



Quarterly CTIP Newsletter

Agency Highlights

New CTIP Student Guides - Helping Parents Navigate Difficult Topics and Conversations

Contributed by: Combating Trafficking in Persons Office

Starting a conversation about human trafficking and online exploitation with your child can feel uncomfortable. For many parents, it is not a topic that comes up naturally. Some worry about saying too much too soon while others are unsure how to bring it up at all. However, research continues to show that traffickers target minors, often taking advantage of everyday situations where young people may not recognize the risks, so it is important for you to be pro-active in discussing these risks with your children.

Military-connected students may face added challenges such as frequent moves, transitions to new schools, and experiencing time apart from one or both parents due to deployment. These situations can make it harder to build stable support systems, which is why it is important to provide them early on with the tools and knowledge to recognize and respond to potential risks.

To help families navigate this topic, the Department of War (DoW) Combating Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) Office developed two new student guides featured in this [PSA](#). These resources help military-connected parents/trusted adults and students better understand common vulnerabilities in their daily lives and learn how to prevent human trafficking and online exploitation.

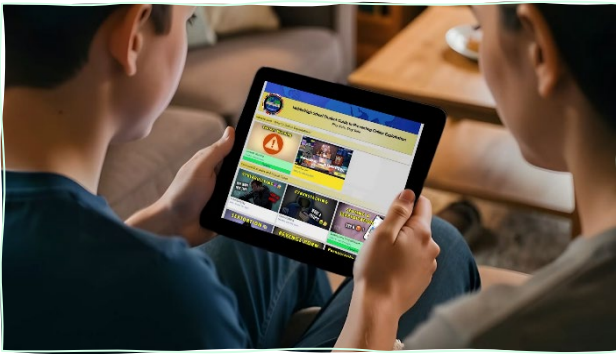
Importance of Parent/Trusted Adult Involvement

While some CTIP material is intended for older students to view on their own, these two new guides are designed to be used with a parent or trusted adult. The content is age-appropriate, but it still includes serious topics that can be confusing or upsetting. We encourage parents or trusted adults to be present so they can help students understand the information and process what they are learning. Parents know their children best and can decide how to present the material or when to pause for a discussion. This approach can make it easier for them to come back later if they encounter a situation that does not feel right. As risks continue to exist both online and in everyday life, making sure your children are not navigating them alone is one of the most important steps you can take toward prevention.

A **trusted adult** is someone who can provide advice, answer difficult questions, share their values and/or faith traditions, and help - especially in an abusive, hurtful, or destructive situation or relationship. A trusted adult will give the support and help needed and deserved. This is a short list of people who might be that trusted adult:

- ❖ Parent, grandparent, or other relative
- ❖ Teacher, especially a teacher who seems to understand the problem(s) the person is going through
- ❖ Coach, sports instructor, or athletic director
- ❖ Guidance counselor
- ❖ School administrator such as a principal or vice principal
- ❖ School security officer
- ❖ Club or activity leader
- ❖ A friend's parents
- ❖ Religious leader like a pastor, youth pastor, chaplain, rabbi, imam, or elder in a religious institution
- ❖ Police officer or other law enforcement official
- ❖ ROTC or military instructor
- ❖ Social worker or community worker
- ❖ Doctor or nurse

DoW CTIP Student Guide to Preventing Online Exploitation

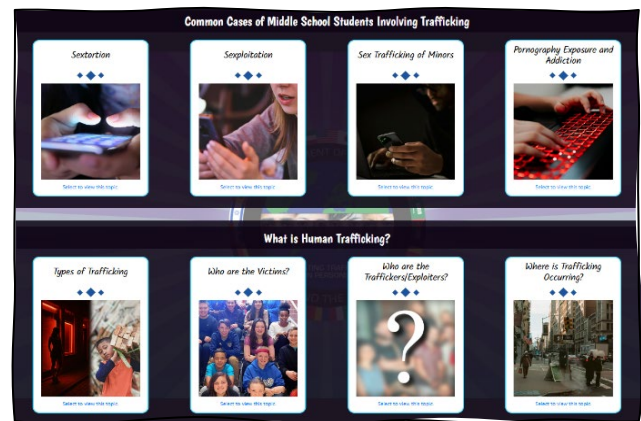


[CTIP’s Guide to Preventing Online Exploitation](#) focuses on how young people interact in digital spaces, helping them recognize unsafe situations before they escalate. Pre-teens and teens spend significant time on social media, messaging apps, and gaming platforms. This exposes them to risks they may not fully understand yet. The guide explains how online exploitation occurs, including situations like cyberbullying, grooming, and sextortion. It also provides children with clear steps they can take to protect themselves and what to do if they or someone they know is being targeted.

