Family & Youth Services Bureau

Human Trafficking and Runaway and Homeless Youth:
Practical Tools for Grantees
Online Recruitment of Youth Via Social Media and the Internet

Youth Social Media Use

Youth use a wide array of social media platforms and apps to build and maintain relationships, express themselves, learn about the world around them, and find employment. One-fifth of youth report being online "constantly" and 92 percent report being on social media at least daily, according to a 2015 Pew Research Center study.[1] Of these youth, 71 percent use multiple social media sites, with Facebook being the most frequently reported.

In a study of 169 homeless youth in Los Angeles, Rice, Lee, and Taitt (2011)[2] found that 62 percent of participants had a cell phone. The study did not assess whether youth with cell phones could access mobile apps or whether they were online by other means. However, service providers should remember that lack of housing does not mean that runaway and homeless youth (RHY) lack access to phones or other means of online communication. RHY may get online via personal cell phones or public library computers or by borrowing devices.

RHY who have access to cell phones use them to contact social services, stay in touch with case managers and social support networks like friends and family, and search for housing and jobs.

Traffickers sometimes provide victims or potential victims with cell phones as a means of recruitment, "boyfriending," or coercion. RHY looking for job opportunities may be recruited into labor trafficking situations when responding to an online job offer or ads.

RHY may look to social media to help them construct supportive peer networks and keep in touch with friends. While these virtual communities can be valuable, they may also provide traffickers with additional opportunities for online recruitment and exploitation of these vulnerable youth.
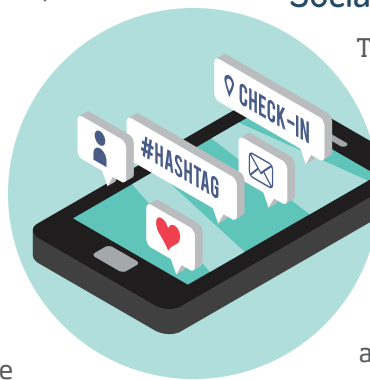
Social Media, Violence, and Trafficking

The significant youth presence on social media platforms gives traffickers many points of access to recruit youth. Where traffickers would otherwise have to interact with youth in person to recruit them, social media provides easy, discreet, and consistent access to youth. Furthermore, depending on the site or app, communications through social media can remain largely anonymous and unnoticed by friends, family, and other adults who may otherwise intervene in a concerning situation.

Online violence is a serious concern and may present as shaming, bullying, humiliation, force, fraud, or coercion. Traffickers may exploit youth's desire for meaningful online friendships and relationships. Damage can be inflicted online regardless of whether victims ever meet their abusers in person, as evidenced by high-profile cases

1   Lenhart A. (2015). Teens, Social Media & Technology Overview 2015. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/#fn-13190-1

2   Rice E, Lee A, Taitt S. Cell Phone Use Among Homeless Youth: Potential for New Health Interventions and Research. Journal of Urban Health, 2011;88(6):1175–1182. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3232411

of youth suicide associated with online bullying during the past decade. Service providers can prevent online abuse and exploitation by discussing social media with youth, creating opportunities for safe online interaction, and supporting youth engagement in local communities in their neighborhoods.

Trafficking Recruitment and Social Media

The National Human Trafficking Hotline data are limited to RHY recruited via social media who then call the Hotline, as well as friends and family who call the Hotline out of concern for a youth recruited online. The Hotline has identified some trends related to social media recruitment of RHY by potential traffickers, including sex-trafficking recruitment through social media, grooming/boyfriending, coercion, advertising, and logistical planning of trafficking activities.

