



Screening for Human Trafficking in Child Welfare Settings: Tools in Use

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Introduction and Methods

Human trafficking of children and youth, defined as the exploitation of minors for forced labor or commercial sex, is increasingly recognized as a public health and social justice concern. In recent years, federal lawmakers have highlighted the important role of child welfare within a comprehensive systems-level response to human trafficking. Several federal policies have defined the child welfare system's role in identifying and responding to human trafficking involving children and youth. Yet, our understanding of how child welfare agencies identify youth who have experienced human trafficking (or are at increased risk for experiencing human trafficking) is somewhat limited.

In an effort to address this knowledge gap, the Identifying and Addressing Human Trafficking in Child Welfare Agencies (IAHT) study conducted interviews with state child welfare leaders from 25 states about how their agencies work to identify and serve children and youth who have experienced or are at increased risk of trafficking.¹ All data were collected between March 2021 and February 2022. Interview questions were open-ended. To analyze the response data, RTI International used a qualitative content analysis approach, in which key points were summarized and organized by questions and domains. The results of this study are not designed to be representative of or generalizable to a given subpopulation.

¹ For full methods and findings, see Charm, S. C, Latzman, N. E., Gilot, B., & Dolan, M. (2022). *Identifying and addressing human trafficking in child welfare agencies: Final report* (OPRE Report # 2022-72). Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The IAHT study was conducted by RTI through a contract from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in collaboration with ACF's Children's Bureau. The IAHT study is being implemented as part of the [Domestic Human Trafficking and the Child Welfare Population](#) project.

This brief describes human trafficking screening tools currently being used by state child welfare agencies that participated in the IAHT study, as well as key themes that arose from interviews with these state child welfare leaders regarding considerations for screening tool selection and protocols.

Tool Types

There is significant variation in the types of screening tools and approaches used in child welfare settings, but they generally fall into the following categories:

Indicator Lists

An indicator list is a set of behavioral, physical, and situational characteristics that may be associated with trafficking victimization. These indicators are provided as possible “red flags” to be informally considered by the caseworker when using his or her professional judgment on next steps.

For example, the Iowa Department of Human Services outlines 19 indicators of possible sex and labor trafficking, including factors related to living conditions, psychological behaviors, relationships, and finances/employment. The indicators are intended to help guide the screener's line of questioning. The list notes that presence of an indicator should not be used to determine that human trafficking is occurring, but rather should prompt the screener to ask further questions to help determine whether a referral to law enforcement is appropriate.

Indicator Tools

An indicator tool is a standardized and more structured approach for reviewing a set of behavioral, physical, and situational characteristics (i.e., indicators) that may be associated with trafficking victimization. Rather than just considering the indicators (as the indicator list does), indicator tools ask users to document the presence or absence of each indicator. Users complete indicator tools using knowledge they have about the case; the tools do not include questions to be asked of the youth or family directly.

Many indicator tools include a scoring algorithm or set of outcomes to guide next steps. Some outcome categories are *risk-based*, identifying different levels of risk for human trafficking and, sometimes, different respective next steps. For example, Nevada's Rapid Indicator Tool provides a standardized way for caseworkers to assess for trafficking or commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) and determine next steps. After the

caseworker completes the tool based on their knowledge of the case, the tool indicates a categorization of *Confirmed Victim*, *At High Risk of Human Trafficking*, or *No Conditions Apply to This Youth at This Time*. If the tool indicates a confirmed victim, the case moves forward with collaborative efforts within the agency to meet the youth's immediate safety needs. If the tool indicates a high risk, the case is staffed for possible referral to a victim support mentor and safety planning.

Interview Tools

An interview tool is a set of questions asked of youth about experiences that are consistent with trafficking victimization. This approach may allow youth to disclose information directly and, in some cases, provide detail and nuance. Interview tools vary in length. The Human Trafficking Screening Tool, a self-administered tool included in a list of potential tools for use by child welfare staff in Ohio, suggests that as few as six questions can be effective (Dank et al., 2017). However, many interview tools are significantly longer and more detailed. For example, Kentucky reports using the Trafficking Victim Identification Tool (TVIT), which includes up to 47 questions.

