

# Labor and Sex Trafficking Among Homeless Youth

## A Ten-City Study Full Report

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This study provides a detailed account of **labor** and **sexual exploitation** experienced by homeless youth in Covenant House's care in ten cities.



LOYOLA  
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MODERN  
SLAVERY  
RESEARCH PROJECT

# Mission Statements



## Loyola University New Orleans

Loyola University New Orleans, a Jesuit and Catholic institution of higher education, welcomes students of diverse backgrounds and prepares them to lead meaningful lives with and for others; to pursue truth, wisdom, and virtue; and to work for a more just world. Inspired by Ignatius of Loyola's vision of finding God in all things, the university is grounded in the liberal arts and sciences, while also offering opportunities for professional studies in undergraduate and selected graduate programs. Through teaching, research, creative activities, and service, the faculty, in cooperation with the staff, strives to educate the whole student and to benefit the larger community.

## Modern Slavery Research Project

Loyola University's Modern Slavery Research Project works to make escape possible for victims of human trafficking in Louisiana, the U.S., and internationally through survivor-centered, data-driven, community-based research that better serves survivors and supports advocates who are on the front lines of identifying and assisting those held in modern slavery.

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# Executive Summary

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**Covenant House International** is the largest, primarily privately-funded charity in the Americas offering housing, outreach, and support services to homeless youth. Each year, the organization helps nearly 47,000 youth in 30 cities in six countries.

Human trafficking—the exploitation of a person’s labor through force, fraud, or coercion—is a crime whose victims tend to be society’s most vulnerable. People who are homeless, lack a support system, or are desperate for work are susceptible to the promises of people who would exploit them for labor and for sex. Recently, homeless youth providers in the United States and Canada have become aware that their clients are particularly at risk of trafficking and research has begun to uncover the extent and contours of the problem within that community.

Between February 2014 and June 2016, researchers from Loyola University New Orleans’s Modern Slavery Research Project (MSRP) were invited by Covenant House International and ten of their individual sites in the United States and Canada to serve as external experts to study the prevalence and nature of human trafficking among homeless youth aged 17 to 25. MSRP researchers interviewed 641 homeless and runaway youth who access services through Covenant House’s network of shelters, transitional living and apartment programs, and drop-in centers. Youth were invited to participate, on a voluntary basis, in a point-in-time study about work experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using the Human Trafficking Interview and Assessment Measure (HTIAM-14) to assess whether youth had been trafficked for sex or labor in their lifetimes.

## Youth were interviewed in the following cities:

Anchorage, Alaska  
Atlanta, Georgia  
Detroit, Michigan  
Fort Lauderdale, Florida  
Los Angeles, California  
New Orleans, Louisiana  
Oakland, California  
St. Louis, Missouri  
Toronto, Ontario  
Vancouver, British Columbia

# Key Findings

## Human Trafficking

- Of the 641 youth we interviewed at Covenant House sites around the United States and Canada, nearly one in five (19% or 124) were identified as victims of some form of human trafficking, following the legal definition outlined by the U.S. Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (later renamed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA).
- More than 14% (92) of the total population had been trafficked for sex, while 8% (52) had been trafficked for other forced labor. 3% (22) were trafficked for both sex and labor.
- Ninety-one percent (91%) of the respondents reported being approached by someone who was offering an opportunity for income that was too good to be true. This included situations that turned into trafficking as well as other offers for commercial sexual exchanges, fraudulent commission-based sales, credit card scams, stolen phone sales, and check fraud.

## Sex Trafficking and Commercial Sex

- 14% (92) were victims of sex trafficking, applying the U.S. federal definition of trafficking.
- Of the 92 youth who were identified as sex trafficking victims within the study, nearly 58% (53) were in situations of force, fraud, or coercion characteristic of human trafficking under the U.S. federal definition.
- 42% of youth who were identified as sex trafficking victims were minors involved in the sale of commercial sex and survival sex but were not forced by a third party to do so.
- 20% (49) of cisgender women interviewed reported experiences consistent with the definition of sex trafficking, as did 11% (40) of cisgender men.
- 24% (30) of LGBTQ youth were trafficked for sex, compared to 12% of non-LGBTQ youth.
- 19% (121) of the youth we interviewed turned to survival sex at some difficult point in their lives.
- 30% (193) of all youth interviewed had engaged in some way in the sex trade at some point in their lifetimes; 24% (93) of the young men, 38% (93) of the young women, whether that was through situations of force, survival sex, or commercial sexual work as adults. (7 transgender youth were engaged in the sex trade, but the sample size was not large enough to produce significant findings.)
- The median age of entry into trading sex was 18, while the median age for those who were considered trafficked was 16.



