

# **Human Trafficking Prevalence and Child Welfare Risk Factors among Homeless Youth in Phoenix**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Field Center completed a three-city study as part of a larger initiative by Covenant House International to research human trafficking among homeless youth that encompassed nearly 1,000 youth across 13 cities. The Field Center interviewed a total of 270 homeless youth, 100 in Phoenix, 100 in Philadelphia, and 70 in Washington, DC, to learn about the prevalence of human trafficking, and the history of child maltreatment, out of home placement, and protective factors among those who were sex trafficked or engaged in the sex trade to survive.

Three agencies in Phoenix that serve homeless youth participated in this study: Tumbleweed, Native American Connections, and One-n-Ten. Of the 100 youth interviewed, 18% were victims of human trafficking, including 13% who were victims of sex trafficking and 6% who were victims of labor trafficking. Additionally, 12% of youth interviewed engaged in “survival sex” to meet their basic needs. A total of 37% of those interviewed reported engaging in a commercial sex act at some point in their lives.

Three-quarters of homeless females reported being solicited for paid sex. For all genders, 33% of those approached while homeless were approached during their very first night of being homeless. Transgender and bisexual youth were particularly vulnerable to being engaged in commercial sex.

For youth who reported that they were victims of sex trafficking, 92% had a history of child maltreatment. Two-thirds reported telling someone that they were abused, and three-quarters of them report that the person they told took some action on their behalf. Among sex trafficking victims who were maltreated, the highest percentage of youth reported being sexually abused (57%), followed by physical abuse at 47%.

A total of 39% of sex trafficking victims were in out-of-home placement at some point in their lives, and many experienced frequent moves. Sixty-two percent did not have a place to live at some point prior to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, and 54% reported involvement with the child welfare system.

LGBTQ youth appear to have experienced a higher level of sex trafficking, with 28% reporting being trafficked, compared to only 5% of straight participants. Although the sample size was too small to generalize, it is indicative of increased risk.

For those who were sex trafficked, when asked what could have helped prevent them from being in this situation, the most frequent response was having supportive parents or family members. Data supported this. Of the youth who engaged in any commercial sex, 50% of those who did not have a caring adult in their lives were sexually trafficked as opposed to 28% who reported having a caring adult being sex trafficked.

Education was also distinguished in the data. Victims of sex trafficking were twice as likely to have dropped out of high school than the full sample of homeless youth. Of those who reported being sex trafficked, only 31% had a high school diploma or more, compared to 56% of those not trafficked. Graduating from high school appears to be a protective factor.

*“When I don't want to do [the sexual] things they want, they pull my hair, they slap my face, they threaten me with a gun.”*

## INTRODUCTION

Phoenix offers a diverse array of programming for homeless and runaway youth. Youth were interviewed for the present human trafficking study at multiple sites at three collaborating agencies: Native American Connection's Home Base, One-n-Ten's Promise of a New Day Housing Program and Drop-In Center, and Tumbleweed's Youth Resource Centers and Emergency Housing Program. Several programs that participated in this research ceased providing services to homeless youth over the course of this research study, resulting in a reduction of resources for this population.

Respondents varied in their experiences of homelessness at the time of the survey; some resided in housing programs within the organization while others received drop-in services while living in outside programs, substandard apartments, couch surfing, or living on the streets.

Respondents in Phoenix reported, with more frequency than other cities in the larger study, an ability to live or sleep outside due to the warm weather. Although some youth experienced homelessness by themselves, many young adults in relationships survived on the streets together or became connected with small groups of homeless young adults who camped in isolated areas together. Multiple youth-serving organizations offer an array of non-residential services utilized by these unsheltered youth, including showers and bathroom use, meals and snacks, laundry and computer use, in addition to therapeutic services and case management. In a unique approach to holistic care, many of the organizations allow clients to seek services with their pets and offer basic animal care, acknowledging the trend for homeless youth to continue caring for their pets despite their lack of shelter.

Phoenix was also a desirable destination for youth who became homeless in other locations. Some participants had traveled across the state or country before seeking services in Phoenix. Youth who intentionally settled in Phoenix had done so due to the weather and the frequent availability of community supports, while others still maintained a transient lifestyle and were simply utilizing available services before moving on to another location.