Tiered Protocols

Tiered protocols combine a relatively brief indicator tool with a more in-depth screener to be used when circumstances warrant it. For example, New Jersey abuse/neglect hotline screeners are instructed to use the Rapid Human Trafficking Assessment screening tool if a caller to the hotline responds affirmatively to the mandated human trafficking question or to four or more "red flags." The Hawaii Child Welfare Services Protocol identifies points at which a caseworker should complete a screening tool, if indicated, followed by the youth being asked to complete a self-report measure (CSEC Identification Survey).

Tailored Tools

Tailored tools are screening tools used in specific situations, such as when a youth returns from a runaway episode. For example, Louisiana uses distinct tools to screen for sex trafficking at the time of Child Protective Services (CPS) investigations (CPS Screening Tool for Child Sex Trafficking), when youth are in foster care or the custody of Family Services (Risk Screening for Sex Trafficking), and upon recovery from runaway/missing status (Runaway, Missing, or Kidnapped Child Assessment).

Characteristics of Tools Used by Participants' Agencies

All participants reported that their state agencies have some protocols or guidance in place for identifying potential victims of trafficking, and all reported that at least one screening tool is required or provided for optional use to staff.

Key highlights from **Table 1** are outlined below:

- **Required tool use.** Nineteen agencies (76.0%) required that a specific screening tool is used. Of the remaining six, four utilized a state-supervised, county-administered administrative framework for child welfare services that often prevents such requirements.
- **Types of human trafficking included in screening.** Of the 37 tools that were provided by participants, 20 (54.1%) screened for sex trafficking, one (2.7%) screened for labor trafficking, and 15 (40.5%) screened for both labor and sex trafficking. One tool (2.7%) was a more general safety assessment and did not specifically screen for either labor or sex trafficking but included some prompts in instructions for how items might impact risk of trafficking). About half (13) of participants' agencies used at least one tool that screens for labor trafficking. The remaining 12 participants' agencies used tools that screen for sex trafficking only.
- **Tool type.** Of the 37 tools that were provided by participants, the most common types were indicator tools (18, 48.6%), indicator lists (7, 18.9%), and interview tools (5, 13.5%). Five tools (13.5%) were tailored for use after a missing-from-care episode; these were all interview tools asking questions directly of the youth. Five of the 25 agencies (20%) used tiered protocols—usually an indicator list or tool followed, when indicated, by a more in-depth indicator or interview tool.
- **Screening for youth at increased risk of trafficking.** Fourteen of the reviewed tools (37.8%) across 12 of the 25 agencies (48.0%) used tools with outcomes that include risk levels, potentially indicating youth at increased risk of sex trafficking, in line with a key part of the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act requirement to identify and provide services for youth “at risk” of sex trafficking.
- **Tool source.** Most agencies used tools developed internally or adapted from other states. Eight agencies (32.0%) reported either requiring or providing caseworkers the option to use previously developed tools (i.e., those originally developed by national resource centers and/or advocacy organizations) or very slight adapting those tools as part of their overall screening approach (**Table 2**). Six participants reported their agencies are using validated screening tools, most commonly as optional tools or as an in-depth assessment after a non-validated pre-screening tool. The most commonly identified among these were developed by the West Coast Children’s Clinic and the Vera Institute.

State screening tools approved for public distribution can be found in **the screening tool compilation at <https://www.rti.org/publication/identifying-and-addressing-human-trafficking-child-welfare-agencies>**. ↗