To recruit youth, traffickers may:

- Contact youth via private or public messages or tag them in photos
- Contact youth on a dating site or app
- Advertise jobs for sales crews, modeling agencies, dance clubs, and other venues
- Provide cell phones to youth so that youth can access social media
- Pose as a potential romantic partner, friend, or job recruiter to gain trust
- Force potential victims of trafficking to recruit other youth via social media
- Use privacy settings to avoid or prevent notice by anyone other than the potential victim

Red Flags for Trafficking Recruitment Through Social Media

Youth with the following characteristics, behaviors, or experiences are potentially vulnerable to trafficking via social media. The list is not exhaustive, and the items do not automatically indicate that human trafficking is occurring. Instead, service providers should note any or all indicators collectively to assess whether a trafficking situation might exist. Service providers and youth should be aware of these red flags when a youth:

- Frequently switches between multiple phones or phone numbers
- Was given a phone as a gift, especially if provided by a stranger or employer
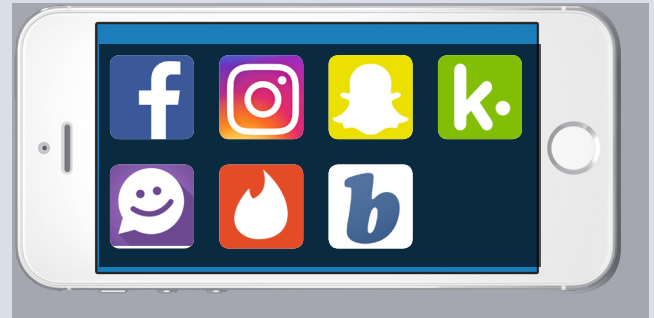
Social media and online sites and apps commonly referenced in human trafficking cases include Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Kik, MeetMe, Tinder, and backpage.*

*Cases included calls received by the National Human Trafficking Hotline until December 2016.

- Shares passwords to his or her social media accounts
- Posts, reposts, or responds to job advertisements on social media platforms
- Has sudden and/or frequent spikes in social media activity, like posting or adding friends
- Inexplicably deletes, unfollows, or blocks people who provide social support
- Excessively invites friends to like or follow specific people, businesses, or groups
- Frequently uses geolocation and tagging to indicate or advertise his or her location
- Is geolocated at known sex- or labor-trafficking venues
- Is excessively preoccupied with his or her online image
- Is tagged in other people's photos that depict him or her in sexually explicit ways
- Is publicly humiliated or trolled online

Emotional attachment to social media is typical of many youth and should not be misinterpreted as a red flag. Rather, providers should focus on patterns of use and behaviors associated with use.

Strategies for Preventing and Responding to Social Media Recruitment of RHY

Social media platforms vary greatly in terms of structure, community, popularity, population, and risk. The following strategies are general practices that can reduce the risk of recruitment across multiple platforms.

Strengths-Based and Harm-Reduction Approach

- Recognize that youth use social media to meet needs for self-expression, reach out to support networks, make friendships, and build communities. A strengths-based approach values these benefits and, therefore, does not enforce zero-tolerance policies related to use of technology.

- A harm-reduction approach involves service providers actively supporting and even facilitating youth use of social media, while providing internet-positive safety guidance and education. The question is not whether but how youth use technology and social media. Service providers should understand and actively engage with how youth use technology, not try to prevent youth from using it.

Internet-Affirmative Youth Education

- When working with youth individually or in groups, take the initiative to guide discussions of their experiences using social media and why they use it. Do not expound on the doom and gloom of the internet; listen to their perspectives and ask strengths-based questions. When youth bring up risky behaviors or situations, brainstorm with youth about how to use the platform to ensure safety.

- Online safety education should focus on reducing high-risk online behaviors, such as accepting friend requests from people they don't know, exchanging inappropriate pictures, or sharing too much personal information. Online safety lessons should encourage youth to make their personal safety a priority and seek help if they experience any online victimization.

Youth Engagement in Agency Approach to Social Media

- Ask youth their preferences regarding how they would like to access and engage with your social service

agency online, what platforms they like to use, and the means of engagement on those platforms. Invite youth to help create and maintain your agency's social media presence, develop appropriate and youth-oriented agency policies, and even facilitate youth outreach online.

- Youth should be involved in determining how to identify someone who may be a victim and how to respond online when other youth are targeted. Youth at your agency may invite you to respond online or may prefer that youth involved in the agency act as online first responders. Make plans with youth receiving services so that youth and your agency can respond quickly and effectively when a youth victim needs support. If youth prefer to respond directly, provide training and supervision that support youth responders.