## Labor Trafficking

- 8.1% of respondents were found to have been trafficked for labor.
- Situations of forced labor included youth who were forced to work in factories, domestic labor situations, agriculture, international drug smuggling, sex-trade-related labor, and commission-based sales.
- The vast majority (81%) of labor trafficking cases reported in this study were instances of forced drug dealing. Nearly 7% (42) of all youth interviewed had been forced into working in the drug trade.
- Forced drug dealing occurred through familial and cultural coercion as well as through the violence of suppliers and gangs.

## 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 factors 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 had experienced discrimination in their jobs and in housing. A confluence of factors made the homeless youth we interviewed vulnerable to both sex and labor traffickers who preyed on their need. It also made them more likely to turn to the sex trade for survival.

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**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 need. Ninety-one percent (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. Eighty-four percent (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 we interviewed. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of the youth who had either been trafficked or engaged in survival sex or commercial sex had done so while homeless. Nineteen percent (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. Forty-one percent (41%) of interviewed drop-in youth had engaged in the sex trade in some way at some point in their lives. One-third (33%) of them had engaged in survival sex as either adults or minors. Many of the trafficked youth who were accessing Covenant House’s shelter programs said they saw the shelters as safe havens from their traffickers.

**Work:** The youth we 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 to lead to vulnerability. Many youth pursued job advertisements that turned out to be fraudulent. 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:** One in five of all cisgender women and one in ten 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

## 68% of the youth who had either been trafficked or engaged in survival sex or commercial sex had done so while homeless.

trafficked than many people might expect. Eleven percent (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. Nearly one in ten men who identified as heterosexual had been trafficked, while more than one in five (21%) LGBTQ men had been trafficked. Despite this, heterosexual cisgender male 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 care 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 their unique vulnerabilities.



# Recommendations

## For Practice

Runaway and homeless youth shelters and programs should be equipped to meet the needs of trafficked youth because they are able to address the root economic and societal problems that make youth vulnerable to exploitation. With programs directly responsive to the heightened needs of trafficking victims, runaway and homeless youth shelters can effectively help trafficking survivors and prevent other homeless youth from being exploited. We recommend a four-pronged approach that includes prevention, outreach, confidential and inclusive identification, and specialized interventions.

**Prevention** efforts that focus on job search and job skills programs, housing opportunities, and healthy sexuality/relationships will increase youth resilience to traffickers and exploitation.

**Outreach** programs and advertising for services should target locations where youth are being approached by those who would exploit them: on social media and online job sites, at bus stops and transportation stations, and at government assistance offices.

**Confidential and inclusive identification** strategies should be employed by all youth-serving organizations to increase the likelihood that youth will disclose a situation of trafficking and, therefore, provide greater access to specialized services and care. Including men, LGBTQ, and foster care-related vulnerabilities in screening protocols should be standard practice.

**Specialized Interventions** might include anti-trafficking orientation and drop-in programs, trauma-informed counseling, harm reduction training, and victim relocation networks.

# 91%

of youth reported being offered lucrative work opportunities that turned out to be fraudulent, scams, or sex trafficking.

## For Policy

Social service providers cannot protect young people from labor trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation or effectively help them overcome related traumas without significant support. Legislators must play a role in ensuring that our youth are protected from trafficking. The following legislative changes could assist us in identifying and helping more trafficking survivors.

- U.S. Congress should pass the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act, which provides much-needed funding for services to prevent and address trafficking among homeless and runaway youth populations.
- Dedicated funding should be allocated for additional shelters and shelter beds equipped with wraparound and specialized services to serve survivors of trafficking and exploitation in both the United States and Canada.
- All U.S. states should pass comprehensive “Safe Harbor” laws that allow young trafficking survivors to be treated as victims of a crime rather than as criminals.
- Criminal justice reform in the United States and Canada should take into account the context in which youth engage in the drug trade and exclude victims of forced labor from prosecution.
- Specialized human trafficking training for law enforcement should be required and funded in every state and province and should include training on appropriate interview techniques as well as the variety of forms trafficking takes.
- Legislators need to address the housing and security crisis experienced by youth aging out of foster care.
- Every U.S. state should raise the age for aging out of foster care to 21.