Table 1 Screening Approaches Used by Child Welfare Agencies

State	Title of tool *Copy of tool included in tool compilation	Required use	Tool type	Screens for:		Outcomes include risk levels
				Sex trafficking	Labor trafficking	
California	Various agency adaptations/agency-developed tools; West Coast Children’s Clinic CSE-IT* (Recommended) or CSE-IT: Hotline and Intake	-	Varies; indicator tool	X	-	X
Colorado	Colorado High-Risk Victim Identification Tool*	X	Indicator tool	X	X	-
Connecticut	Child Trafficking Decision Map*	X	Indicator tool	X	X	X
Florida	Human Trafficking Screening Tool (HTST)*+	X	Interview tool	X	X	X ⁰
Georgia	Intake Question list pre-screen; West Coast Children’s Clinic CSE-IT	X	Tiered protocol	X	-	-
		-	(indicator list, indicator tool)	X	-	X
Hawaii	Loyola University Rapid Screening Tool*; CSEC Identification Scale (optional)*	X	Tiered protocol	X	X	-
		-	(indicator tool; survey)	X	-	-
Illinois	Child Assessment of Needs and Strengths (CANS) Post-run debriefing form	-	Indicator tool	-	-	-
		X	tailored interview tool	X	-	-
Iowa	Child Trafficking Indicators List; Iowa High Risk Victim Identification Tool	-	Indicator list;	X	X	-
		-	indicator tool	X	X	X
Kansas [‡]	Structured Decision-Making Tool; Child Welfare Human Trafficking Immediate Response Assessment+	X	Indicator list;	X	X	-
		X	interview and indicator tool	X	X	X
Kentucky	Vera Institute of Justice TVIT*	-	Interview tool	X	X	-
Louisiana	CPS Identification Tool for Child Sex Trafficking;	X	Indicator tool;	X	-	X
	Risk Screening for Sex Trafficking+;	X	indicator tool;	X	-	X
	Runaway, Missing, or Kidnapped Child Assessment	X	tailored interview tool	X	-	-

(continued)

Table 1. Screening Approaches Used by Child Welfare Agencies (continued)

State	Title of tool *Copy of tool included in Appendix	Required use	Tool type	Screens for:		Outcomes include risk levels
				Sex trafficking	Labor trafficking	
Minnesota	Child Protection Screening of Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking Flow Chart; Labor Trafficking Screening Tool	- -	Indicator list and flow chart; indicator list	X -	- X	- -
Nebraska	Providing Avenues for Victim Empowerment, which includes pre-screening tool; adaptation of TVIT (optional)	X	Tiered protocol (Indicator tool; interview tool)	X	X	-
Nevada	Nevada Rapid Indicator Tool*+ Returning Child Debriefing Tool	X X	Indicator tool; tailored interview tool	X X	- -	X -
New Jersey	Rapid Human Trafficking Assessment*	X	Tiered protocol (mandated question; interview tool)	X	X	-
New York	Rapid Indicator Tool to Identify Children Who May Be Sex Trafficking Victims*; Child Sex Trafficking Indicators Tool*+; Initial Trafficking Interview Tool* (optional)	X X -	Tiered protocol (indicator tool; indicator tool); interview tool	X X X	- - X	- X -
North Dakota	North Dakota Indicator list; ND Runaway & Missing Youth Screening	X X	Indicator list; tailored interview tool	X X	X -	- -
Ohio	Varies by county; list of optional tools	-	Varies	X	-	-
Oregon	Determination of Sex Trafficking Victim Status*+	X	Indicator tool	X	-	X
Rhode Island	Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children Screening Tool*	X	Indicator tool	X	-	X

(continued)

Table 1 Screening Approaches Used by Child Welfare Agencies (continued)

State	Title of tool *Copy of tool included in Appendix	Required use	Tool type	Screens for:		Outcomes include risk levels
				Sex trafficking	Labor trafficking	
Tennessee	Structured Decision-Making System;	X	Indicator list and flow chart;	X	-	-
	Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths with a CSE module (custodial); *+	X	indicator tool;	X	-	X
	Family Advocacy Support Tool* (non-custodial)	X	indicator tool	X	-	X
Vermont	Risk of Human Trafficking Screening Tool (planned)	X	Indicator tool	X	-	X
Virginia	Varies by county; HTST (recommended)	-	Varies, interview tool	X	-	-
Washington	CSEC Screen	X	Indicator tool	X	-	-
West Virginia	Comprehensive Human Trafficking Assessment	-	Interview tool;	X	X	-
	Missing Child Debriefing Interview	X	tailored interview tool	X	X	-

* Copy of tool included in screening tool collection.

+ Participant reported screening tool used in both child welfare and juvenile justice settings in the state.

◇ HTST outcomes include level of likelihood of the youth having experienced human trafficking.

‡ Kansas operates on a public-private partnership model. The Kansas Department for Children and Families has four providers that provide services and foster care. Each of those providers has developed a human trafficking screening tool, not provided to the study team.

