Addressing Online Harassment and Abuse in Technology-Facilitated Human Trafficking

TO:	Grant recipients and organizations preventing and responding to human trafficking
SUBJECT:	Addressing Online Harassment and Abuse in Technology-Facilitated Human Trafficking

Background

In June 2022, the White House Task Force to Address Online Harassment and Abuse (Task Force) launched with a roundtable of experts, including individuals with lived experience, on "increasing support for survivors of online harassment and abuse, expanding research to better understand the impact and scope of the problem, enhancing prevention… and strengthening accountability for offenders and platforms."[1] Online harassment and abuse includes the online recruitment and exploitation of individuals for human trafficking as well as associated coercive mechanisms such as the non-consensual distribution of sexually explicit digital content and child sexual abuse materials, cyberstalking and digital surveillance, and gendered disinformation.

Online harassment and abuse can have serious effects on a survivor's physical and mental health and social relationships. At the Task Force's launch, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy noted the effects of online abuse, specifically depression, suicide, and anxiety, when technology platforms had too few safeguards: "The ripples that are generated by this trauma can be long-lasting but also far reaching. For every individual who is harmed, there are also family members and friends who experience distress and anxiety as they try to care for their loved one."[2]

Federal agencies recognize the intersection between online harassment and abuse and technology-facilitated human trafficking (e.g., recruitment for labor or sex, enticement through social media, advertisement of services, livestreaming of child sex trafficking) as reflected in the

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[1] From Fact Sheet: Presidential Memorandum Establishing the White House Task Force to Address Online Harassment and Abuse, The White House, (2022), https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/16/fact-sheet-presidential-memorandum-establishing-the-white-house-task-force-to-address-online-harassment-and-abuse/

[2] Remarks by Surgeon General Vivek Murthy during the White House Task Force to Address Online Harassment and Abuse Launch event, The White House, (2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmdgDt9Pgs0

National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking.[3] For example, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) will be working with the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security, the technology industry, and child welfare agencies to locate children missing from care vulnerable to human trafficking (Priority Action 3.2.2). Federal agencies will also work with the social media and technology industries to identify barriers and solutions related to voluntary reporting of suspected human trafficking on their platforms (Priority Action 3.2.3).

In response to the priorities laid out by the Task Force[4] and the National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking, the Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP) in the HHS Administration for Children and Families (ACF) produced this Information Memorandum (IM) for grant recipients and organizations preventing and responding to human trafficking who may be positioned to address online abuse and harassment and technology-facilitated human trafficking. The IM explains how technology is misused by human traffickers, provides examples of how HHS OTIP is leveraging technology to combat human trafficking, and notes additional resources.

The IM also contributes to strengthening awareness on the "use and abuse of technology," this year's theme of the United Nations World Day Against Trafficking in Persons.[5] Information on efforts supported by HHS OTIP contributes to other U.S. multilateral commitments, including as a participating State to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) "to take measures, where appropriate, to enhance capacities for monitoring, detecting, investigating, and disrupting all forms of trafficking in human beings facilitated by [information and communication technologies]."[6]

The Misuse of Technology by Human Traffickers

Human traffickers misuse and abuse technology in each step of the trafficking process:[7]
- **Recruiting**: Includes proactive targeting of vulnerability and enticement online through social networking with people seeking connection, migrants and displaced persons seeking safety, and individuals seeking employment

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[3] See The National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking, The White House, (2021), https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/National-Action-Plan-to-Combat-Human-Trafficking.pdf

[4] See Memorandum on the Establishment of the White House Task Force to Address Online Harassment and Abuse, The White House, (2022), https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/06/16/memorandum-on-the-establishment-of-the-white-house-task-force-to-address-online-harassment-and-abuse/

[5] See United Nations World Day Against Trafficking in Persons: Use and Abuse of Technology, United Nations, (2022), https://www.un.org/en/observances/end-human-trafficking-day

[6] From Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Decision No. 1107 Addendum to the OSCE Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings: One Decade Later, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, (2013), https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/6/109532.pdf

[7] See Fact Sheet: Human Trafficking, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office on Trafficking in Persons, (2017), https://www.acf.hhs.gov/otip/fact-sheet/resource/fshumantrafficking

