

**Domestic Sex Trafficking:  
The Criminal Operations of the American Pimp**  
A Condensed Guide for Service Providers and Law Enforcement

*Developed by Polaris Project*

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*“Fast, I got to find out the secrets of pimping. I really want to control the whole whore. I want to be the boss of her life, even her thoughts. I got to con them that Lincoln never freed the slaves.” – Iceberg Slim, Pimp*

**A Brief Overview: The Elements of the Crime of Human Trafficking are Present**

In the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000, sex trafficking is defined as: “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act.” Also defined in the TVPA, the legal definition of “severe forms of trafficking in persons” is:

- sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age; or
- the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.

Trafficking victims can be men or women, adults or children, rich or poor, and U.S. citizens or foreign-born. Domestic sex trafficking involves U.S. citizens who are forced to perform commercial sex acts entirely within the borders of the United States.

Please view the below chart for examples of how pimps use elements of force, fraud, and coercion in domestic sex trafficking.

**FORCE**

- Beating/Slapping
- Beating with Objects (bat, tools, chains, belts, hangers, canes, cords)
- Burning
- Sexual Assault
- Rape/Gang Rape
- Confinement/Locked in
- Torture Practices
- Seasoning/Initiation

**FRAUD**

- False promises
- Deceitful enticing and affectionate behavior
- Withholding wages
- Lying about working conditions
- Lying about the promise of “a better life”
- Preying on desperation and poverty
- Blackmail, extortion

**COERCION**

- Threats of serious harm or restraint
- Threatened abuse of legal process
- Intimidation/Humiliation (Pimp circle)
- Emotional Abuse
- Climate of Fear
- Modeling abusive behavior
- Controlling daily life skills
- Creating dependency
- Establishing quotas

### Domestic Sex Trafficking in the Federal and State Criminal Paradigm

Major crimes that many individual pimps have committed through the course of their criminal behavior include:

- Sex trafficking (U.S.C. 1591)
- Involuntary servitude (U.S.C 1584)
- Physical/Sexual assault
- Assault with a deadly weapon
- Kidnapping
- Sexual abuse of a minor
- Money laundering
- Tax evasion
- False and fraudulent identities
- Fraudulent checks
- Racketeering
- Child pornography
- Pandering
- Falsifying business records

### The Pimp Subculture

Generally, pimping involves a complex relationship between a male pimp and one or more women and/or girls. In this relationship, the pimp wields complete control and domination and induces commercial sex acts in order to make money. The pimp attains authoritative levels of control and obedience through a combination of intense manipulation and feigned affection, brutal violence, and verbal, psychological, and/or emotional abuse. In the pimp relationship, the pimp is motivated primarily by the pursuit of money. He keeps all the money from the commercial sex acts of the women and girls he controls and prides himself on achieving higher and higher levels of blind obedience.

#### **The Rules and Techniques of Being a “Real” Pimp**

Pimps enforce “rules” for the women and minors under their control. A sampling of the formal “rules” of pimping is included below:

- The Term “Daddy”: Women and girls under a pimp’s control must never know his real name or identity and refer to him exclusively as “daddy.”
- Eye Contact: A woman or girl may not ever make eye contact with another pimp. If this rule is broken, the woman or girl suffers serious physical violence.
- Sidewalks and Streets: As indicated by the term “Pimps Up, Ho’s Down,” women and girls must always exist in “lower” ways than the pimp, including by standing only on the street during street prostitution. A woman or girl who ventures onto the sidewalk is severely reprimanded or forced into what is known as a “pimp circle.”
- Quotas: Pimps set nightly monetary quotas that the women or girls must reach through providing commercial sex or theft.

### The Language and Terminology of the Pimp Subculture

The following is a sample glossary of terms that are heavily used throughout the pimp culture in street prostitution.