# 1. Introduction

## Background

Though we cannot determine the precise number of homeless youth living in the United States and Canada, what we do know is that every single night of the year, no matter how hot or cold it is, tens of thousands of homeless youth seek out shelter, safety, food, and work. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Point-in-Time Estimate for January 2016 suggested that as many as 170,820 youth 24 years old or younger were homeless on any given night of that month. Nearly 36,000 (21%) of those youth were homeless and alone.<sup>2</sup> In Canada, at least 35,000 people are homeless on any given night, 20% of whom are youth.<sup>3</sup> These figures represent homelessness on a single night—without accounting for all of the marginally-housed, couch-surfing, hidden, and otherwise uncounted youth.

Most often these vulnerable youth find high-risk routes to securing housing, basic necessities, security, and employment. Unsheltered homeless youth face a narrow range of false choices—either starve or sell drugs, either sleep on the street or trade sex. Limited to high-risk or illicit opportunities for meeting needs, homeless youth are susceptible to becoming victims of exploitation as scam artists, abusers, and traffickers recognize and target their vulnerabilities.

Covenant House International's mission is to defend the rights of homeless youth by providing them with the resources they need to be safe and free from exploitation. The agency's programs work to assist young people by providing no-barrier, safe, short-term housing and longer-term transitional housing. They also provide educational support, job training and placement, medical services, mental health and substance abuse counseling, and legal aid.

In order to serve this high-risk population most effectively, Covenant House International has worked over the last several years to determine the extent of the labor and sexual exploitation youth face and to provide specialized care for those affected or at risk.

Understanding the true scope of trafficking proves as difficult as determining the number of people who are homeless. The Walk Free Foundation's most recent 2016 Global Slavery Index estimate suggests that of the 46.8 million people enslaved in the world, there are approximately 57,700 people enslaved in the United States<sup>4</sup> and 6,500 in Canada.<sup>5</sup> That estimate does not count everyone who would be considered "trafficked" by U.S. law, but it reveals that there is a significant problem with trafficking in the United States and Canada. The ability to produce completely reliable estimates in North America is challenged, however, by the absence of nationally representative survey data as well as the hidden nature of trafficking, the lack of knowledge of labor exploitation practices in the United States and Canada, and the relatively recent attention to the issue as it concerns U.S. and Canadian citizens. Indeed, trafficking may be more widespread than most statistics can represent. Sheldon Zhang's recent estimates of labor trafficking suggest that among Mexican immigrants alone, there may be more than 2.4 million individuals in forced labor in the United States.<sup>6</sup> While we cannot determine the precise number of people who are trafficked in any city, state, or province, deep-dive research into the prevalence of trafficking in particular populations can begin to help us describe the problem and the vulnerabilities that are peculiar to victims of trafficking in North America. Such data, though specific, will assist in improving the reliability of future national-level estimates.

Studies indicate that risk for both sex and labor trafficking in the United States is highest when a confluence of individual risk factors collides with societal and familial pressures. Those individual indicators include poverty, homelessness, unemployment, a history of sexual abuse, and a history of mental health issues.<sup>7</sup> Among young men and women, rejection by birth or foster families (which is highest among LGBTQ youth) can increase vulnerability to sex trafficking.<sup>8</sup> Familial and societal pressures that may increase the risk of trafficking include family members involved in commercial sex, prevalent local gang culture and family affiliation with gangs,<sup>9</sup> and socioeconomic disadvantages associated with race.<sup>10</sup> Youth who exhibit these vulnerabilities can be considered easy prey for those who might traffic them for sex or labor through physical violence, trickery, and psychological coercion. The Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council suggest that in addition to these individual and societal risk factors, a lack of awareness of trafficking and sexual exploitation endangers young people, leaving them more vulnerable to sex traffickers.<sup>11</sup> In the Urban Institute's 2014 study of the underground commercial sex economy, interviews with sex traffickers and other pimps revealed that pimps targeted young women who were "damaged" and experienced emotional and family issues. Traffickers often knew that the young women they recruited tended to have histories of sexual assault. They used a wide variety of tactics ranging from romance to physical violence to coerce girls and women into engaging in the sex trade.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to situations of force, recent studies provide evidence of what service providers have long suggested: when youth are in dire need of basic necessities such as food and housing and find those resources are unavailable, they often turn to transactional sex to meet those needs.<sup>13</sup> When Covenant House and Fordham University conducted the first iteration of this study, they found that nearly 50% of the respondents who had engaged in commercial sex had done so in order to secure a place to sleep for the night.<sup>14</sup> A Street Outreach Program study conducted by the University of Nebraska for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that of the 873 "street youth" aged 14–21 surveyed, nearly a quarter of them had traded sex with at least one person for money, more than a quarter of them had traded sex for a place to stay for the night, more than 18% had traded sex for food, 12% for protection, and 11% for drugs. More than 10% had been asked by an intimate partner to trade sex with a third party for money.<sup>15</sup> Ric Curtis found that among the 249 sex-trade engaged youth included in their study in New York, the most pressing needs reported as necessary to exit the trade were food (60%), education (51%), and housing (41%).<sup>16</sup> Alexandra Lutnick found that among the 78 youth who were receiving services as part of a human trafficking grant she evaluated, the youth requested

