International Centre
FOR MISSING & EXPLOITED CHILDREN

Human Trafficking

Guidance for Medical and Mental Health Professionals During and After COVID 19

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to widespread public health mandates in many countries. Governments have imposed policies requiring varying levels of social isolation, which has resulted in closures of schools and non-essential businesses, marked increases in unemployment and concerns of a major global recession. While confirmatory data is sparse at this early stage and formal peer-reviewed studies are needed, there are major concerns that the effects of the COVID pandemic will exacerbate many of the risk factors for human trafficking, leading to a rise in rates of commercial sexual and labor exploitation. The impact of COVID may increase risk in the following ways:

- **Financial stressors**: Loss of jobs, furloughs and business closures create tremendous financial stressors within families, potentially resulting in hunger, homelessness, and poverty. Adults and youth may be desperate for work, and thus vulnerable to accepting high-risk job opportunities and/or exploitative work conditions. Adults and children may fall prey to scams, be drawn into commercial sexual activities, or agree to engage in work that is hazardous and/or very poorly paid. Intra-familial trafficking of children may increase in an effort to pay for basic needs of the household.

- **Dysfunctional family life**: Forced restrictions on movement outside the home increase daily contact between family members. This may become dangerous if interpersonal relationships are already strained. Accessing normal avenues of emotional 'decompression' including 'safe places' such as work or school environments can worsen the problem. Increased tension, fueled by financial stressors, may lead to an increase in Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). Anecdotal reports from IPV service agencies in several countries indicate a significant increase in hotline calls since the COVID crisis began. This is exacerbated by restrictions in services by some agencies, related to social distancing measures. Thus, safe housing is more difficult to obtain for those exposed to violence.

- **Social isolation:** Social isolation, unemployment concerns, and anxiety about COVID infection may increase the risk of child maltreatment, especially in homes where there are other forms of interpersonal violence. Caregivers may experience COVID-related stress as irritability and aggression. Children may manifest their stress by hyperactivity, difficulty following instructions, irritability or developmental regression, which may further irritate the caregiver(s) and increase the risk of physical abuse.

Sex offenders out of work, or working from home have increased opportunity to abuse the children in the home; online offenders have increased time to spend exploiting children on the internet. Parental distraction by consequences of COVID may lead to many children

spending increased unsupervised time on the internet. If they lack self-protective online skills, they are at increased risk of exploitation in the form of sexual solicitation (grooming), sextortion (sexual coercion), production and distribution of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), engaging in livestream sex acts, and recruitment for labor or sex trafficking.

- **Diminished protection and prevention opportunities**: For many mandated reporters, contact with children and vulnerable adults is greatly reduced or even eliminated. Online contact by teachers, health professionals, and victim service providers is restricted and presents considerable challenges in the detection of violence/exploitation. Police may be distracted from anti-trafficking activities by the need to respond to COVID conditions. Healthcare providers may have limited access (telehealth/telemental health) or very rushed in-person contact with patients/clients and their focus may be on COVID concerns rather than possible exploitation/trafficking.

The Role of Medical and Mental Health Professionals

Here are some things you, as a medical or mental health professional can do to help protect and serve your patients/clients:

1. **Be aware**. Keep in mind the common risk factors for human trafficking, especially those exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. Be alert to potential indicators of exploitation and other forms of violence so you can offer resources to your patients/clients. **For additional information about human trafficking, see the "Global Resources" section of our MedPortal, then click on either "Guidelines and Protocols," or "Information on CSA/CSE/trafficking".**

2. **Provide support**: If you identify a patient/client who appears to be at risk of exploitation, or is already being trafficked, provide emotional support using a trauma-informed approach. In addition, offer resources to address vulnerabilities. Such resources may include information on IPV, human trafficking, labor rights, and services for immigrants/refugees. Providing hotline numbers and the websites of service organizations can help children and adults address conditions that may evolve into exploitation. Also consider teen hotlines, suicide hotlines, child and parent helplines and LGBTQ+ resources.

3. **Refer patients/clients to the local, national, or international Human Trafficking resource organization or agency**: This may be a governmental agency, a local multidisciplinary task force or an NGO that provides services to trafficked/exploited persons.

4. **Report to authorities, as appropriate**. You need to follow mandated reporting laws, if these are in place in your country. If not mandated to make a report, be sure to seek permission from your patient/client before contacting external resources (e.g. respect patient privacy and confidentiality). When contacting authorities, make every effort to advocate for your patient/client to be treated as a victim of harm who needs services, rather than a 'criminal' who should be penalized or deported.

5. **Increase public awareness of trafficking**: Display posters, and offer brochures and infographics on human trafficking, with the phone numbers of local, national, or international resources for victims and families.