, Trafficking Hope, House of Ruth, Dare to Hope, and the West Alabama Human Trafficking Task Force (*Members of the Alliance – Alabama Anti-Human Trafficking Alliance – State of Alabama*, n.d.). The alliance provides the Bringing Exploitation of Alabama Minors to a Stop (BEAMS), a Human Trafficking Screening Tool, which is designed to be a guide to informally assist in the screening of elements that would typically indicate a potential trafficking

victim (*Human Trafficking Screening Tool*, n.d.). This tool also provides suggestions on how to respond in such crises. The alliance offers links to many other resources outside of what just one organization can offer including publications on the indicators of human trafficking, helping prevent trafficking for those with developmental disabilities, guidance websites, labor trafficking information, human trafficking laws, and research about various topics related to sex and/or labor trafficking (*Resources – Alabama Anti-Human Trafficking Alliance – State of Alabama*, n.d.).



### **Children's Aid Society of Alabama**

The Children's Aid Society (CAS) of Alabama was built on the foundation of changing lives, building families, and strengthening communities. They strive to build and strengthen families through a community of expert care and support for youth, parents, children, and the professionals who help them. CAS has over one hundred years of service to the children of Alabama through three principles that guide every decision made by the organization.

Relationship building and the belief that we all need a connection to lead to positive change is the first principle. It is their belief that relationships between family members, individuals, peer support networks, and professionals who support them can lead to great change within a child's life that might not otherwise be possible without one of these aspects. Another principle is that they aim to provide educational opportunities for all members of a child's support system that helps to care for the child. These efforts include educational opportunities for prospective adoptive parents with questions about the adoption process, schoolteachers working with trauma



affected youth, and social workers who might be interested in seeking continuing education credits. Lastly, they have formed strategic partnerships with support organizations and agencies such as the Alabama Department of Human Resources which allows them to provide direct support to families in need (*About Us – Children’s Aid Society of Alabama*, n.d). In relation to child sex trafficking, the Children’s Aid Society of Alabama houses the Child Trafficking Solutions Project (CTSP) which was inherited from the Jefferson County Policy Cooperative in 2022. This project is a broad-based coalition working together to implement community-driven solutions aimed at preventing, identifying, and addressing child trafficking. The CTSP seeks to enhance support for survivors, bring predators to justice, and rally communities to prevent abuse, promote awareness, and bolster safety measures. It delivers accredited training and tailored resources for a spectrum of professionals including law enforcement, child welfare, social services, health/mental health practitioners, educators, hospitality staff, parents, students, and concerned citizens. The project prioritizes the identification of and response to various forms of child trafficking, fostering collaboration among diverse fields such as law enforcement, child protective services, juvenile justice, healthcare providers, mental healthcare providers, child advocacy centers, and schools. CTSP provides access to evidence-based assessment tools, secure housing options, health/mental health services, educational support, legal system guidance, and coordinated care within local communities. Through advocacy for robust public policy initiatives, regulations, and legislation, CTSP endeavors to enhance prevention efforts, prosecute offenders, and offer trauma-informed services to survivors and vulnerable children/youth (*Child Trafficking Solutions Project*, n.d.).



### **Children's Hospital Intervention & Prevention Services (CHIPS)**

Children's Hospital Intervention & Prevention Services (CHIPS) was formed in 1995 and serves as an outpatient clinic that provides services to children who have experienced suspected abuse and their families who may have been impacted by the abuse. Their staff is made up of a team of licensed professional counselors, doctors, licensed social workers, and sexual assault nurse examiners. The Center provides forensic medical evaluations, social work support services, counseling services, and prevention education services (*CHIPS Center | Children's of Alabama, n.d.*).

The first service they offer is a forensic medical evaluation which provides a comprehensive medical examination to a child who has a suspected abuse situation. This is necessary to document the health of the body of the child. CHIPS strives to conduct these examinations in a safe and nurturing environment. Second, CHIPS can also provide a licensed social worker to meet with caregivers to assess any needs that the family may need and make referrals as needs arise. They can also provide a counselor to children that are suspected victims of abuse. The treatment options include play therapy, Trauma Focused -Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT), attachment therapies, somatic and mindful based treatments, and prevention education. Lastly, CHIPS aims to provide prevention education to schools and organizations in the community (*Services | Children's of Alabama, n.d.*). This service has been designed to appeal to all age groups and includes animated videos, safe talk with younger children, phrases that

children can easily remember, and resources for middle and high school children centered around Erin's Law (*Prevention Resources* | *Children's of Alabama*, n.d.).

