

# FACT SHEET: Human Trafficking in Washington State

## What is “Human Trafficking?”

Human trafficking refers to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of individuals through force, fraud, or coercion for the purposes of exploitation. This exploitation can include forced labor, sexual slavery, or other forms of commercial sexual exploitation. The coercion can be subtle or overt, physical or psychological. This fact sheet focuses on commercial sexual exploitation in particular.

While international trafficking does occur, many victims experience trafficking locally within Washington state, are forced to travel to other states within the United States, and/or travel to Washington from other within the United States.

## Who are the victims?

Victims come from every background, but BIPOC women and girls, especially Black and Native American youth, are at particular risk.

- Of 10,000 cases reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, nearly 40% involved Black women and girls.
- According to the National Criminal Justice Training Center, 40% of sex trafficking victims in the United States identified as Native American.

LGBTQ+ youth, runaways, and those experiencing homelessness or childhood abuse are heavily targeted.

89% of Washington victims reported being first exploited as children.

## How does trafficking occur?

Traffickers use manipulation, isolation, and violence to gain control — often starting online or in vulnerable settings such as foster care, shelters, and schools.

## Why does trafficking exist?

Sex trafficking exists because there is considerable demand from buyers to purchase trafficked/prostituted people. Traffickers view and treat trafficked people – predominantly girls and women – as products that are sold and purchased to meet the demand of buyers.

## Who are the traffickers?

According to the 2023 “[Federal Human Trafficking Report](#),” the average age of sex traffickers was 37 and the vast majority were male. That largely matches the [available data](#) from cases charged by the King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office.

## Who are the buyers?

Buyers are found across all income groups; however high frequency buyers are much more likely to make \$100,000+ annually.

Between 2014–2023, 71% of buyers charged with purchasing or attempting to purchase sex from a minor in King County were white men.

For more information on buyers, please see the 2025 report, “[Buyers Unmasked: Exposing the Men Who Buy Sex & Solutions to End Exploitation.](#)”

### **Where is trafficking happening in Washington?**

Trafficking is occurring in communities throughout Washington State. It is highly visible in places like Aurora Ave, but it also occurring in private spaces out of the view of the public, including private residences, short-term rentals, businesses, hotels, etc.

### **What are some of the harms associated with trafficking? What do survivors experience?**

Survivors routinely experience extreme violence. Throughout our state, it is unfortunately common to see cases where trafficked children and adults have been shot, stabbed, beaten, and raped – either by their trafficker, a buyer, or both.

The physical and psychological harm is lasting:

- According to a Colorado medical study examining two decades of evidence, the mortality rate of women in prostitution is 200× the general population.
- Traumatic brain injury: 53–95% of prostituted women (higher than NFL players or Iraq War veterans).
- PTSD prevalence: 53%, similar to combat veterans.
- Enduring impacts include exposure to STIs, coercion into abortions or sterilization, forced pregnancies, a variety of lasting medical conditions, and deep emotional trauma.

### **How has – and is – Washington addressing trafficking?**

Washington was the **first state** to enact a criminal Human Trafficking statute modeled on the Federal crime of Human Trafficking (HB 1175, 2003).

**Safe Harbor Laws** - Protects minors from being prosecuted for prostitution (HB 1775, 2020)

**Vacating Convictions** - Allows survivors to have certain crimes vacated from their records if tied to their trafficking (RCW 9.94A.640)

**Affirmative Defense Prosecution for Prostitution** - that the actor committed the offense as a result of trafficking (RCW 9A.88.040) (SB 6255, 2012)

**Survivors FIRST** – a KCPAO program that declines to file charges against victims of trafficking, facing criminal charges—refers culturally responsive, trauma-informed services.

