



Human Trafficking:

How are homeless Youth Affected?

Homeless youth are vulnerable to both sex and labor trafficking because they tend to experience a higher rate of the primary risk factor to trafficking: poverty, unemployment, a history of sexual abuse, and a history of mental health issues. If they have families who are involved in the commercial sex trade or gangs, their risk is even higher. Homeless youth indicated that they struggled to find paid work, affordable housing, and support systems that would help them access basic necessities. They experienced discrimination in their jobs and in housing. These factors made the youth interviewed more likely to turn to the sex trade for survival.

Economics: For the vast majority of youth, economic factors made them most vulnerable to traffickers and unwanted engagement in the sex trade. They reported that they often found themselves desperate for work and that people took advantage of their needs. 91% of respondents reported being approached by strangers or acquaintances, who offered lucrative work opportunities that turned out to be fraudulent work, situations, scams, pandering, or sex trafficking. While some were resilient and walked away from these offers, many of the youth who were trafficked for sex and labor were recruited in this way. Others felt forced to turn to trading sex because they could not find legitimate work. 84% of youth who reported engaging in the sex trade without a third-party controller did so because of economic need.

Housing: Youth reported that their fear of sleeping on the streets left them vulnerable to sex and labor traffickers and to survival sex. Securing housing was a primary concern for the vast majority of the youth interviewed. 68% of the youth who were trafficked or who engaged in survival sex or commercial sex had done so while homeless. 19% of all youth interviewed had engaged in survival sex solely so that they could access housing or food. This problem is even starker among those who are not sheltered. The incidence of trafficking among drop-in youth – sometimes called ‘street youth’ was high relative to the sheltered cohort: 24% were trafficked for sex, 13% for labor. 41% of interviewed drop-in youth had engaged in the sex trade in some way at some point in their lives. 33% of them had engaged in survival sex as wither adults or minors. Many of the trafficked youth who were accessing Covenant House’s shelter programs said they saw the shelters a safe havens from traffickers.

Work: The youth interviewed indicated that they encountered people who took advantage of them when they were searching for work. A lack of job opportunities converged with a lack of computer literacy and job skills, leading to vulnerability. Many youth pursued job advertisements that turned out to be fraudulent. At Covenant House they sought training on how to identify a safe job and additional job skills training programs to help them avoid labor traffickers, sex traffickers and other exploitative labor situations.

Gender: 20% of all cisgender (a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex) women and 10% of all cisgender men had experienced a situation that was considered sex trafficking. While cisgender women were more likely to be trafficked and to engage in the sex trade, cisgender men were more likely to be trafficked than many people might expect. 11% of cisgender men had been trafficked, and a total of 24% of them had engaged in at least one commercial sexual exchange at some point in their lives. 10% of heterosexual man had been trafficked, while more than 21% LGBTQ men had been trafficked. Despite this, cisgender make youth reported that they typically had not been asked about engaging in the sex trade when interacting with social service providers and were not typically offered services for trafficking or sexual exploitation.

Sexuality: LGBTQ youth were disproportionately affected by sex trafficking and significantly more reported engaging in the sex trade. Though LGBTQ youth accounted for 19% of the respondents interviewed, they accounted for 36% of the sex trafficking victims and 36% of those who engaged in the sex trade. Half of the LGBTQ youth had engaged in the sex trade in some way during their lifetimes. LGBTQ youth were significantly more likely to be sex-trafficked than their straight counterparts.

Aging Out: Aging out of the foster care system made youth vulnerable to traffickers and to engagement in the sex trade. The median age of entry into trading sex for the youth we interviewed was 18 years old, and for those who were sex trafficked it was 16. Youth reported becoming homeless as a result of leaving foster care, and they indicated that homelessness resulted in vulnerability to the sex trade and sex trafficking. Though they constituted 21% (137) of the sample, youth who had a history of involvement in the foster system accounted for 29% (25) of all sex trafficking victims 27% (49) of all youth engaged in the sex trade, and 26% (13) of all youth who were labor trafficked. Youth between the ages of 17 and 19 need special attention because of these unique vulnerabilities. (<http://covenanthousestudy.org>)

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