### ***National & Alabama Child Sex Trafficking- Prevention Initiatives***

After researching current Alabama partners and their initiatives, our team began a deeper dive into specific prevention efforts that raise awareness within our state's borders and nationally. The following sections will focus on state and national projects, programs, laws, and public awareness efforts that Alabama has embraced from a local and national standpoint to help prevent Child Sex Trafficking.



#### **END IT Alabama**

END IT Alabama is a project of the Alabama Human Trafficking Task Force (AHTTF). The project was sponsored by Representative Jack Williams and passed by the Alabama legislature in 2014 (END IT Alabama, 2024). The purpose and agenda of the Alabama Human Trafficking Task Force is to combat all aspects of human trafficking. This includes sex trafficking and labor trafficking, pursuing a comprehensive response to crimes of human trafficking, and coordinating strategies to provide necessary services for victims of human trafficking. They focus prevention efforts to end the demand for human trafficking and create awareness through educational and community initiatives. They also work to develop legislation to prevent, intervene, and treat human trafficking victims (END IT Alabama, 2024). The program offers an Alabama Human

Trafficking Summit periodically which is considered a Wellhouse training. This summit offers several presenters such as the Governor, Attorney General, Alabama Human Trafficking Task Force, Wellhouse, and many other Anti-Human Trafficking Affiliations (END IT Alabama, 2024).



### **Alabama BEAMS**

Alabama BEAMS, mentioned earlier, is a program that was developed by the University of Alabama (Alabama BEAMS, 2024). It was created to help support sex trafficked victims and provides resources and information about the issue of sex trafficking. It is committed to sharing accurate and informative training materials about trafficking. It also works with a network of various partners who offer training to generate community awareness. If an organization is interested in training, Alabama BEAMS offers an online request form. Once submitted, the request will be referred to trainers who can assist with an appropriate plan (Alabama BEAMS, 2024).



## **ERIN'S LAW- A National Effort**

Erin's Law is a set of laws that aim to prevent child sex trafficking in 38 states and helps teach students and school personnel how to recognize child sex trafficking and report it appropriately. The Law requires all public schools to provide a minimum of four lessons per year on child sexual abuse prevention for students from all grade levels (Hillsboro School District, 2024). It also provides resources for the victims and their families. Erin's Law was named after a survivor, Erin Merryn, who advocated for similar laws nationwide. Erin was sexually abused and raped from age six until age eight by an adult neighbor and was threatened to stay silent by her abuser. Erin's abuse with that offender ended after she and her parents moved away. She was later abused again by an older teenage cousin who lived down the street from her. Her older cousin sexually abused her from the age of eleven to thirteen years old. He also threatened her to stay silent. Erin documented her abuse and secrets in her childhood diary. As a survivor, Erin is now on a mission to persuade all 50 states to pass Erin's Law, which mandates that all public schools use age-appropriate curricula to teach students how to safely report anyone who touches or attempts to touch their private parts (Erin's Law, 2024). Alabama adopted Erin's Law in 2015 (HB197, Act No. 2015-456) to mandate that all public-school systems establish and implement age-appropriate instruction and curriculum for students in grades Kindergarten through twelfth grade (ALSDE Erin's Law Curriculum Guidelines).



## **The Blue Campaign- A National Effort**

The Blue Campaign is a national public awareness campaign that is led by the U.S Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to combat human trafficking (Blue Campaign, 2024). The partners of the Blue Campaign are federal, state, and local governments, non-governmental organizations, and private organizations. Through the Blue Campaign, DHS raises public awareness about human trafficking, by working with organizations and making prevention resources available to educate the public in recognizing possible human trafficking and reporting suspected instances. The Blue Campaign also offers training to law enforcement and others to increase detection and investigation of human trafficking (Blue Campaign, 2024). They also work to coordinate protection and treatment of victims and bring suspected traffickers to justice (Blue Campaign, 2024). National Human Trafficking Awareness Day is recognized each year on January 11<sup>th</sup>. The Blue Campaign currently hosts a #WearBlueDay which is hosted on social media. It involves people taking pictures of themselves, friends, family, and colleagues wearing blue clothing and sharing the pictures on social media using the hashtag. Blue is internationally symbolic of human trafficking awareness, and the Blue Campaign's name references the global anti-human trafficking symbols, the Blue Heart and the Blue Blindfold, as well as the "thin blue line" of law enforcement (Blue Campaign, 2024). DHS is responsible for the investigation of human trafficking crimes, arresting the traffickers, and protecting the victims of trafficking. DHS also

utilizes a victim-centered approach to combat human trafficking. They understand how difficult it can be for victims to come forward and work with law enforcement due to their trauma and are committed to helping victims feel safe and secure. The Blue Campaign's website provides direction and phone numbers to report suspicions of human trafficking. Their objective is to provide easy access to current information regarding the program and offering activities to fight against human trafficking.