Online exploitation reports continue to rise. Despite new ways to detect and remove harmful online content, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) said it saw a 1,325 % increase in cases involving online exploitation, including child sexual abuse material (CSAM), between 2023 and 2024.

DoW CTIP Guide to Human Trafficking – What Your Middle Schooler Needs to Know

[CTIP’s Guide to Human Trafficking – What Your Middle Schooler Needs to Know](#) takes a more introductory approach, designed for students who may be learning about the topic for the first time. It presents the information in a clear and age-appropriate way, using real-life situations that middle school students can recognize. The Guide covers topics like what human trafficking is, how it happens, warning signs, and indicators of an exploitative relationship. The guide focuses on hope and help, emphasizing prevention and making good choices. Students are encouraged to reach out to a trusted adult if something does not feel right. The goal is to help students feel informed and prepared, without overwhelming them or creating fear.



Both guides are designed not just to inform, but to engage, taking into account how young people learn and process information. The material is broken into short, interactive segments that are easier to absorb. Students can move through the material at their own pace, choosing topics that interest them while still reinforcing awareness and safety. Features like videos, quizzes, and interactive activities help keep their attention while making the content easier to remember. Each of the Guides also include:

- Peer communicators (high school students) as narrators
- A multi-media, interactive approach with games, activities, and quizzes
- A non-linear format - students can choose Action Cards that interest them
- Stories of survivors who were trafficked when they were minors
- Real cases of students victimized by human trafficking
- An “Immediate Help” Banner on every Action Card

NOTE

Although the guides have been created for military connected students, we believe that they will be of interest to all students and their parents/ guardians.

Are Children Recruited by Organized Crime? Child Soldiers: A New Look at an Old Issue

Contributed by: Combating Trafficking in Persons Office

An egregious and brutal case in the U.S. called attention to the ways in which Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) exploit children. In 2016 in New York two high school girls were murdered by gang members who were juveniles themselves. The case showed how TCOs and Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) recruit children as young as 11 years old to commit crimes involving extreme violence, including robbery, extortion, and murder.¹

Signs and indicators of children being exploited by TCOs or FTOs

- ◆ Sudden changes in a child's friendship groups.
- ◆ Disappearance for long periods of time, which could mean initiation into gangs, cartels, and other organized criminal groups.
- ◆ Changing patterns of behavior, including being more aggressive or more secretive, or going missing.
- ◆ Problems in school – they might skip school or get into trouble more often.
- ◆ Unexplained money or gifts.
- ◆ Unexplained injuries.
- ◆ Being picked up in cars driven by unknown adults.

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

It has long been a law enforcement understanding that street gangs and cartels choose children as runners, lookouts, messengers, low-level dealers, and more recently for more serious crimes such as robbery, assault and even murder because they are less likely to face severe punishment if caught. This allows adults, who would serve life sentences if caught, to continue their violent criminal activities without detection, and to become more organized and more powerful, building and controlling criminal empires while using children as disposable pawns.

New Executive Orders have designated cartels and street gangs as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and directed the U.S. Department of War to deploy troops to the border to prevent drug, arms, and human trafficking. As a result, the reality is that U.S. troops especially with the expanded roles of National Guard troops, may face children from 12 – 18 years old on these “new battlefields” – such as on the

southern border of the U.S., or as suicide bombers in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility, or as runners, spies, or frontline workers for domestic or foreign street gangs. The warfighter needs to know how to recognize signs and indicators of children being exploited by TCOs or FTOs and how to respond appropriately.

As the headlines in U.S. states and cities illustrate, children are being recruited, urged, pressured, and forced into cartels and street gangs. It could be argued that no child can consent to being recruited into a criminal gang and that recruiting children is itself a criminal activity.