- “Daddy” – a term used to describe one’s own pimp, evoking images of fatherhood.
- “Bottom” or “Bottom Bitch” – the woman who’s been with the pimp the longest and often takes on a mid-level controlling role to keep other victims in line.
- “Dates,” “Johns,” and “Tricks” – terms used to describe buyers of commercial sex.
- “Square” – a term used that describes trying to go straight and get out of the life, or that describes law enforcement and those that don’t understand “the game.”
- The “Stroll” or “Track” – the common area or cross-streets where street prostitution is known to occur on a nightly basis.
- “Pimp circle” – the process of multiple pimps swarming and surrounding one woman or girl and hissing insults at her, for the purposes of humiliation and intimidation.
- “Wife in Law” – each individual in a group of women or girls that are with the same pimp. “Family” and “folks” also are synonyms.

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- “Stable” – refers to the group of women and girls under a pimp’s control (i.e., a pimp’s stable).
- “Out of Pocket” – a term used to describe when a woman or girl breaks “the rules” by making eye contact with another pimp.

### **Initial Recruiting Behavior: Erecting the Front of False Love and Selling the Dream**

Pimps manipulate their victims beginning with an initial period of false love and feigned affection. This initial period is critical to attaining long-term mind-control. This period often includes:

- Warmth, gifts, compliments, and sexual and physical intimacy
- Elaborate promises of a better life, fast money, and future luxuries
- Purposeful and pre-meditated targeting of vulnerability (e.g., runaways, throwaways)
- Purposeful targeting of minors due to naivete, virginity, and youthful appearance

### **An Ongoing Search for Victims and the Relentless Pursuit of Wealth and Power**

Pimps are known to engage in constant recruiting to attempt to entice women and children into their web of control. Common recruiting locations include:

- Junior high and high schools
- Courtrooms
- Hallways of court buildings
- Foster homes
- Bus stations
- Group homes
- Homeless shelters
- Halfway houses
- Restaurants and bars
- Parks and playgrounds

### **“Seasoning” Women and Girls to be Ready for Commercial Sex with Strangers**

The process of “breaking-down” a girl from healthy adolescent sexual boundaries to commercial sex with strangers is often referred to as “grooming” or “seasoning.” It is a systematic process that has been documented and replicated by pimps nationwide. In essence, this process aims to achieve complete control over someone’s identity or individuality using a combination of physical, mental, and emotional means. In the trafficking paradigm, this process involves force, fraud, and coercion, as elaborated below. Seasoning often involves:

- Beating/Slapping/Whipping – With hands, fists, and kicking, as well as with objects such as bats, tools, chains, belts, hangers, canes, and cords
- Burning – Of personal items and items of meaning to foster hopelessness and demoralization or directly burning women and girls using cigarette/cigar butts
- Sexual assault – Rape or gang rape
- Confinement – Using torture practices such as confinement to lock women and girls in closets, trunks of cars, or rooms for indeterminate amounts of time.
- Other torture techniques – Such as deprivation of food or water or various forms of bondage such as chaining individuals to items or tying them up.
- Emotional abuse – Direct verbal insults, name-calling, threats, mind control, brainwashing, cognitive re-programming
- Re-naming – Offering “nicknames” both for endearment and to erase former identity
- Creating dependencies – By instructing how to walk, how to talk, what to wear, when to eat, when to sleep, and where to sleep.
- Removal from familiarity and support structures – By transporting a woman or minor to a new location where she knows no one
- Document confiscation – Of identification documents (ID, birth certificate, SS number)
- Forced sexual education – Inducement of viewing pornography to learn to have sex

The Role of Money and Debt in the Pimp Relationship

Boiled down to its very essence, money is oftentimes the primary motivating factor driving pimp behavior.

**Quotas**

It is widely-known and well-documented that pimps establish nightly monetary quotas that the women and girls under their control must make in order to end each night of commercial sex. These quotas typically fall in the range of \$500 - \$1,000 each night. Through whatever means necessary (including forced theft), the woman or girl must reach these quotas each night to be allowed to eat or sleep. If she does not make enough money, the woman or girl will be forced back out into her venue of commercial sex until she reaches her quota. Quotas are strictly enforced, and the punishment for failing to meet a quota is severe physical retaliation from the pimp or other torture methods. It is also essential to note that in pimp-controlled situations, *the women and girls keep zero of this money and turn over 100 percent of the profits to the pimp.*

**How much income do pimps really make?**

The following calculation is intended to demonstrate how pimps make money off the women and girls held under their control. Much or all of this income can be evaded from Federal reporting and taxes.