- **Harboring:** Includes the withholding of technology and communications to keep individuals isolated and using digital surveillance to monitor movements
- **Transporting:** Includes arranging travel and maintaining control over someone's movements including through ride-sharing apps
- **Providing, Soliciting, and Patronizing:** Includes connecting with potential consumers through advertisements on the open and dark web, using encrypted communications, exploiting through digital media and livestreaming of abuse, and moving criminal transactions through anonymized financial platforms

As human traffickers have increasingly used technology platforms to sustain their operations through the COVID-19 pandemic and amidst humanitarian crises in Ukraine,[8] regional roundtables of experts have gathered in Europe[9] and Asia[10] to discuss the concerning trends of technology-facilitated trafficking. Many of these international trends also apply to the misuse of technology by human traffickers in the United States, including the key challenges of increased anonymity for perpetrators, increased ease of control of individuals being exploited over greater distances, scale of commercialization, ability to reduce workforce of criminal networks, and legislative loopholes where policy lags behind technological advancements.

While human traffickers misuse technology for both labor and sex trafficking, emerging data on technology-facilitated human trafficking in the United States has focused on sex trafficking, particularly of children.

Data from the National Human Trafficking Hotline

The National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH), funded by HHS OTIP, has been monitoring the intersections of online abuse and human trafficking over the last several years. The NHTH identified remote interactive sexual acts and pornography as 2 of the 25 reported types of human trafficking experienced in the United States, based on an analysis of more than 32,000 cases of human trafficking documented by calls into the hotline between December 2007 and December 2016.[11]

Remote interactive sexual acts are live commercial sex acts simulated through remote contact through technologies such as webcams, text-based chats, and phone lines. Human traffickers recruit people into engaging in remote interactive sexual acts through promises of lucrative

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[8] See Recommendations on Enhancing Efforts to Identify and Mitigate Risks of Trafficking in Human Beings Online as a Result of the Humanitarian Crisis in Ukraine, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, (2022), https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/c/516423_0.pdf

[9] See Online and Technology-Facilitated Trafficking in Human Beings: Summary and Recommendations, Council of Europe, (2022), https://rm.coe.int/online-and-technology-facilitated-trafficking-in-human-beings-summary-/1680a5e10c

[10] See Highlights of the 2021 Roundtable on Tech-Facilitated Trafficking in Human Beings in Central Asia, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, (2021), https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/7/497032.pdf

[11] See The Typology of Modern Slavery: Defining Sex and Labor Trafficking in the United States, Polaris, (2017), https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Polaris-Typology-of-Modern-Slavery-1.pdf

earning potential or professional modeling opportunities. Individuals may also be recruited by intimate partners or individuals who feign romantic interest to gain their trust. In the less than 80 cases identified by the NHTH between 2007 and 2016, most individuals exploited were domestic adult females. Minors were victimized in just under half of all cases. During the same reporting period, the NHTH also documented more than 600 cases where people were made to generate sexually explicit content—including child sexual abuse material. Sixty-one percent of the cases involved children where family members, individual traffickers, or other perpetrators induced children to produce visual material depicting sexually explicit displays, sexual activity, or sexual abuse, and distributed the material for financial gain. In cases involving adult exploitation, family members, intimate partners, or individual traffickers earned profits from distributing a person's non-consenting appearance in images and videos. As sexually explicit content is now largely online rather than in print, many of these situations involved individuals who were made to leverage technology to generate or distribute content.

More recent NHTH data shows a 22 percent increase in online recruitment into trafficking schemes in 2020 compared to 2019.[12] Public health measures implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., social distancing, quarantining, temporary closures of commercial and public spaces) may have made it more difficult for human traffickers to recruit individuals from previously common recruitment sites. For example, reported recruitment from strip clubs decreased by 46 percent, from group and foster homes decreased by 70 percent, and from schools decreased by 38 percent compared to 2019. Human traffickers shifted strategies to online recruitment, resulting in the Internet being reported as the top recruitment location for all forms of trafficking in 2020. In particular, there was a 125 percent increase in reports of recruitment on Facebook and a 95 percent increase on Instagram compared to the previous year. Other online platforms recruiting for both labor and sex trafficking included dating sites, chat rooms, and mobile apps.