There was a noticeable trend of methamphetamine use as the drug of choice among the homeless youth who participated in the survey in Phoenix. Whether this was a predicating factor leading to future homelessness or a later result of experiencing desperation, respondents shared extensive histories of methamphetamine use and the associated challenges in battling their addictions. Meth was reported to be widely available in the impoverished communities from which respondents hailed, at public city shelters and on the streets. Many youth directly linked their experiences with exploitation to behaviors they engaged in as a way to obtain drugs.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of the study were twofold:

1. To examine the prevalence of human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation among homeless youth through replication of an earlier study utilizing the previously validated HTIAM-10 Human Trafficking Interview and Assessment Measure, and
2. To gain insight into the child maltreatment, child welfare and out of home placement experiences as well as protective factors for victims of child sex trafficking.

## **OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY**

Participation in the research was voluntary and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. The interviewer administered the Human Trafficking Interview and Assessment Measure (HTIAM-10) to all youth. The HTIAM-10 was previously validated by Fordham University and was designed to detect and identify victims of human trafficking, specifically, victims of commercial sexual exploitation and labor trafficking.

Participants who identified that they engaged in any commercial sex act were then administered the Child Welfare Supplemental Survey (CWSS) containing additional questions pertaining to potential child welfare risk factors for engaging in commercial sex and potential protective factors. This supplemental instrument, developed by the University of Pennsylvania's Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice & Research, asks victims of human trafficking and youth who have engaged in commercial sex about their history of child maltreatment, involvement in the child welfare system, social support networks, living situation, and preparation for independent living.

## RESULTS

Of the 100 respondents in Phoenix, 18% were identified as victims of some form of human trafficking. Twelve percent had been trafficked for sex only, 1% for other forced labor only, and 5% of them were victims of both sex and labor trafficking.

*One female participant met her trafficker at a party when she was 14 years old. After entering into a relationship with him that she believed to be based on love, he began pressuring her to sleep with other men to prove that she loved him. Once she began prostituting for him, he threatened to kill her if she ever stopped. She eventually learned that he was pimping out many other women as well, advertising the girls for sex on Backpage, and often observed him violently beating them when they didn't obey his orders.*

### Sex Trafficking

In which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age.

- 24% of women, 5% of men, and 50% of transgender participants were sex trafficked.
- 32% of the 32 LGBTQ respondents were trafficked for sex. This was significantly higher than the 5% of heterosexual participants who were sex-trafficked.
- 33% of Latino respondents, 8% of Caucasian respondents, 4% of African American respondents, and 2% of multiracial respondents identified as victims of sex trafficking, along with one of the two (50%) who identified their race as "other."
- 19% of those who either had a GED, were still in high school, or had dropped out of high school were victims of sex-trafficking, more than double the 8% of those who either had a high school diploma as their highest level of education or had at least entered college.
- Of the 13 respondents identified as having been sex-trafficked, six were classified as victims only because they had engaged in sexual acts while under the age of 18, three because he or she engaged in sex because of force, fraud, or coercion, and four were victims of sex-trafficking as both a function of their age and force, fraud, and coercion.

*A young woman described moving into a homeless shelter when she was 21 because she was addicted to drugs at the time and didn't have family support. While in the shelter, she was recruited into prostitution by a man in his 60's. She described him as a "father figure," saying "he would take care of the girls like me."*

## Survival Sex

Consistent with Fordham and Loyola University New Orleans' use of the definition for "survival sex," we defined "survival sex" as involving individuals *over age 18* who trade sex acts to meet

*One female participant explained that, prior to meeting her current boyfriend and finding an abandoned house to stay in, she lived in a public shelter where she constantly feared for her physical safety. She strategically dated and engaged in sex acts with men at the shelter for the purpose of having a bodyguard around. She stated, "It's just like you protect me and I'll give you what you want."*

the basic needs of survival (e.g., food, shelter, etc.) without overt force, fraud or coercion of a trafficker, but who felt that their circumstances left little or no other option.

- 10 participants engaged in survival sex; nine identified as gay, bisexual, or pansexual, five were female, five were male, and one was transgender.
- Those with some college had the highest rate of survival sex (33%), followed by those that had dropped out of high school (26%) and those still attending high school (9%).
- Multiracial (17%) and Latino (15%) participants were the most likely to participate in survival sex.

## Commercial Sex

Any sex act in which anything of value is given or received by any person.

- 37% of respondents engaged in commercial sex at some point in their lives.
- 48% of women, 29% of men, and 67% of transgender participants engaged in the sex trade.
- 56% of Latino respondents and 50% of multiracial respondents exchanged sex for some good or service; rates for White, African-American, and other race/ethnicity participants were lower, ranging between 10% and 38%.
- 83% of bisexual participants, 56% of pansexual participants, and 55% of gay participants engaged in commercial sex, higher than the 21% of heterosexual participants.
- Commercial sex rates did not vary greatly by education; 38% of those with at least a high school degree exchanged something of value for sex, compared to 36% of those with a GED or less.
- 30% who engaged in commercial sex placed an online ad or were advertised on the internet.
- Of the 51 that were approached by someone who wanted them to sell sex, 84% were approached while homeless; one-third of them experienced this during their first week of homelessness.

