



POLICYMAKER'S GOAL 2.6

JLM POLICY GOAL 3



State law should prohibit the criminalization of child sex trafficking victims for status offenses, misdemeanors, and felony offenses committed as a result of their trafficking victimization.

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 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 any offense related to the trafficking victimization.
- ▶ Include language on procedure for moving to stay proceedings.
- ▶ Provide survivors of child sex trafficking with access to specialized services.

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).