Although the exploitation of minors is similar in organized crime and armed conflict, experts had always argued that a child recruited by a street gang or cartel cannot be legally categorized as a child soldier under international law, even though their

The term child soldier is defined in the Child Soldiers Prevention Act of 2008 as:

- Any person under 18 years of age who takes direct part in hostilities as a member of governmental armed forces, police, or other security forces;
- Any person under 18 years of age who has been compulsorily recruited into governmental armed forces, police, or other security forces;
- Any person under 15 years of age who has been voluntarily recruited into governmental armed forces, police, or other security forces; or
- Any person under 18 years of age who has been recruited or used in hostilities by armed forces distinct from the armed forces of a state.

¹In September 2016, the two teenage best friends were walking down a street in Brentwood, Long Island, when they were targeted by MS-13 members. The gang members had been looking for perceived rivals to kill after a series of disputes on social media and at school. The victims were chased and then brutally attacked with baseball bats and a machete. The crime scene was described by law enforcement as the worst they had ever seen, with the girls' bodies mutilated. *The perpetrators were gang members who were described as juveniles themselves, highlighting the gang's use of minors in extreme violence.* [emphasis added] Several high-ranking gang members, including brothers Alexi and Jairo Saenz, and Enrique Portillo, were eventually indicted and pleaded guilty to the murders.

experiences are often similar. Experts argued that international law clearly distinguishes between the situations of "armed conflict" and "peacetime criminal violence." Using United Nations or European legal definitions, they distinguished:

- **Child Soldiers:** The definition of a child soldier (or more accurately, "children associated with armed forces or armed groups") under international humanitarian law and human rights law is linked to their recruitment or use within the context of armed conflict.
- **Children in Street Gangs or Cartels:** The activities of gangs or cartels are typically classified as organized crime, which falls under the jurisdiction of domestic criminal law (human rights law applies, but the specific "child soldier" provisions do not). The situation is not legally considered an "armed conflict," so the laws of war do not apply.

However, new research on the lived experience of children recruited by cartels shows that their experiences are very similar to those of traditional child soldiers.

The case for classifying children recruited by cartels as "child soldiers" rests on the broad definition of this term under international and domestic law and the functional parallels between cartels and state/non-state armed groups in conflict zones. It is important for U.S. Service members and National Guard members to consider this information as their deployments may bring them into contact with children recruited by cartels.

- **Using a Broad Definition of "Child Soldier":** The [UN Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict](#) (OPAC) and the [Cape Town Principles](#) define a "child associated with an armed force or armed group" as anyone under 18 who is part of any regular or irregular armed force or group in any capacity, including fighters, cooks, porters, spies, or for sexual purposes. Cartel-recruited children fit this broad definition as they perform various functions, from lookouts and drug dealers to assassins and kidnappers.
- **Cartels as "Non-State Armed Groups"² and Cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs):** The argument posits that cartels function as non-state armed groups engaged in non-international armed conflict, as they exert control over territory and local populations and engage in organized armed violence against the state and rival groups. This argument is bolstered by recent Executive Orders designating five Mexican drug cartels as FTOS.
- **Recruitment Tactics and Vulnerability:** Cartels employ tactics similar to traditional armed groups, such as preying on vulnerable children's desires for food, clothing, shelter, money, protection, and belonging in impoverished areas. Recruitment is often a matter of survival rather than true voluntary action. This negates the idea that these children are simply willing criminals and highlights their status as victims of exploitation.
- **Expendability and Exploitation:** Children are recruited because they are physically and psychologically easier to manipulate, considered expendable, and face shorter prison sentences than adults, making them a cost-effective and disposable labor source. This systemic exploitation aligns with the experiences of child soldiers globally.

An examination of the U.S. Child Soldiers Protection Act (CSPA) shows that the definition of child soldier could easily include a child recruited by a domestic or transitional criminal organization. The CSPA states that a child soldier is: **any person under 18 years of age** who has been **recruited or used in hostilities** by armed forces **distinct from the armed forces of a state**; and (B) includes any person described in clause (ii),(iii), or (iv) of subparagraph (A) **who is serving in any capacity**, including in a support role such as a cook, porter, messenger, medic, guard, or sex slave. The CSPA also notes: "It is the sense of Congress that-- (1) the United States Government should condemn the **conscription, forced recruitment, or use of children** by governments, paramilitaries, or **other organizations....**" [emphasis added]

² <https://wjpcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Evolving-Role-of-Security-Forces-against-CTOC-ENG.pdf>

The argument for considering children recruited by cartels as child soldiers emphasizes that the nature of the child's involvement—forced or coerced recruitment into an FTO, a TCO or another organized, violent group operating in a conflict-like environment—meets the established criteria for a "child soldier," regardless of the group's specific political (as opposed to criminal) motivation. U.S. troops and National Guard members may encounter children recruited by FTOs and TCOs during deployments and it is important they consider this asymmetric tactic in the broader context of irregular warfare on the battlefield.