## **Labor Trafficking**

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.

- Half of the labor trafficking victims were male, the other half were female.
- Four of the labor trafficked participants identified as straight, one bisexual, and one pansexual.
- Education and race varied among those who were labor trafficked, with no obvious trend among the five victims.

*One young man described fleeing his home country and meeting a man who offered to help him find work and go to school. He moved in with this man and worked on a farm and did household chores. He never had access to money, personal resources, a phone, or school, and was under constant threat of being sent back to his country of origin.*

## CHILD WELFARE FACTORS

### Child Maltreatment

Of the 37 respondents that engaged in commercial sex, 83% reported having been maltreated at some point during their childhood. Sexual abuse was the most prevalent response (57%) followed by physical abuse (47%) and neglect (30%). Seventy-three percent of those that experienced maltreatment were abused by a biological parent, the most prevalent perpetrator of abuse. Other relatives (excluding siblings) were second at 40%, and other non-family members were the third most frequent source. Of the 26 participants that provided the age at which abuse began, 65% were abused by the age of 5, and all but two were abused by the age of 10. Two-thirds told someone about their maltreatment; of those, 53% of them reported that this person took some action on their behalf. However, 72% reported receiving some type of services or treatment to help cope with the maltreatment.

*“When I was younger, I was raped and molested so it was like I always thought it was okay to go out and have sex with different people because this happened.”*

### Living Situations

Residential instability was prevalent within the sample of youth who engaged in commercial sex. Twenty-eight respondents (83%) reported having lived with someone other than a biological parent, and 39% reported that at some point in their youth they had no place to sleep. Only four reported having lived in only one place (other than with a friend or boyfriend/girlfriend). Twenty (56%) reported that they had some child welfare involvement growing up, and 70% of them experienced at least one out-of-home placement; all of them spent time in a foster home, and nine (64%) had lived in a group home or congregate care setting.

*One female participant who was unhappy at home was exploited through most of high school by the man she believed to be her boyfriend. If she tried to leave him, she said that she would be killed. She finally escaped by lying about physical abuse in her family, resulting in her being placed in out-of-home care.*

### Social Supports and Peer Relationships

Among victims of sex trafficking, many respondents indicated the presence of a caring adult (other than a caregiver), especially at present day. Seven of the 13 (54%) reported having a caring adult in their lives prior to turning 18, and 69% reported having a caring adult at the time of the interview. These supports varied widely, from parents to siblings to caseworkers and others. Of the youth who engaged in any form of commercial sex, 50% of those who did not have a caring adult in their lives were sexually trafficked as opposed to only 28% who reported having a caring adult being sex trafficked. Many also found support among their peers; 39% had a group of friends they could rely on. Twenty-three percent were, at some point, members of a gang.

*A male participant joined a gang for protection when he was 13 and, as part of his commitment to the gang, he was forced to sell drugs. He quickly progressed to making money in other ways, accepting money from both women and men for sex, and began pimping women by the time he was 16. After an assault that almost killed him, he decided to leave the gang.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Support continued and increased funding for programming for homeless youth on both state and federal levels. This appears to be of particular concern in Phoenix.
2. Utilize data to identify populations at highest risk for human trafficking and create targeted prevention services.
3. Target street outreach services for newly homeless youth, and support continued funding of this critical service.
4. Promote psychoeducational intervention and access to evidence-based treatment for victims of sexual abuse.
5. As LGBTQ youth were found to be frequent targets, develop and implement victimization minimization services for this population.
6. Promote programs that support youth to remain in school and graduate from high school. Preliminary data indicates that being in school, as opposed to attainment of a GED, may be a protective factor.
7. Support policies that promote out-of-home-placement stability for youth, as multiple moves place them at greater risk.
8. Explore implementing new and innovative out-of-home placement models that are targeted to older youth.
9. Assure that youth who exit the child welfare system are financially literate and are provided with transitional and after-care services to foster a successful transition to independence.
10. Identify and foster emotional attachments for vulnerable children and youth with both family members and other caring adults, including natural mentorship initiatives to help connect at-risk youth with caring adults in their lives. Early identification of and facilitation of such relationships can serve to both prevent youth from becoming victimized and to provide a resource should they end up needing support and assistance.
11. Further explore the impact that meth has on the vulnerability of this population, including whether it is an additional risk factor for victimization.