Myriad factors make some students more vulnerable to human trafficking and child exploitation than others. These include having physical, learning, or other disabilities; being a newcomer to the United States; or being unstably housed or homeless.

To complement the 2024 Human Trafficking & Exploitation Prevention Strategies for Vulnerable Students webinar, which was hosted as part of the Human Trafficking and Child Exploitation Webinar Series by the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, this tipsheet offers strategies K–12 educators can use to help prevent vulnerable students from being trafficked or exploited.

The National Institute of Health defines vulnerability as “the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed (physically or emotionally).” Vulnerability is not a personal characteristic or deficit of the person; rather, it speaks to the intersection of inherent, situational, and pathogenic factors and the lack of protection. (See this article for more information.)

General Strategies for Building Protective Factors of Students Who Are Vulnerable to Trafficking and Exploitation

The goal for all students, including those who are at increased risk of being trafficked or exploited, is to regularly attend school and stay in school. The healthy relationships that can develop in school are key protective factors for youth.

In addition to focusing on the academic performance, attendance, and behavior of students, some additional ways to connect with students are as follows:

- Talk with students about their lives, their dreams, and their concerns.
- Build a schoolwide culture of belonging, inclusion, and safety.
- Model healthy adult connections: these healthy relationships provide support and friendship and can prevent an unhealthy, exploitative relationship from taking route.
- Explore with students their strengths, as well as their vulnerabilities including homelessness, new or uncertain immigration status, or disabilities. Any of these factors can make a student more attractive to those who might exploit them or may make it more difficult for them to get help.
Practice Example: Engage in a “student mapping” process. This is a prevention technique used to identify students who are falling through the cracks. Staff first list all the students they know beyond the classroom—their likes/dislikes, what hobbies or activities they enjoy, and who their friends are. Then staff list students who are less known and less connected and assign someone to get to know those students better. (See this blog for more details.)

Strategies for Vulnerable Student Populations

Different student populations have their own unique vulnerabilities. Thus, strategies to build protective factors that prevent trafficking and exploitation can vary too. Students with disabilities, newcomers and immigrants, and unstably housed or homeless students are just a few of the populations who are uniquely vulnerable to being trafficked or exploited. In the following sections, we highlight corresponding strategies educators can use with these groups.¹

Students With Disabilities

People with disabilities experience violent victimization at rates three to five times higher than people without disabilities, and people of color with disabilities experience higher rates of human trafficking. (See this webpage for more information.) In most cases, traffickers take advantage of those who feel socially isolated and lonely by promising to be their friend. Helping students feel connected to the school community can make a big difference.

Some strategies for supporting students with disabilities include the following:

- Engage students in school activities and avoid expulsion due to behavioral concerns or truancy.
- Provide opportunities for students to be educated in integrated classes rather than separate classes.
- Work with the students’ strengths to help them persevere when school feels challenging.
- Connect students with additional services such as afterschool programs, summer jobs, and vocational education in their area of interest.
- Provide labor and sex trafficking and exploitation prevention education in appropriate and accessible formats.

Practice Example: Take younger students with and without disabilities to visit an inclusive playground and reflect on the experience. Bring together older students with and without disabilities in community service projects, giving everyone a chance to develop peer relationships while doing something useful for their community. Increasing connections and reducing feelings of isolation can help youth with disabilities feel less vulnerable. See this article for more details.

¹ Some students may be vulnerable in intersecting ways. For example, a student could have a disability and be homeless. For such situations, educators can consider both sets of strategies to help build protective factors.
Newcomer and New Immigrant Students

Students who are new to the United States may have adverse experiences that increase their vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation. In their 2021 report, Polaris found that 54% of trafficking victims identified as having recently migrated or relocated to the United States. See this analysis for more information. Vulnerabilities include the following:

- A traumatic journey to the United States that included exposure to violence or threats of violence
- Poverty, family instability, or isolation
- Limited understanding of the culture and their legal rights, power imbalances, instability and worry about immigration status

Regardless of how a student arrived in the United States, it is important to welcome these students and their families into the school community.

Strategies for supporting new immigrant students' connection to school include the following:

- Support their first language, ensuring school materials are offered in their first language and honoring the cultures of all students, while teaching English.
- Connect the student and family to immigrant and refugee organizations if they are not yet connected.
- Educate school personnel on the various immigration groups in the community.
- Work in partnership with the local Refugee Resettlement Agency to identify when there are influxes of new immigrants, where they are coming from, and where new immigrants are being housed.
- Provide prevention education about labor and sex trafficking and exploitation in multiple languages.

If you suspect that a student who is a newcomer, new immigrant, or refugee is being trafficked, submit a request for assistance through the Office on Trafficking in Persons Shepherd Case Management System.

Practice Example: Host welcome events to help newcomer families learn about the schools, schedules, busing, and expectations and to enroll their students. Providing a meal and transportation to and from these events improves attendance. In addition to enrolling their students at welcome events, new immigrant families can develop social and support networks with one another. These events also give school personnel an opportunity to meet and greet new families and provide an immediate sense of connection and stability. View this school district webpage for an example of how it can be done.

Students Experiencing Homelessness or Unstable Housing

Students experiencing homelessness are especially vulnerable to being exploited due to their extreme circumstances. For example, in exchange for food, housing, or an occasional place to sleep, they are often forced to perform sexual acts or take jobs, including those of a criminal nature. Polaris identified that 8% of people who experienced human trafficking reported having unstable housing, and 7% reported being a runaway or young person experiencing homelessness. See this webpage for more information.
Strategies for supporting students who are experiencing homelessness or unstable housing include the following:

- Connect them to the school-based McKinney-Vento liaison to coordinate services.
- Partner with community-based organizations that provide crisis intervention services and youth shelter services.
- Create strong connections with students to increase sense of safety, belonging, and the likelihood that the student may accept additional supports.
- Keep students in school and avoid expulsion from school for misbehavior.
- Create a climate that is welcoming to all students, and ensure students are aware of resources available at the school.

**Practice Example:** Provide opportunities for students to shower or otherwise take care of their hygiene needs at school. Provide food, hygiene products, school supplies, and clothing through a clothing exchange and resource center. For more information, visit this webpage.

**Additional Resources**

- For all students, if you suspect labor or sex trafficking or child exploitation, report it. Follow your internal school process if there is one. Call the National Human Trafficking Hotline for guidance by dialing 1-888-373-7888. The Hotline website also has information on safety planning, general information about trafficking, statistics, human trafficking support service directors, and other resources. In many states, human trafficking and child exploitation require a report to Child Protective Services. Familiarize yourself with your states’ laws. In addition, the U.S. Department of Labor should be contacted when you suspect a student might be a victim of labor trafficking or unfair labor practices.
- Learn more about populations at higher risk for trafficking and about other risk factors associated with human trafficking in Human Trafficking in America’s Schools on pages 4 through 7.
- SOAR for School-Based Professionals is a human trafficking training with several modules.
- The Office on Trafficking In Persons offers a variety of resources and trainings on human trafficking as well as information on victim assistance and research.
- The Newcomer Toolkit from the U.S. Department of Education provides strategies to create welcoming environments for new immigrants and engagement strategies to strengthen school connections, meet their needs, and provide high-quality education.