### ***Reports: Shared Hope- National Sex Trafficking Reports***



Shared Hope International is an organization that was founded in response to sex trafficking in 1998 by Linda Smith (Shared Hope International, 2024). In 2023 the organization celebrated 25 years of bringing hope to victims of child sex trafficking. This organization produces a 'report card' style report that grades states based on their response to child sex trafficking. From 2011 to 2019 the 'report card' was produced under the name Protected Innocence Challenge (Shared Hope International, 2024). In 2020, Shared Hope International realized that there were critical gaps related to laws that protect the victims and has since updated their grading criteria to become more comprehensive and cover a wide variety of criminal statutes as well as victim protection initiatives. The last report was published in 2023 and will be reported biennially going

forward, with the next report being released in 2025 (Shared Hope International, 2024). The ‘report card’ focuses on 6 areas of grading: Criminal Provisions, Identification of and Response to Victims, Continuum of Care, Access to Justice for Trafficking Survivors, Tools for a Victim-Centered Criminal Justice Response, and Prevention and Training. These categories were developed by experts in the field of Child Sex Trafficking (Shared Hope International, 2024). Florida, Minnesota, and Tennessee were the top 3 states scoring the highest in all categories nationwide (Shared Hope International, 2024). In 2023, Alabama ranked 36th out of 51 overall which included all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Under the new guidelines, Alabama scored a Grade Level F (1 out of 15 total possible points) in the category of Prevention and Training. Due to the specificity of our research, we have outlined the top performers in the category of Prevention and Training below.

**Tennessee** is a surrounding state to Alabama and a top performer in combating child sex trafficking. It was ranked 1<sup>st</sup> overall in the national rankings. They received an A (14.5 out of a possible 15 points) in Prevention and Training by mandating prevention education in schools. Their law stipulates that this is accomplished through viewing age-appropriate videos approved by the Local Education Agencies (LEAs) beginning with the 2021-2022 school year. LEAs were tasked with devising, adopting, and implementing a program of family life education in alignment with current curriculum guidelines (Shared Hope International, 2024).

**California** ranked 4<sup>th</sup> overall and was the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest ranking state in their prevention and training efforts with a letter grade of B (12.5 out of 15). They also mandated child sex trafficking prevention education be provided in schools. To accomplish this, they require that all students in grades 7-12 receive comprehensive sexual health education at least once in middle or junior high



school and then again in high school. Children at the elementary level can also receive grade appropriate prevention education with the caveat that parents can opt their children out. The governing board of each school district held the responsibility to implement their chosen programs or methods by January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 (Shared Hope International, 2024).

**Florida**, who is a top 3 overall national performer and an Alabama surrounding state, ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in prevention and training, receiving a letter grade of B (12 out of 15). They also have a state mandate to provide prevention education to all students in public schools in grades K-12 with students in grades 6-12 receiving additional components concerning education surrounding social media and internet vulnerabilities. They go further by requiring the Florida State Department of Education to allow parents to view the curriculum and instructional materials online (Shared Hope International, 2024).

**Texas** ranked 6<sup>th</sup> overall and was the 4<sup>th</sup> highest ranking state in prevention and training, receiving a letter grade of B (12 out of 15). Texas does not have a mandate to provide prevention and training but does strongly recommend and authorize prevention education and training. The local school health advisory council recommends and advises the Board of Trustees on the process of adopting grade appropriate curriculum. The school district must notify parents in detail prior to the start of each school year and provide instruction of the parent's rights to excuse their child and also offer parental participation opportunities. Parents must provide consent for students to participate. They do have a law requiring anti-victimization programs be provided in both elementary and secondary schools, though this law doesn't specify education on prevention and training for child sex trafficking (Shared Hope International, 2024).

**All other states** ranked a D or F (<10 out of 15) in Prevention and Training with most states falling into the F category (<9 out of 15) including Alabama (1 out of 15). From these findings, it is obvious that this is a critical area of concern and there is much room for improvement both in Alabama and nationwide.

