



POLICY GOAL

State law prohibits the criminalization of child sex trafficking victims for status offenses, and misdemeanor and non-violent felony offenses committed as a result of their trafficking victimization.

To see where your state and others fall on this issue, click on the related survey chart at <https://reportcards.sharedhope.org/state-survey-charts/>.

A COMPLICATED HISTORY OF ADJUDICATIONS, convictions, and/or arrests creates numerous tangible obstacles in the lives of survivors as they attempt to regain control of their lives and strive toward wellness and independence.¹ Criminal and delinquency records hinder survivors from obtaining employment, securing safe housing, taking out loans, accessing education, traveling, and obtaining visas.² Limiting access to benefits and services perpetuates the categorization of survivors as criminals for the crimes they were induced to commit in the context of their victimization. This can be debilitating to the mental health of survivors as many struggle to view their experiences as interconnected with their trafficking victimization and consequential trauma.³

As advocates and legislators have become aware of the problems caused by criminalizing commercially sexually exploited (CSE) children, they have begun to shift away from criminalization and toward a more victim-centered approach.⁴ To prevent the harmful effects of arrests and convictions for crimes committed pursuant to their trafficking victimization, some states have enacted non-criminalization laws, designed to prohibit the criminalization of survivors for crimes committed pursuant to their victimization. Although many states have taken the important step of enacting non-criminalization laws for prostitution offenses, CSE children may still interact with juvenile or criminal justice systems due to other crimes resulting from their victimization. Oftentimes these are petty offenses, such as theft or drug possession, or status offenses, such as truancy,⁵ but commonly includes more serious offenses covering a range of conduct. Recognizing that many child sex trafficking victims are forced or compelled to engage in other criminal conduct as a result of their victimization,

state non-criminalization laws should extend to offenses beyond prostitution, including status, misdemeanor, and non-violent felony offenses committed pursuant to trafficking victimization. Importantly, the nature of sex trafficking victimization means that many child victims inevitably violate state status offense laws (e.g., truancy, running away from home, using alcohol or tobacco products). Consequently, non-criminalization laws should extend to status offenses without requiring that the offense was committed as a direct result of trafficking victimization but, instead, provide the protection to all identified victims.

When state non-criminalization provisions do not extend to offenses outside of prostitution, many child sex trafficking victims will likely be subjected to unnecessary re-traumatization through interactions with the juvenile or criminal justice system.⁶ Traffickers often force their victims to commit crimes for a multitude of reasons, including knowledge that (1) the punishment is commonly less severe for children than the adult trafficker and (2) once a victim has committed a crime, the child is less likely to seek help or support for fear of being punished for previous criminal conduct. This is especially true for victims who have outstanding warrants.⁷ Trauma responses resulting from CSE victimization can impact a victim's susceptibility to coercion to commit crimes.⁸ Additionally, victims may commit other crimes to protect themselves in self-defense, to avoid abuse by their exploiter, to avoid future sexual exploitation, or to obtain their basic needs.⁹ Expanding non-criminalization to all status, misdemeanor, and non-violent felony offenses—in addition to prostitution-related offenses—recognizes that numerous offenses can be connected to sex trafficking victimization and offers a vital alternative to the harmful practice of arresting and prosecuting minors for crimes resulting from their victimization and the traumatizing impact of juvenile or criminal justice involvement.¹⁰

DRAFTING CONSIDERATIONS:

TO ACCOMPLISH THIS POLICY GOAL, STATE LAW SHOULD...

- ▶ Ensure non-criminalization protections apply to status offenses, and misdemeanor and non-violent felony offenses related to the trafficking victimization.
- ▶ Provide survivors of child sex trafficking with access to specialized services.

RELATED ISSUES:

- 2.5 State law prohibits the criminalization of minors under 18 for prostitution offenses and establishes a services-referral protocol as an alternative to arrest.
- 2.7 State law prohibits the criminalization of child sex trafficking victims for sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation offenses, including accomplice and co-conspirator liability, committed as a result of their trafficking victimization.
- 2.8 State law provides child sex trafficking victims with an affirmative defense to violent felonies committed as a result of their trafficking victimization.
- 3.1 State law mandates a process for coordinating access to specialized services for child sex trafficking victims that does not require involvement in child-serving systems.
- 3.3 State law requires child welfare to provide access to specialized services for identified sex trafficked children and youth.
- 6.3 State law mandates ongoing, trafficking-specific training on victim-centered investigations for law enforcement.

SUPPORTING RESOURCES:

- ▶ Seeking Justice: Legal approaches to eliminated criminal liability for child sex trafficking victims
- ▶ Responding to Sex Trafficking Victim-Offender Intersectionality A Guide for Criminal Justice Stakeholders
- ▶ Bendtsen Diedhiou, Roberts, & Raino, Trauma, Coercion, and the Tools of Trafficking Exploitation: Examining the consequences for children and youth in the justice system

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- 1 *Victims of Human Trafficking Aren't Criminals* POLARIS, (Sept. 29, 2016), <https://polarisproject.org/blog/2016/09/victims-of-human-trafficking-arent-criminals/>.
 - 2 *Id.*
 - 3 Erin Williamson et al., *Evidence-based Mental Health Treatment for Victims of Human Trafficking*, U.S. DEP'T HEALTH & HUM. SERVICES <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/76116/index.pdf>.
 - 4 Cheryl Nelson Butler, *Bridge Over Troubled Water: Safe Harbor Laws for Sexually Exploited Minors*, 93 N.C. L. REV. 1284-85; SEEKING JUSTICE: LEGAL APPROACHES TO ELIMINATE CRIMINAL LIABILITY FOR JUVENILE SEX TRAFFICKING VICTIMS, SHARED HOPE INT'L (2018), https://sharedhope.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/ANALYSIS-OF-STATUTORY-APPROACHES_ver7.pdf.
 - 5 Eraka P. Bath et al., *A Specialty Court for U.S. Youth Impacted by Commercial Sexual Exploitation*, 100 CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT 2 (2020).
 - 6 *Seeking Justice*, *supra* note 4, at 18.
 - 7 *The Importance of Criminal Record Relief for Human Trafficking Survivors*, POLARIS, (Mar. 20, 2019), <https://polarisproject.org/blog/2019/03/the-importance-of-criminal-record-relief-for-human-trafficking-survivors/> (last visited Oct. 18, 2023).
 - 8 *See* SHARED HOPE INT'L, *RESPONDING TO SEX TRAFFICKING: VICTIM-OFFENDER INTERSECTIONALITY* (2020) https://sharedhope.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/SH_Responding-to-Sex-Trafficking-Victim-Offender-Intersectionality2020_FINAL.pdf.
 - 9 *Id.* at 51.
 - 10 Jennifer Musto, *Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking and the Detention-to-Protection Pipeline*, 37 DIALECTICAL ANTHROPOLOGY 257-76 (2013).