- Polaris Project, a Washington, DC-based nonprofit working with victims of human trafficking recently conducted an informal analysis of a pimp's wages, based on direct client accounts. One teenage girl was forced to meet quotas of \$500/night, 7 days a week and gave the money to her trafficker each night. This particular pimp also controlled three other women. Based on these numbers, Polaris Project estimates that the pimp made **\$632,000 in one year** from four young women and girls.

### SERVING VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC SEX TRAFFICKING

#### Why Don't They Just Seek Help?

For a wide variety of reasons, the women and girls under a pimp's control will often not self-identify as victims of human trafficking or seek help on their own. The following is a list of common reasons why victims of domestic sex trafficking cannot or will not leave their exploitative situations:

- **Captivity/Confinement** – locked indoors, locked in rooms, locked in closets
- **Frequent accompaniment/guarded** – interactions are monitored or controlled by the pimp
- **Use and threat of violence** – severe physical retaliation (beatings, rapes, sexual assault)
- **Fear** – of physical retaliation, of death, or of arrest
- **Use and threat of reprisals against loved ones** – against children or family members
- **Shame** – about the activities they have been forced to perform
- **Self-blame** – brainwashed by the pimp to blame themselves
- **Dependency** – on the pimp after years of control
- **Debt bondage** – may have a debt to the pimp that they feel they need to pay off
- **Loyalty to the pimp** – Stockholm syndrome, similarities to Battered Women's Syndrome
- **Social barriers and unfamiliarity with surroundings** – due to frequent movement
- **No personal ID or documentation** – which is often confiscated by the pimp
- **Distrust of law enforcement** – brainwashed to fear law enforcement by the pimp or learned distrust of law enforcement due to direct negative experiences
- **Isolation** – from others, from other support structures, from means of relief
- **Misinformation and false promises** – have been told lies or deceitful information
- **Hopelessness/Resignation** – feelings of no self-worth, disassociation, giving up, apathy
- **Lack of knowledge of social systems** – may not understand social service infrastructure or how and where to access help

#### Why is it hard to identify domestic sex trafficking victims?

In addition to the above factors, the following factors also complicate the process of identifying domestic sex trafficking victims:

- **Frequent movement** – may not be in one place long enough to form social connections
- **Distrust of service providers** – generalized impressions and perceived judgmental attitudes
- **Lies and false stories** – may be self-generated or trained to tell lies, fake names, fake SSN
- **Rarely come into contact with institutional systems** – that are designed to help them
- **Low likelihood of multiple encounters** – within institutions or through doing outreach

#### Indicators of Domestic Sex Trafficking

It is important to be on the look-out for potential indicators of trafficking. Although non-exhaustive, the following is a list of potential indicators. Each of these indicators may or may not be a tell-tale sign of domestic sex trafficking, but it is recommended that each be taken in an overall context of appearance, demeanor, and affect. Indicators include:

- Presence of an overly controlling and abusive 'boyfriend'
- Inability to look in the eyes or face of people, especially her 'boyfriend'
- Injuries/signs of physical abuse or torture
- Signs of malnourishment
- Restricted or controlled communication
- Demeanor - Fear, anxiety, depression, submissive, tense, nervous
- Claims of being an adult although appearance suggests adolescent features
- Lack of identification documents (ID, birth certificate, Social Security card)

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- Presence of different aliases and ages
- Lack of knowledge of a given community or whereabouts
- Frequent movement
- Claims of “just visiting” and inability to clarify addresses
- Few or no personal possessions
- Few or no personal financial records
- Inconsistencies in their story
- Inappropriately dressed for court
- Reporting an excessive amount of sexual partners during a health check-up