***A Meta-Analytic Review- Effective Components of School-Based Prevention Programs for Child Abuse***  
***(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8176877/>)***

The states having the highest scores for Prevention and Training all have statewide effective school-based training programs indicating that these programs are a solid approach to preventing child sex trafficking because most children attend school daily in the United States. This ensures a captive audience for the curriculum. (Citak Tunc et al., 2018; Daigneault et al., 2012; Nickerson et al., 2019). Through these preventative programs, children are taught and encouraged to recognize and report abuse situations (Baker et al., 2012). This type of preventative program implementation within schools has been popular since the 1980s (Berrick & Gilbert, 1991; Daro, 1991). Studies show strong evidence of program effectiveness using programs that have shorter sessions, last longer in duration, and start at younger ages (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/10802834/>). Games and active participation styled preventative programs have been found to have a positive impact in building knowledge, expanding motivation, developing skills, and increasing awareness to a child's ability to self-protect and ensure their personal wellbeing (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8176877/>). School based prevention programs are shown to be effective in increasing child abuse disclosures and building a child's self-

protection skills (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10567-021-00353-5#Sec12>).

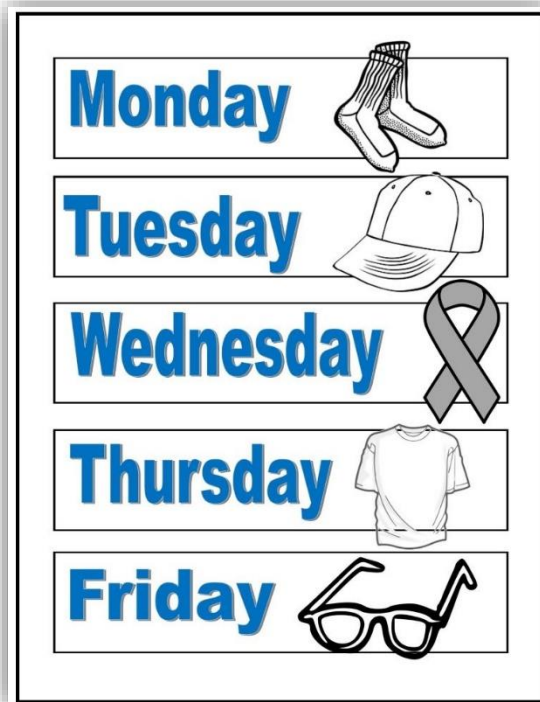
Preventative programs that focus on core components of increasing social- emotional skills while teaching children to avoid self-blame type thinking helps students learn about acceptable and unacceptable behaviors from others. It also increases their ability to problem solve and advocate in real world scenarios (Grober & Bogat, 1994; Sanderson, 2004). During the 2020 pandemic, cases of child abuse increased nationwide. Because of the pandemic, schools were closed, and most children attended classes through a virtual setting. Due to this and the continued use of virtual options for students since then, prevention programs should be adapted to accommodate both in person and virtual learning (i.e., Agrawal, 2020; Kovler et al., 2020).

## ***Recommendations***

### **Adopt and Implement a Unified Statewide Curriculum**

Alabama has made great strides in recent years to address child sex trafficking including the passage of Erin's Law and mandating that all public schools provide grade appropriate prevention and training education to its students. Implementation and measurable outcomes have been slow to come to fruition. Using best practices from other states, our team has drawn the following conclusions: We need to better develop a widespread preventative measure against child sex trafficking in Alabama beyond the passage of laws. Our Solutions Alabama Team recommends the adoption of a unified/ statewide grade appropriate Personal Safety and Exploitation Prevention curriculum within all public Preschool through 12<sup>th</sup> grade school systems. Additionally, we recommend an annual reporting system and accountability model to ensure compliance on this mandated subject. We recommend an annual Blue Ribbon Week Campaign styled curriculum be implemented as it is a familiar and fun way for children to learn about this very serious matter- similar to Spirit week or Red-Ribbon week. This statewide