### **Relevant Criminal Statutes**

- Human Trafficking 1st Degree – Class A Felony (RCW 9A.40.100)
- Human Trafficking 2nd Degree – Class A Felony (RCW 9A.40.100)
- Promoting Commercial Sexual Abuse of a Minor – Class A Felony (RCW 9.68A.101)
- Commercial Sexual Abuse of a Minor – Class B Felony (RCW 9.68A.100)
- Promoting Prostitution 1st Degree – Class B Felony (RCW 9A.88.070)
- Promoting Prostitution 2nd Degree – Class C Felony (RCW 9A.88.080)
- Prostitution – Simple Misdemeanor (RCW 9A.88.030)
- Patronizing a Prostitute – Simple Misdemeanor (RCW 9A.88.110)

## FAQ

### **What is needed to reduce trafficking in Washington State?**

Washington has a history of leading on laws to address trafficking, and there are meaningful criminal legal tools that exist to hold traffickers accountable. However, law enforcement and prosecutors do not have meaningful interventions to address the buying side – and the buyers are who (and why) trafficking is so lucrative and prevalent. “Patronizing prostitution” is a simple misdemeanor, a less serious offense than stealing a candy bar, and carries little to no deterrence to buyers and little incentive for law enforcement to prioritize.

HB 1265, offers one tool to shrink the lucrative market for commercial sexual exploitation. By making “patronizing prostitution” a **Class C Felony** this bill aims to deter potential buyers, incentivize law enforcement to investigate more cases, and generate considerable revenue to support survivors by increasing the associated fines. Right now, our state’s laws are constructed in a way that provides avenues for stopping individual traffickers *while simultaneously* allowing trafficking as a system to thrive.

### **What evidence is there that increasing the criminal penalty for buyers will reduce trafficking?**

Evidence exists from jurisdictions like Sweden, Norway, and Northern Ireland which showed that criminalizing the purchase of sex acts corresponded with a reduction in both street prostitution and trafficking. This approach is known as the “Survivor Model” (see [Buyers Unmasked: Exposing the Men Who Buy Sex & Solutions to End Exploitation](#), page 38).

### **What is needed to support survivors?**

For survivors who are being trafficked today, more accessible and robust services (medical, mental health, housing, legal etc.) are also needed at every stage – including to help them find a safe and sustainable path out of the sex trade. As an example, HB 1775, envisioned receiving centers where law enforcement could take juveniles recovered from commercial sexual exploitation to receive immediate, trauma-informed care; unfortunately, these centers have not come to fruition. Additionally, there is a lack of substance use and mental health treatment beds available for juveniles, and those that do exist often have long waiting lists.

More judicial training is also needed to increase awareness about collecting fines and fees that go to survivor services (ESHB 1291).

### **Isn’t prostitution a choice for many people? Isn’t that different from trafficking?**

While there may be some people for whom prostitution is truly a choice, they are the rare exception to the majority of predominantly girls and women who are being bought and sold against their will under conditions that involve violence, economic duress, coercion or manipulation. It is also common for prostituted adults to have been first bought and sold as children. Simply put: this is not a choice for most individuals, and not the first choice for those who are engaged in it. Circumstances such as addiction, homelessness, and escape from sexual or physical abuse can also contribute to driving people into prostitution. Moreover, the extreme violence and harm (physical/sexual violence, trauma, restricted exit) experienced by prostituted people is well-documented.

### **Isn’t prostitution a victimless crime?**

No. The vast majority of prostituted people are being or have been trafficked, and they are unfortunately routinely subject to appalling and extreme violence at the hands of both buyers and traffickers. While there may be some people for whom prostitution is truly a choice, they are the rare exception to the majority of predominantly girls and women who are being bought and sold against their will under conditions that involve violence, economic duress, coercion or manipulation.

**Shouldn't we just legalize prostitution? Won't that make things safer?**

No. There is no consensus that legalizing prostitution stops trafficking from occurring. In fact, some studies suggest that legalization leads to an increase in human trafficking (see: Cho, Seo-Young and Dreher, Axel and Neumayer, Eric, *Does Legalized Prostitution Increase Human Trafficking?* January 16, 2012; see also: "[Buyers Unmasked: Exposing the Men Who Buy Sex & Solutions to End Exploitation](#)," January 2025)