Additional Data on Increase in Technology-Facilitated Child Trafficking and Abuse

Analysis from the NHTH on the increase in technology-facilitated human trafficking in 2020 aligns with findings from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) based on a record-setting year of 21.7 million global reports of suspected child sexual exploitation made to the CyberTipline in 2020. One of the most significant findings from the 2020 report was a 97.5 percent increase in reports of online enticement schemes compared to the prior year.[13] Online enticement includes escalating requests of sexually explicit images, videos, and conversations that can lead to in-person meetings and selling or trading of child sexual abuse

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[12] See Analysis of 2020 National Human Trafficking Hotline Data, Polaris, (2020), https://polarisproject.org/2020-us-national-human-trafficking-hotline-statistics/

[13] See Rise in Online Enticement and Other Trends: NCMEC Releases 2020 Exploitation Stats, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2021), https://www.missingkids.org/blog/2021/rise-in-online-enticement-and-other-trends--ncmec-releases-2020-

material. This type of exploitation can occur across dozens of technology platforms including social media, messaging apps, and online gaming.[14]

In 2021, overall reports to the CyberTipline increased by 35 percent from 2020, and reports of online enticement increased by 17 percent, indicating the continued need for more awareness of the intersections of online harassment and abuse and risks for human trafficking victimization. In 2021, there were 16,032 reports of child sex trafficking to the CyberTipline, a 36 percent increase from 2019.[15]

Additional research indicating the importance of parents and caregivers talking about online safety with children comes from a survey of 1,000 children aged 9-17 about their own experiences and attitudes about self-generated child sexual abuse material.[16] The report found:
- 1 in 7 nine- to twelve-year-old children said they had shared their own sexually explicit imagery in 2020 (up from 1 in 20 in 2019).
- 1 in 6 nine- to twelve-year-old children admitted to seeing non-consensually reshared sexually explicit imagery of other children (up from 1 in 9 in 2019).
- 1 in 5 nine- to twelve-year-old children agreed that it is normal for peers their age to share sexually explicit imagery (up from 1 in 8 in 2019).
- 50 percent of nine- to seventeen-year-old children who reported sending sexually explicit imagery reported sending it to someone they had never met in real life (up from 37 percent in 2019).
- 41 percent of nine- to seventeen-year-old children who reported sending sexually explicit imagery believed they were sending the images to an adult.

A more recent report that surveyed 1,200 youth aged 9-17 in 2021, highlighted the importance of online connections to children's social networks where 1 in 3 minors considered an online connection among their closest confidants.[17] The report also found that:
- 24 percent of teens connected online with someone they believed to be aged 30 or older.
- 63 percent of nine- to twelve-year-old children had online interactions with unfamiliar adults.

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[14] See The Online Enticement of Children: An In-Depth Analysis of CyberTipline Reports, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, (2021), https://www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/ncmec-analysis/Online%20Enticement%20Pre-Travel.pdf

[15] See CyberTipline 2021 Report, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, (2022), https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline/cybertiplinedata

[16] From Self-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material: Youth Attitudes and Experiences in 2020: Findings from 2020 Quantitative Research Among 9-17 Year Olds, Thorn, (2021), https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/SGCSAM_Attidues&Experiences_YouthMonitoring_FullReport_2021_FINAL%20(1).pdf?utm_source=website&utm_medium=blog&utm_campaign=SG_monitoring_2021

[17] See Online Grooming: Examining Risky Encounters Amid Everyday Digital Socialization – Findings from 2021 Qualitative and Quantitative Research Among 9-17-Year-Olds, Thorn, (2022), https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/2022_Online_Grooming_Report.pdf

- 40 percent of children have been approached by someone online attempting "to befriend and manipulate" them.
- 54 percent of children believed online grooming is a common experience for peers their age.
- 31 percent of nine- to twelve-year-old boys and 25 percent of girls reported receiving a cold solicitation for sexually explicit imagery (a "cold solicitation" is communication from online contact with no previous interaction).
- 51 percent of teenage girls and 42 percent of teenage boys reported receiving a cold solicitation for sexually explicit imagery.
- 1 in 4 LGBTQ+ children received a cold solicitation for sexually explicit imagery on a daily or weekly basis (compared to 1 in 7 of all children).
- 2 in 3 children have been asked to move from a public chat into a private conversation on a different platform.

