

Global scope of the problem

The huge transnational industry of trafficking in human beings generates approximately up to \$10 billion per year. Exact numbers of trafficked children are hard to pinpoint since child trafficking is mostly hidden, and victims often fearful of coming forward. One estimate is that 50 percent of trafficking victims are children.

Children and their families are often lured by the promise of education, better employment or a more prosperous life far from their homes. Sometimes desperate children see no alternative but exploitation for survival. Children are smuggled across international borders or trafficked within their home countries, usually from rural to urban areas. They are sold like commodities and suffer brutal assaults on their dignity and safety.

Children are forced to work in hazardous conditions, sold into domestic labour, marriage or prostitution, forcibly recruited as child soldiers, and offered up for illegal adoptions. Girls, as young as 13, mainly from Asia and Eastern Europe, are trafficked as “mail-order brides”, and commonly forced into prostitution or involved in pornography. In West and Central Africa, large numbers of children, especially girls, are trafficked for domestic work.

Vulnerability and impact

Children who are poor, have minimal education, lack vocational skills or have few prospects for job opportunities are most at risk of being trafficked. These factors, when compounded by gender, racial or ethnic discrimination, or insecurity caused by armed conflict and civil strife, create the ideal environment for trafficking networks to thrive.

Child trafficking violates the human rights guaranteed to children under international law, most notably the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children who have been trafficked face a range of dangers including violence and sexual abuse. Their social and educational development is often stunted. They are even arrested and detained as illegal aliens – often with little or no access to their parents or other support services.

UNICEF’s role

UNICEF’s global effort to combat child trafficking focuses on building a protective environment for children – a safety net of interconnected elements designed to safeguard children from violence, exploitation and abuse. Children can be shielded from trafficking when:

- Governments are truly committed to child protection.
- Attitudes and prejudices that facilitate or lead to abuses are challenged or changed.
- Media and civil society openly confront exploitation, abuse and violence.
- Protective laws are in place and consistently enforced.
- Children have the information to protect themselves from abuse and exploitation.
- All those who interact with children –teachers, parents and religious leaders alike— know how to recognize and respond to exploitation.
- Proper monitoring is in place to identify victims of exploitation and abuse.
- Services for victims of exploitation are available without discrimination.

UNICEF programmes to curb child trafficking focus on poverty reduction, education and life skills, addressing discriminatory attitudes and practices, the strengthening of existing laws and implementation and monitoring of international conventions, and helping children who have been trafficked to re-enter society.