# Tens of Thousands

Every single night of the year, no matter how hot or cold it is, tens of thousands of homeless youth seek out shelter, safety, food, and work.

services related to long-term housing, crisis intervention, mental health services, food and clothing, employment, and sexual health education—all signs that many young people seek services to assist them in avoiding or exiting the sex trade but are often ultimately forced to engage in transactional sex as the "least-worst" option available to them.<sup>17</sup>

Discrimination against LGBTQ youth and a lack of services geared toward their needs increase their chances of homelessness and hunger, and thus vulnerability to trafficking. The Urban Institute reports, "LGBTQ youth, YMSM [young men who have sex with men], and YWSW [young women who have sex with women] lack access to voluntary and low-threshold services, including short- and long-term housing, affordable housing and shelter options, livable-wage employment opportunities, food security, and gender-affirming health care."<sup>18</sup> This lack of access and opportunity led the LGBTQ individuals interviewed for the Urban Institute survey to engage in survival sex.<sup>19</sup> Though anti-trafficking programs typically focus on cisgender female victims of trafficking, many studies have found that LGBTQ youth of all genders are disproportionately engaged in survival sex and trafficking situations in both the United States and Canada.<sup>20</sup>

Though there is significantly less research on the subject of labor trafficking, there are increasing signs that this may be a significant issue among homeless youth who are seeking legitimate, paid employment. Forced drug dealing is emerging as a form of forced labor, and the U.S. Department of Justice has included it as a form of trafficking in its guidance for trafficking task forces nationwide.<sup>21</sup> Homeless youth who seek out opportunities for legitimate work that will provide a living wage are also susceptible to predators posing as legitimate employers who lure them into unpaid work in magazine sales, domestic service, fraudulent commission-based sales, pyramid schemes, modeling, acting, and other seemingly promising scams.<sup>22</sup>

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As a result of these heightened risk factors for homeless youth, Covenant House partnered with the Loyola University New Orleans Modern Slavery Research Project to better understand the prevalence and experience of sex and labor trafficking and commercial sexual exchange among Covenant House's young clients.

### **Fordham University/Covenant House New York Study**

In their first attempt to better understand how these trends affect the population of homeless youth that they serve, Covenant House New York and researchers from Fordham University created and validated an identification instrument for human trafficking, the Human Trafficking Interview and Assessment Measure (HTIAM-14).<sup>23</sup> After validating the instrument, researchers and caseworkers interviewed 174 youth aged 18 to 23 who were accessing services at the Covenant House New York shelter. They found that 15% of the respondents had been victims of some form of human trafficking (12% sex, 3% labor), and an additional 8% had engaged in survival sex over the age of 18.<sup>24</sup>

### **Ten-City Replication**

In 2014, the Loyola University New Orleans Modern Slavery Research Project (MSRP) replicated and expanded the original Fordham University/Covenant House New York study in New Orleans and found strikingly similar rates of trafficking. Of the 99 youth interviewed at Covenant House New Orleans, 14% of respondents had been victims of some form of human trafficking, and a full 25% of the New Orleans sample had been engaged in commercial sexual labor in some way in their lifetimes.<sup>25</sup>

Between August 2015 and June 2016, the Modern Slavery Research Project continued this study of trafficking among homeless youth using the HTIAM-14 to interview an additional 542 youth in nine additional cities in the United States and Canada (Anchorage, Atlanta, Detroit, Fort Lauderdale, Los Angeles, Oakland, St. Louis, Toronto, and Vancouver). In all, the research team conducted and recorded in-person interviews with 641 clients of Covenant House, aged 17 to 25, regarding their experiences of work exploitation. All participants were seeking services at Covenant House sites at the time of the interview. For a description of methods, see Appendix A.