The Use of Technology to Combat Human Trafficking

A 2020 report from the OSCE and Tech Against Trafficking identified 305 technology tools used to combat human trafficking as of December 2019.[18] Twenty-six percent of the tools were used to identify individuals experiencing and perpetrating trafficking. Sixty-two percent of the tools were used to raise awareness, manage supply chains, analyze data trends, assess corporate risks, and engage workers. Only 6 percent of the tools were used to provide support for individuals who experienced trafficking.

Notably, governments developed only 9 percent of technology tools and initiatives compared to the tools developed by the private sector (40 percent) and non-government organizations (33 percent). Twenty-six percent of tools responding to labor trafficking were in use in North America, compared to 46 percent of tools responding to sex trafficking. The report also highlights ethical considerations in using technology to combat human trafficking, including importance of protecting data privacy and security and establishing consent protocols with survivors of trafficking in the development of technology initiatives.

Recommendations from the analysis of how technology can be used to prevent and respond to human trafficking focused on the importance of multi-sectoral collaborations and having clarity on measurable outcomes of technology-facilitated interventions. Recommendations for governments include adopting policies to reduce the misuse of technology and incentivize its prosocial use, increasing resources to enable organizations responsible for identifying human trafficking cases to invest in technology-based solutions to better support survivors, and strengthening partnerships with the technology industry to scale technology initiatives in anti-trafficking responses. Such recommendations align with many of the commitments the United States has already made in national strategies including the National Action Plan to Combat

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[18] See Leveraging Innovation to Fight Trafficking in Human Beings: A Comprehensive analysis of Technology Tools, OSCE Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Tech Against Trafficking, (2020), https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/6/455206_1.pdf

Human Trafficking and through the work of the White House Task Force on Online Harassment and Abuse. The sections below provide a summary of how HHS OTIP has leveraged technology in its anti-trafficking programs.

Service Delivery

OTIP uses technology throughout its programming to support survivors of human trafficking. In 2019, OTIP partnered with the ACF Office of the Chief Information Officer to launch the Shepherd Case Management System, streamlining how case managers request assistance on behalf of foreign national minors and adults who have experienced human trafficking. Through this system, OTIP securely issues HHS Certification, Interim Assistance, and Eligibility Letters quicker; expedites connection to assistance programs; and enables benefits-issuing agencies for real-time verification. OTIP produced videos describing the Adult Certification[19] and Child Eligibility[20] processes and offers virtual monthly webinars that train participants on how to submit requests.[21] As a result of these efforts, OTIP received ACT-IAC's Igniting Innovation Award,[22] Government Information Technology Executive Council's Emerging Technology Award,[23] and FedHealthIT's Innovation Award[24] for improving services and government operations and for reducing case processing time by 50 percent.

OTIP funds the NHTH to use technology to connect with survivors and the public seeking support on human trafficking cases in the United States and U.S. territories. In 2020, the NHTH received more than 51,000 signals related to human trafficking concerns by phone (29,426), text (13,562), online tips (2,907), emails (4,143), and webchat (1,629). Other OTIP grant recipients have increasingly leveraged technology during the pandemic response to sustain critical outreach and comprehensive case management services including transitioning to remote operations, adapting telehealth practices, and increasing use of digital communications.

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[19] See How to Apply for a Certification Letter for Foreign National Adults Who Experienced Human Trafficking, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office on Trafficking in Persons, (2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ECG3pr3HcE&t=2s

[20] See How to Apply for an Eligibility Letter for Foreign National Minors Who Experienced Human Trafficking, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office on Trafficking in Persons, (2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_Bi6UO4iak

[21] See Monthly Webinars: Responding to Foreign National Minor Victims of Trafficking, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office on Trafficking in Persons, (2018), https://www.acf.hhs.gov/otip/training-technical-assistance/resource/monthlywebinars

