



## Studying the Impact of Social Media and the Internet on Human Trafficking



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### The Basics: Intersections of Technology and Human Trafficking

As awareness of human trafficking increases, we are learning more about how social media and the internet impact human trafficking. Runaway and Homeless Youth programs must recognize that the internet and social media function as tools with the potential to facilitate human trafficking. They can also be utilized to interrupt it.

Social media and the internet, as well as other networking technologies, provide traffickers the ability to connect with potential victims. Traffickers utilize friends of friends and word-of-mouth to identify and target youth in vulnerable situations. Traffickers are also able to manipulate potential victims' lives in "real-time" by utilizing technology to text or share and tag photos on social networking sites.

On the other hand, the internet and social media can be powerful positive forces in young people's lives. Technology enables youth to connect with each other and service providers. These connections can provide youth an opportunity to express themselves and build a sense of belonging and connectedness as well as the opportunity to develop and sustain positive permanent connections to peers, school, faith-based organizations, and their community. Technology is also used by law enforcement to rescue victims of human trafficking and by service providers to increase awareness of the issue and provide opportunities for survivors to seek services.

As your agency develops policies and procedures related to social media and internet access by youth, it is important to embrace and enhance the positive opportunities presented by technology while decreasing the inherent risks. It is also critical to incorporate the principles of positive youth development and trauma-informed care.

### Practical Pointers:

- Involve youth in the development of policies and procedures related to social media, the internet, mobile devices, gaming and other networked technologies. Youth are more likely to adhere to policies they had a role in shaping and they will learn more about both the benefits and challenges presented by technology-based connections.
- Incorporate harm reduction into policies and procedures. Service providers focusing on a harm-reduction philosophy when developing policies and procedures will maximize the benefits of technology.
- Avoid zero-tolerance policies relating to the use of technology. These policies and procedures are difficult to enforce and can be counter-productive as they may further disaffect and marginalize youth that need services.
- Take a trauma-informed approach when developing and implementing policies and procedures. Take time to listen to youth, understand their concerns

and their need for maintaining connections via social media and the internet, and develop policies that incorporate this information.

- Provide youth and staff access to the latest research and training related to social media, the internet and other networked technologies. Knowledge of technology and how to utilize it safely and effectively are essential for youth and staff as technology plays a major role in navigating school, community, and employment opportunities.
- Develop flexible plans with each youth based on individual strengths and challenges. Plans may include supervised use, a specific time of day youth can utilize the internet or social media, limiting the amount of time youth can engage in technology, or restricting/denying access to the internet and social media for a period of time due to the youth being in danger or at higher risk of trafficking.
- Create safe spaces for youth to interact utilizing social media, the internet and other networked technologies. Service providers may create a youth-only social media space where information about services and supports are readily available and youth can connect with peers and providers.

**Resources:**

***How to Responsibly Create Technological Interventions to Address the Domestic Sex Trafficking of Minors*** discusses several findings that should be considered when using technology to address the commercial sexual exploitation of children. <http://www.danah.org/papers/TechnologistsCSEC.pdf>

***Human Trafficking and Technology: A Framework for Understanding the Role of Technology in the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S.*** discusses different facets of the human trafficking ecosystem and what is known about technology’s role in each. <http://research.microsoft.com/en-us/collaboration/focus/education/htframework-2011.pdf>

***The Technology and Human Trafficking Initiative*** was created to study the current use and broader implementation of information and communication technologies in the international fight against human trafficking and modern slavery. <https://technologyandtrafficking.usc.edu/>

***Human Trafficking Online: The Role of Social Networking Sites and Online Classifieds*** presents a comprehensive examination of the role of social networking sites and online classified ads in facilitating human trafficking and delivers recommendations for developing technological innovations to monitor and combat trafficking. <https://technologyandtrafficking.usc.edu/technology-labor-trafficking/>

***Technology and Human Trafficking: The Rise of Mobile and the Diffusion of Technology-Facilitated Trafficking*** discusses the role of digital technologies in exploitation, and ways to use the tools to combat trafficking. [https://technologyandtrafficking.usc.edu/files/2012/11/HumanTrafficking2012\\_Nov12.pdf](https://technologyandtrafficking.usc.edu/files/2012/11/HumanTrafficking2012_Nov12.pdf)

***The Technology and Labor Trafficking Project*** is the first in-depth study of technology and data-driven approaches to combat labor trafficking. Technology is playing an increasingly significant role in understanding and addressing labor trafficking, forced labor, and exploitation. <https://technologyandtrafficking.usc.edu/technology-labor-trafficking/>

***Technology and Labor Trafficking Project Framing Document*** provides an initial scan of the technology and labor trafficking landscape based on initial literature reviews, expert interviews, and stakeholder discussions. <https://technologyandtrafficking.usc.edu/files/2014/06/Annenberg-Tech-and-Labor-Trafficking-Framing-Document-June-27-2014.pdf>