Agency and Staff Presence Online

- Recognize that not all youth want to be connected online with your agency or staff. Your agency should consider its online presence. Youth service's online presence can connect youth to the agency, create an extra community for youth, offer points of contact for youth to access services, and allow staff to identify online abuse or exploitation of youth.

- Youth may not want to be publicly associated with a social service agency. Having a separate (professional) staff social media account, possibly one that does not mention the agency as an employer, may make it easier for youth to contact the agency.

Onsite Internet and Social Media Access

- If possible, offer youth access to the internet at your agency. Flexibly supervised use and availability of a nonjudgmental adult when online can be beneficial to developing safe online behaviors.

- If a youth is targeted or recruited online, develop flexible plans with the youth to use the internet and social media at the agency.

Staff and Youth Online Surveillance and Response

- Be alert for offline and online red flags that may indicate trafficking. Focus on prevention efforts to ensure youth are aware of potential online sex and labor trafficking situations.
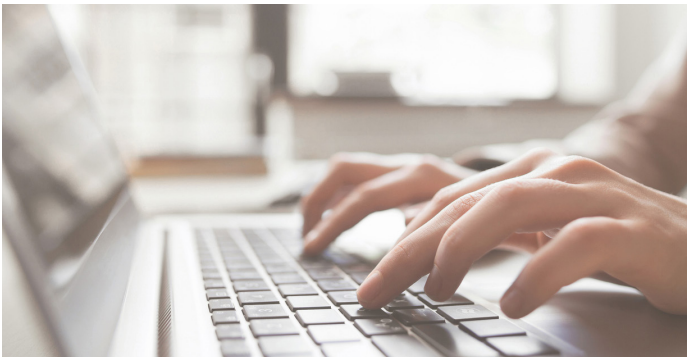
- Agencies should integrate social media into existing response protocols to ensure staff takes steps to report red flags to supervisors, family members, or local, state, or national hotlines.

Individualized Response to Youth Online Victimization

- If a youth is being targeted online, reach out to the youth and develop plans together on how to address the problem. Support youth in using technology safely, taking a break from using specific apps or technology in general, or employing privacy settings and other features to protect themselves.
- Individual case management can help youth strike a balance between safety and access to needed online supports. Do not apply rote responses to all youth; such blanket restrictions can erode trust and cut off youth from beneficial online communities.

Social media comprises a major component of youth social experience, community, and development. Although often derided as a distraction or even a threat to life, social media produces important benefits to youth, especially to RHY. Efforts to restrict youth online presence do not work. Service providers must use internet-affirmative, strengths-based, trauma-informed, and youth-oriented harm-reduction practices when discussing social media.

It is also important to remember that social media is an easy and effective tool that traffickers use to recruit youth who are vulnerable. If service providers are involved in a youth's virtual life, provide the youth with training in recognizing dangerous online situations and bystander intervention, and support safe online engagement, then many attempts to exploit the youth can be disrupted.

Additional Resources

Common Sense (https://www.commonsense.org) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of youth and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive in a world of media and technology. Put simply, Common Sense makes it easier for parents, educators, and service providers to provide children and youth with safe media that will enhance their lives, rather than hinder them. Lesson plans and resources to teach children and youth internet safety can be found at:
https://www.commonsense.org/educators/training

NetSmartz Workshop (http://www.netsmartz.org) is an interactive, educational program of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC)that provides age-appropriate resources to teach children and youth how to be safer online and offline. With resources such as videos, games, activity cards, and presentations, NetSmartz educates while it entertains. Materials for teens that take a more serious tone can be found at:
http://www.netsmartz.org/RealLifeStories

Connect Safely (http://www.connectsafely.org) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to educating users of technology about safety, privacy, and security. The website provides research-based safety tips, parental guidebooks, advice, news, and commentary on all aspects of tech use and policy. The Media Library offers videos, talks and presentations, and other resources. Visit the media library here:
http://www.connectsafely.org/media-library

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