

KEY FINDINGS

17% of interviewed youth were victims of sex trafficking

14% engaged in “survival sex” (exchanging sex to meet a basic human need)

24% of females and 9% of males reported being victims of sex trafficking

67% of homeless females report being offered money for sex

22% of homeless youth who were offered money for sex had this happen on their first night being homeless

39% of those who were sex trafficked identified themselves as LGBTQ

60% of transgender youth reported being trafficked for sex

95% of sex trafficked youth report a history of child maltreatment, with 49% being sexually abused

58% of those without a caring adult in their lives were sex trafficked

67% of those who were sex trafficked had not graduated from high school



The Field Center
FOR CHILDREN'S POLICY,
PRACTICE & RESEARCH

FIELD CENTER COMPLETES MULTI-CITY STUDY ON CHILD TRAFFICKING AMONG HOMELESS YOUTH; IDENTIFIES RISK AND RESILIENCE FACTORS

The Field Center recently completed a 3-city study as part of an initiative by Covenant House International to conduct the largest-ever study of the incidence of trafficking among homeless youth, encompassing approximately 1,000 youth across 13 cities. The Field Center interviewed close to 300 homeless youth in Philadelphia, Phoenix and Washington, DC to learn about the prevalence of child trafficking, and the history of child maltreatment, out of home placement, and resilience factors among those who were sex trafficked or engaged in the sex trade to survive. Of those interviewed, 17% were victims of sex trafficking and 14% engaged in “survival sex” to meet their basic needs.

“I didn’t really have anybody in my life, so they used that against me. Every time I’d leave, I’d come back cause that’s all I really had.”

An astounding 67% of homeless females reported being solicited for paid sex. For all genders, 22% were approached on their very first night of being homeless. Transgender youth were particularly vulnerable, with 90% of transgender youth reporting being offered money for sex.

Child maltreatment and placement factors

For youth who reported that they were victims of sex trafficking, 95% had a history of child maltreatment. While 62% report telling someone that they were abused, only 49% report that the person they told took some action. The highest percentage of youth reported being sexually abused (49%) followed by physical abuse at 33%.

A total of 41% of those who were sex trafficked were in out-of-home placement, and many experienced frequent moves.

“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.”

“Carla” was living with a friend’s family when the mother invited her to go out of town for the weekend. Once they arrived at their hotel, men began showing up and she was forced to have sex with them. She later found out that her friend’s mother had advertised her on Backpage for sex.



“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.”

Who is particularly vulnerable?

LGBTQ youth appear to experience a higher level of sex trafficking, comprising 39% of those who reported being trafficked. Transgender youth are particularly vulnerable, with 60% of those surveyed reporting sex trafficking. Although the sample size was too small to generalize, it is indicative of increased risk.

Resilience: what can indeed make a difference

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: 58% of those who did not have a caring adult in their lives were sexually trafficked as opposed to 41% who reported having a caring adult being sex trafficked.

“I wasn’t born in a stable house...I used to get kicked out when I was real young...I’m talking about when I was probably like 11.”

Education also appears to have a protective factor. Of those who reported being sex trafficked, only 22% had a high school diploma and 11% had attended some college. A full 67% had not graduated from high school.

Stemming the pipeline to predators

With a better understanding of what places young people at risk for sex trafficking and what resilience factors lower that risk, new policy and practice initiatives can actually prevent further victimization.

The Field Center for Children’s Policy, Practice & Research is an interdisciplinary collaboration of the University of Pennsylvania’s Schools of Social Policy & Practice, Law, Medicine and Nursing, and the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia that strives to impact critical change in the child welfare system through policy and practice reform, translational research, advocacy and education.



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