The primary objectives of the study were to

- establish the prevalence of commercial sexual exploitation, sex trafficking, and labor trafficking among youth served by Covenant House;
- assess some of the risk factors, trends, and results of youth trading sex;
- highlight the voices and experiences of the homeless youth themselves; and
- provide evidence-based and youth-informed recommendations for policy and practice that respond to the trafficking of homeless youth.

# Definitions

**Trafficking:** The HTIAM-14 determines trafficking status as defined by U.S. federal law, which includes:

- a) sex trafficking, which involves a commercial sex act that is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; and
- b) labor trafficking, which involves 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.<sup>26</sup>

Some U.S. states employ a broader definition of trafficking, and in Canada minors must prove force, fraud, or coercion to be considered trafficking victims. To maintain consistency, this report uses the U.S. federal definition.

**Homeless:** The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines a homeless person as “an individual who lacks housing (without regard to whether the individual is a member of a family), including an individual whose primary residence during the night is a supervised public or private facility (e.g., shelters) that provides temporary living accommodations, and an individual who is a resident in transitional housing.”<sup>27</sup>

**Homeless Youth:** The National Network for Youth (United States) indicates that a homeless youth is any “individual, 12–24 years of age, who is living on their own, without a parent or guardian, and lacks a stable or permanent address.” This includes youth who are “marginally-housed” because they are “couch-surfing” or living in temporary shelters, abandoned buildings, motels, or other unsafe or temporary housing.<sup>28</sup>

**Street Youth:** UNICEF defines street youth as anyone under the age of 18 “for whom ‘the street’ (including unoccupied dwellings and wasteland) has become home and/or their source of livelihood, and who are inadequately protected or supervised.”<sup>29</sup> For the purposes of this report, we are using “street youth” and “unsheltered youth” to describe any youth aged 12 to 24 who fits this definition.

**Survival Sex:** The trade of sex for the provision of a basic necessity such as housing or food.

**Commercial Sex, Sex Work, Sexual Labor, Transactional Sex:** Sex acts on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person.<sup>30</sup>

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## Limitations

This study provides a detailed account of work and sexual exploitation experienced by homeless youth in Covenant House's care. It was conducted using a convenience sample of homeless youth who were present at Covenant House sites in the United States and Canada during the time that the interview team visited. All findings refer to this particular sample. The sample interviewed in this study is neither random nor locally or nationally representative of homeless populations, youth populations, or even of the homeless youth population, and should not be construed as such.

Though we did interview a small number of youth who accessed drop-in services and who might be considered strictly "street youth," we did not have a large enough sample size to adequately capture the experiences of unsheltered youth. There are likely to be significant differences between those youth who remain unsheltered, those who move directly from their family homes or foster homes into homeless shelters, those who seek shelter at other sites, and those interviewed here who sought shelter at Covenant House sites, but that variability could not be captured in this study.

This study also cannot represent all youth who engage in the sex trade, the drug trade, or who are victims of human trafficking, especially those who are not homeless.

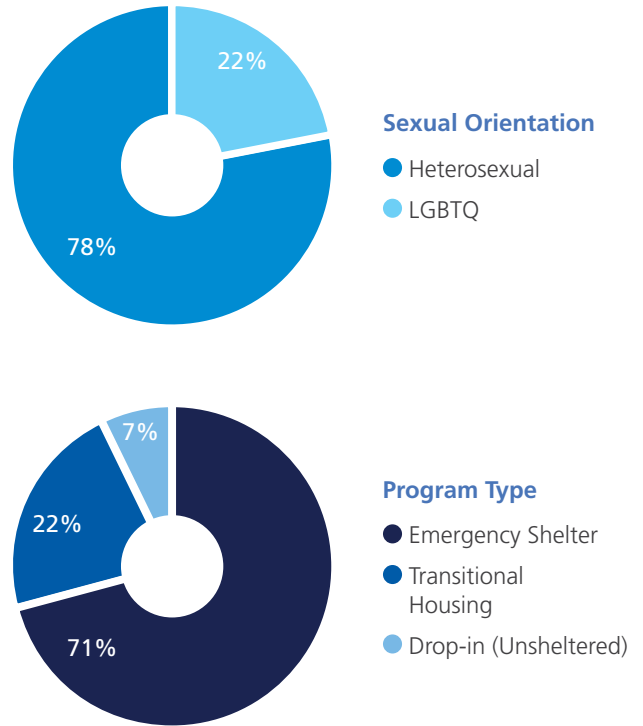
As this was a point-in-time study, we were limited to interviewing those youth who happened to be sheltered at a Covenant House site during the time we were there. Variables that determine youth intake at each particular shelter at that particular time (including weather, availability of alternative services, availability of beds, programming, advertising, etc.) played a role in the demographics of youth who were interviewed. Prevalence of trafficking for each individual site is only based on that point in time and could be different if assessed at a different point in time.