Table 2 State Use of Existing Screening Tools

Screening tools currently in use	
Screening tool	Known state use
WestCoast Children’s Clinic CSE-IT	California (Optional), Georgia, Kansas*, Ohio (Optional)
Vera Institute of Justice TVIT	Kentucky, Nebraska (Adapted), Ohio (Optional)
Loyola University Rapid Screening Tool	Hawaii, Ohio (Optional)
Polaris Project Comprehensive Human Trafficking Assessment	West Virginia (Optional), Ohio (Optional)
Covenant House Human Trafficking Interview and Assessment Measure	California (optional), Ohio (Optional)
Urban Institute Human Trafficking Screening Tool	Ohio (Optional)

* The CSE-IT tool is integrated into the Child Welfare Human Trafficking Immediate Response Assessment.

Considerations for Screening Tool Selection

Screening versus Identification

Interviewees expressed differing perspectives on whether a screening tool is needed for identifying youth who have experienced trafficking. Human trafficking can have a wide variety of presentations. Several participants discussed the concern that screening tools lead workers to over-rely on tools for identification rather than thinking critically about the individual situation and case.

“Sometimes when you give someone a tool, they stop thinking. We want them to use critical thinking skills, which is why we reiterate over and over that these are merely indicators. They are questions you should ask that cause you to ask more questions. I feel like if we get to the point where we’re just checking off a list of whether this applies or not, people just start checking boxes and they stop thinking ...”

Other participants talked about the need to balance their unstructured professional judgment with the structured guidance provided by a screening tool, particularly given the realities of child welfare jobs and workforce. Human trafficking is rare compared to other types of maltreatment that workers see on a regular basis. As such, workers may go significant periods of time without having a trafficking case and become less attuned to trafficking indicators. Additionally, given the high rates of turnover among child welfare staff, it can be challenging to ensure that all new staff have the training and experience to rely on professional discretion alone.

Tool Content and Audience

Several themes emerged related to desired areas of improvement in screening tools and protocols.

- **Labor trafficking.** Many participants expressed a desire for a tool that screened for both sex and labor trafficking.
- **Gender inclusivity.** A few participants noted that many screening tools are based around characteristics of females experiencing trafficking and may not be as effective in screening for males and other genders. Nevada is in the process of assessing and considering revisions to make their tool more appropriate for all genders.
- **Age inclusivity and familial trafficking.** Participants from both Kentucky and Oregon reported seeing increasing numbers of cases with young children experiencing trafficking, including children 10 years old and younger. Most screening tools were developed or validated with older youth and may not be as appropriate for this

younger age group. Additionally, in Kentucky, many of the cases involving young children are related to familial trafficking. A few participants also noted that most tools include fewer indicators or questions related to familial trafficking. As part of the Office for Victims of Crime's Improving Outcomes for Child and Youth Victims of Trafficking grant, the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services is working with research partners to develop and validate a screener for children under 13 years of age.

- **Sensitivity.** Participants raised the need for a tool that screens in what agencies deem to be the right number and risk level of youth. Some tools developed for community-based service organizations or other settings with less vulnerable youth may have a threshold that is not appropriate or feasible for child welfare. One participant noted that, based on the screening criteria in a tool they piloted, almost every youth in care would screen positive for trafficking.
- **Clarity of outcomes and next steps.** A screening tool is only useful if it leads to appropriate action based on the information included. Many participants described feedback from screeners on the need for clear, concrete guidance on the tool's result or outcome and what it means for their next steps (e.g., in some tools, providing a score or outcome algorithm). Conversely, a few participants noted that such rigid scoring does not allow for the potential nuances of trafficking indicators and situations.
- **Length.** Screening tools vary significantly in length, ranging from a few minutes to as much as an hour. Many participants noted that several of the validated screening tools were eliminated from consideration due to length and the burden that may put on child welfare staff.
- **Cost.** Some existing screening tools have a cost for use or training for use. Some participants reported that these costs are prohibitive.

Reference

Dank, M., Yahner, J., Yu, L., Vasquez-Noriega, C., Gelatt, J., & Pergamit, M. (2017). *Pretesting a human trafficking screening tool in the child welfare and runaway and homeless youth systems.*

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