[22] See REI and ACF Win Innovation Award for Improving Services to Human Trafficking Victims, REI Systems, (2021), https://www.actiac.org/documents/rei-and-acf-win-innovation-award-improving-services-human-trafficking-victims

[23] See OTIP Online Case Management System Wins Digital Experience Technology Award, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office on Trafficking in Persons, (2020), https://www.acf.hhs.gov/otip/news/otip-shepherd-case-management-system-digital-experience-technology-award

[24] See 2021 FedHealthIT Innovation Award Winners Announced, FedHealthIT, (2021), https://www.fedhealthit.com/2021/05/2021-fedhealthit-innovation-award-winners-announced/

Public Engagement

OTIP publishes materials through various digital channels to connect with diverse audiences, build the capacity of service providers, and spread awareness about human trafficking (e.g., blogs, digital newsletters, social media). Technology is also critical for OTIP's training and technical assistance activities. OTIP delivers SOAR Online virtual training through the National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center.[25] In 2021, OTIP trained more than 112,000 recipients on how to identify human trafficking within health and human service settings and provide trauma-informed responses.

Additionally, OTIP partnered with StoryCorps and the ACF Administration for Native Americans to launch the Voices of Freedom Initiative, a digital podcast-style collection preserving the voices of those who have informed, shaped, and contributed to the successes of the anti-trafficking field over the past two decades.[26] StoryCorps' online platform allowed people across the United States to record over 100 conversations with colleagues, friends, and family – regardless of where they were located.

Prevention Education

OTIP's Human Trafficking Youth Prevention Education Demonstration Program funds local educational agencies to develop and implement programs to prevent human trafficking victimization.[27] School staff and students receive skills-based and age-appropriate human trafficking trainings supported by collaborations between the school, a partner non-government organization, and public safety agencies. Prevention education content for students addresses risk factors for trafficking, builds knowledge and skills to develop resilience, and encourages the adoption of healthy behaviors online and offline.

For example, Dekalb County School District in Georgia is implementing the *Not a Number* violence prevention curriculum in 18 high schools throughout the district. The curriculum, developed by Love146, incorporates the role of technology-facilitated human trafficking into prevention education programming. Dekalb County school staff receive training on how recruitment, enticement, and exploitation can manifest online and how the internet shapes the way students communicate with one another and connect with the world. School social workers, counselors, and educators also receive training on having trauma-informed

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[25] See SOAR Online, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center, (2022), https://nhttac.acf.hhs.gov/soar/soar-for-individuals/soar-online

[26] See Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of Efforts to Address Human Trafficking, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office on Trafficking in Persons, (2021), https://www.acf.hhs.gov/otip/partnerships/voices

[27] See Human Trafficking Youth Prevention Education Demonstration Program: Information and Data, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office on Trafficking in Persons, (2020), https://www.acf.hhs.gov/otip/grant-funding/htype-human-trafficking-youth-prevention-education-demonstration-program

conversations with youth to assess for risk factors and support students with the tools they need to feel safe and seek help when experiencing exploitation.

Additional Resources

U.S. Government Resources

- The Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse
  https://www.whitehouse.gov/gpc/briefing-room/2022/03/18/launching-the-global-partnership-for-action-on-gender-based-online-harassment-and-abuse/

- The White House Task Force to Address Online Harassment and Abuse
  https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/06/16/memorandum-on-the-establishment-of-the-white-house-task-force-to-address-online-harassment-and-abuse/

- Voluntary Principles to Counter Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
  https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1256061/download

- The Human Trafficking Technology Roadmap: A Targeted Development Strategy for the Department of Homeland Security
  https://www.ll.mit.edu/r-d/publications/human-trafficking-technology-roadmap-targeted-development-strategy-department

- The Role of Technology in Countering Trafficking in Persons
  https://www.congress.gov/event/116th-congress/house-event/110942

Online Safety Resources for Parents and Children

- Thorn for Parents
  https://parents.thorn.org/

- Stop Sextortion
  https://www.stopsextortion.com/

- NCMEC NetSmartz Resources for Parents, Educators & Communities
  https://www.missingkids.org/netsmartz/resources

- NCMEC KidsSmartz Child Safety Program for Parents of Children Grades K-5
  https://www.missingkids.org/education/kidsmartz

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