Interagency Activities



The CTIP Office participates in the White House Task Force FIFA World Cup 2026 Safety and Security Working Group, Anti-Trafficking Committee. Members include representatives from the Departments of State, Justice, Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, Transportation, Labor, and Treasury. The Working Group priorities/goals are: (1) coordination of efforts, including training, and de-confliction; (2) ensuring adequate and appropriate victim service resources are available; and (3) liaising as appropriate with other FIFA World Cup Task Force Committees, such as the Branding and Marketing Committee who are involved in US Government messaging efforts.

DoD CTIP Program Office Updates

The CTIP Office chaired the CTIP Task Force meeting on April 8, 2026. The CTIP PMO invited two guest speakers for the meeting: Ms. Tiffany Phillips, Security Cooperation Senior Advisor for USNORTHCOM and Human Security and Resilience Branch Chief for NORAD and USNORTHCOM, discussed CTIP work/initiatives including at the southern and northern borders. Ms. Laura Lederer, CTIP SME, discussed the two new student Guides: CTIP Guide to Human Trafficking – What Your Middle Schooler Needs to Know and CTIP Student Guide to Preventing Online Exploitation.



On April 26-28, 2026, the CTIP Office traveled to USNORTHCOM to provide expertise and unique perspective for the initial testing of a new, interactive in-person training concept focused on CTIP at the Southern Border. The training was designed by a Texas A&M Capstone team in partnership with USNORTHCOM. The pilot training will be essential to refining the training and ensuring it is highly contextualized for troops securing the Territorial Integrity of the United States (TITUS).

The CTIP Office will hold an event, “**A Warfighter Approach to Stopping Human Trafficking**,” in the Pentagon Auditorium on July 30, 2026, from 0900-1100. Invitations to participate were sent to Under Secretary of War for Personnel and Readiness, United States Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command (USNC-NORAD), the National Guard Bureau (NGB), and Mr. Bazzel Baz, Marine Corps veteran and Founder, Association for the Recovery of Children. USNC-NORAD and NGB have a significant role in securing our borders and cities against threats including human trafficking. Transnational criminal organizations (TCOs)

For more information,
visit :
ctip.defense.gov

and terrorist groups engaged in human trafficking represent irregular threats that employ asymmetric methods within the broader context of irregular warfare. This event will highlight the CTIP Warfighter Readiness trainings explaining how irregular actors' campaigns use human trafficking as a tool and how the warfighter may combat it. Discussion to include links between human trafficking, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and terrorism, which pose significant threats that directly inform the missions of the USNC-NORAD and NGB on the Southern Border.

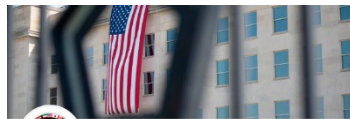
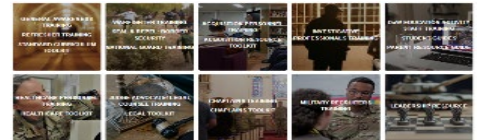
NEW TRAINING: *The CTIP Office released a specialized [micro-training for the National Guard \(NG\)](#) troops deploying to locations under Title 32 and Title 10 orders within the United States. The training will enhance mission readiness for NG members by: giving them an understanding of human trafficking, relevant laws, signs and indicators to look for, and how to respond appropriately to suspected or confirmed trafficking incidents. It contains original interactive maps showing how traffickers exploit the U.S. borders and trafficking routes and patterns across the U.S. Watch the PSA about this training [here](#).*

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Check out the Training page! The CTIP office updated the training page on the CTIP [website](#) to provide easier access to all trainings.



Follow us on social media! The CTIP PMO is now on [Facebook](#), [X](#), [YouTube](#), and [LinkedIn](#)!

Upcoming Events

- CTIP Event: A Warfighter Approach to Stopping Human Trafficking, July 30, 2026 (This will replace the quarterly CTIP Task Force meeting on July 8, 2026.)