### **Tips for First Encounters and Interactions with Potential Domestic Sex Trafficking Victims:**

The following tips have been compiled based on Polaris Project’s direct client service experience with victims of domestic sex trafficking. Tips include:

- Building TRUST is a number one priority
- REASSURE the potential victim that:
  - You are there to help and you care about them
  - You are NOT trying to arrest or incarcerate them
- One-on-one interactions are ideal
  - Attempt one-on-one interactions as much as possible
  - If possible, no one else should be in the room or within listening distance (interactions should occur in private settings and out of sight)
  - One-on-one interactions are ideal for building trust and receiving an honest account
- Terminology and cultural sensitivity are important
  - Avoid technical terminology and jargon
  - Knowing appropriate “street terms” helps to build trust
- Many victims do not self-identify as “trafficking victims”
  - Expect the potential victim not to know the term “human trafficking”
- Do not expect to receive the full and honest story during a first encounter
  - Be aware of and expect lies, canned stories, untruths
  - Canned stories may include “I’m just visiting,” “I’m from out of town,” or “I do this on my own because I want to – I don’t have a pimp.”
  - Do not be offended if they lie; do not take it personally
  - Women and girls may have been coached to give certain stories
  - It often takes up to 3-5 encounters before the true story may emerge
- Be on their level
  - Avoid victim-blaming attitudes, body language, or behaviors
  - Avoid “gasps” or acting “shocked”
  - Avoid pity, judgment, or patronization
- Assess safety and threat levels
  - Ask the woman or girl if she feels like she is under threat or if she is with her “folks”
- Anticipate and expect that the client may return to the pimp
  - Due to high levels of loyalty, brain-washing, and/or fear, victims may return to their pimp during the course of receiving services
- Understand her world view
  - The victim may have a very difficult time understanding that she has been a victim of a crime and that the pimp may be arrested for what he has done to her. This difficulty occurs because:
    - Pimps brainwash the women by repeatedly telling her that no one will listen to a ‘ho’ if she tries to get help from the police or anyone else.
    - Typically the women in prostitution are arrested rather than the pimp or men who buy their services.

The Road to Self-Sufficiency: Service Needs and Considerations

**General Comprehensive Service Needs of Domestic Sex Trafficking Victims**

Domestic sex trafficking victims often require a comprehensive service response to meet their varied and diverse service needs. The following list outlines various general types of services that these trafficking cases often involve:

- Emergency, Transitional, and Long-term housing
- Legal services
- Medical and Mental health services
- Clothing and food
- Court and daily accompaniment
- Crisis intervention
- Emotional support and counseling
- Employment assistance
- Protection/safety planning
- Social service advocacy
- Transportation
- Literacy education (school, G.E.D.)
- Assistance in accessing government benefits

**“Safety Assessments” and Creating a Safety Plan**

The following questions are helpful to ask during a brief safety and threat assessment for a domestic sex trafficking victim. The answers to these questions will likely help to chart the course of service. Questions include:

- Where is the trafficker?
- Are you living under any current threats or fears?
- Are you afraid someone is looking for you?
- Are you concerned for your safety? Why? How?
- Does anyone else know where you are right now?
- Contingency planning
  - What to do in an encounter with the trafficker?
  - What to do if trafficker calls?
  - Phone protocols/Internet and email protocols

**Mental Health Effects and the Importance of Counseling**

The following list outlines the various types of mental health effects that victims of domestic sex trafficking may present. The presence or absence of these mental health factors also will likely chart the course of services. Mental health issues include:

- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Depression
- Disconnection from feelings and flat affect
- Anxiety disorders
- Self-blame
- Hopelessness, helplessness
- Nightmares – dreams of rapes, sexual assaults, physical abuse
- Anger and anger management issues
- Suicidal ideation and attempts
- Paranoia
- Stockholm Syndrome
- Spiritual disruption
- Fatalism and rage
- Dual diagnosis
- Self-care issues
- Sleeping issues
- Disassociative disorders