unified approach will raise awareness with Alabama’s most vulnerable population and their families while paving the road for schools to become compliant with implementing Erin’s Law. Moving the responsibility from the local school board level to the state school board level will further ensure that all schools are participating using one statewide approved curriculum and enhancing our data reporting and compliance with Erin’s Law standards. State level direction and accountability measures must be enforced with well outlined compliance reporting and corrective action plans for school systems that fail to comply. Using grade appropriate materials, students will receive an education that builds upon the previous year’s curriculum and furthers their knowledge and understanding at an age-appropriate pace. We recommend implementation near the annual national Blue Ribbon Week held in April each year. If we better equip our children with personal safety education, we can help prevent them from becoming victims, and give them the power to protect themselves and their peers. With a mandatory unified Blue Ribbon Week type curriculum within schools, children will have a full foundational week with a variety of daily themes such as wearing blue socks on Monday to teach students to step away from danger or glasses on Friday to teach about looking out for each other. Activities such as playing out scenarios, and informational presentations from local Department of Human Resources’ social workers or organizations specializing in protecting children to ensure their personal safety will allow children to hear



information from outside sources and actively participate in what to do in exploitative situations. This should be a fun and empowering experience for students on a very serious subject. A mandatory unified curriculum is a great step in ensuring all our students get a measurable preventative education and training they need no matter where they live or what school they attend in Alabama. To fund this endeavor, we recommend utilizing grant funding for the program curriculum, public and private donations along with local community engagement to assist with the week of fun yet informative activities to include in-person speakers, swag items, and coupons for local establishments.

### **Embed Awareness Ads on Popular Gaming Apps and Social Media Platforms**

Outside of PK-12 educational prevention curriculum, we further recommend embedding child sex trafficking awareness ads

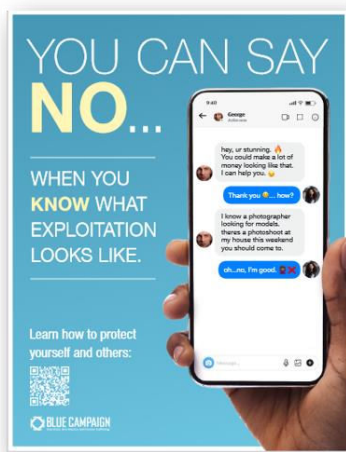


<https://wellpointcare.org/media-and-events/>

within students' Chromebooks, on gaming apps, and on social media platforms that are popular among children and teenagers. Imbedding ads on gaming apps and social media platforms is a national preventative measure that we recommend implementing through legislative efforts. One constant in most children's lives is daily attendance in school. Most Alabama children work from Chromebooks or something similar provided by the local school system to complete their assignments, attend virtual classes, and participate in daily activities. Local school IT personnel who load student academic programs and software onto these Chromebooks could install ads for each grade level at the start of each year as simple screen savers or pop-up style ads at little to no

cost to the school systems. This effort will serve as an age-appropriate daily informative message and reinforcement of the education they receive during the Blue Ribbon Week campaign type curriculum in school. They will better retain the information and become confident in recognizing and reporting dangerous behavior and possible threats while playing at home, in the park, or online.

### Utilize Campaigns to Increase Public Awareness



Raising awareness of child sex trafficking is everyone's concern. We recommend posters and flyers be posted in mass around public places such as parks, playgrounds, gas stations (at pumps, in store, in restrooms), bus stops, airports, welcome centers, hotels (rooms and lobbies), homeless shelters, food banks, and rest areas. Widely publicizing what trafficking is and how it can be prevented and stopped will lead to an

increase in recognition and reporting of possible trafficking situations. Posters with phone numbers and/or QR codes to hotlines for reporting should be fully embedded in high-traffic areas and everywhere children are present in our communities.

All parents, children, neighbors, businesses, and citizens at

large should have large scale access to information on how to report, what to report, and how to do so safely. There are many free or low-cost options available through the Department of Homeland Security and other public entities.



## *Conclusion*

Education and awareness are the first lines of defense in the fight against child sex trafficking in Alabama and across the nation. While Alabama has made great strides in making its youngest citizens safe, there is always room for improvement. There is power in knowledge and the more we can bring awareness to this crime and take the steps necessary in preventing or stopping further abuse, the safer Alabama's children will be. Each year, our children learn how to be safe with regards to weather emergencies, fire emergencies, mass shootings, drug safety, and bomb threats. We need to educate our children, their parents, and all Alabama citizens on how to recognize personal danger and exploitative circumstances in their homes, communities, and the world around them. By educating children to recognize the signs, risks, and reporting procedures they will know what to do when they suspect a predator, see abuse or exploitation, or experience harmful situations firsthand. The recommendations listed above are a great, low-cost way to help bring our state's implementation of the prevention efforts within Erin's Law to fruition, increase reporting, and decrease the overall number of victims. Thank you for taking the time to consider our recommendations to bring Alabama to the forefront in the nation. We can become the model for all others to follow in the fight to protect the innocence of children.

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