As with much social science research dealing with sensitive topics, it is prudent to assume that the numbers presented here concerning sex and labor trafficking, sexual labor, and drug trading are underreported. This may be due to respondents feeling uncomfortable disclosing their participation, even when forced, in activities considered illicit, or may have resulted from respondents believing their experiences were irrelevant to the research being conducted. Furthermore, demographic data was reported by shelter staff, using their case management record systems, so those data are reliant on what interview subjects reported to staff members at intake and during their work with the staff. This means that these data are likely underreported as well.

# 2. Participant Characteristics and Prevalence

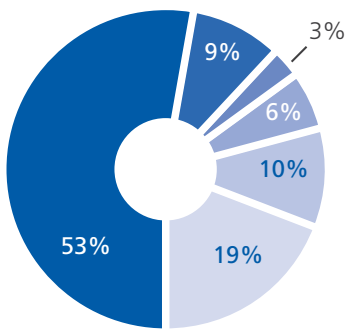
## General Demographics

Total Participants: 641



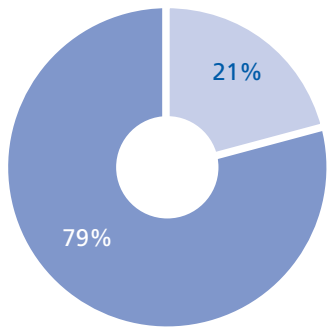
## Prevalence

| All (641)                | Anchorage (65) | Atlanta (64)         |
|--------------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Any Trafficking: 19%     | 28%            | 20%                  |
| Sex Trafficking: 14%     | 20%            | 14%                  |
| Labor Trafficking: 8%    | 18%            | 11%                  |
| Both Sex & Labor: 3%     | 11%            | 5%                   |
| Any Commercial Sex: 30%  | 30%            | 36%                  |
| California (98 Combined) | Detroit (60)   | Fort Lauderdale (47) |
| Any Trafficking: 15%     | 22%            | 17%                  |
| Sex Trafficking: 8%      | 18%            | 15%                  |
| Labor Trafficking: 9%    | 5%             | 2%                   |
| Both Sex & Labor: 2%     | 2%             | 0%                   |
| Any Commercial Sex: 30%  | 33%            | 19%                  |



### Race

- African, African American, or Black
- American Indian, Native Canadian, or Native Alaskan
- Asian
- Latino
- Multiracial/Other
- White



### Foster Care History

- Yes
- No

### Age

|              |     |
|--------------|-----|
| 17 year olds | 1   |
| 18 year olds | 79  |
| 19 year olds | 134 |
| 20 year olds | 125 |
| 21 year olds | 117 |
| 22 year olds | 85  |
| 23 year olds | 58  |
| 24 year olds | 25  |
| 25 year olds | 3   |

## Prevalence

### Los Angeles (72)

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Any Trafficking    | 10% |
| Sex Trafficking    | 6%  |
| Labor Trafficking  | 6%  |
| Both Sex & Labor   | 1%  |
| Any Commercial Sex | 25% |

### New Orleans (99)

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Any Trafficking    | 14% |
| Sex Trafficking    | 11% |
| Labor Trafficking  | 5%  |
| Both Sex & Labor   | 2%  |
| Any Commercial Sex | 29% |

### Oakland (26)

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Any Trafficking    | 31% |
| Sex Trafficking    | 15% |
| Labor Trafficking  | 19% |
| Both Sex & Labor   | 4%  |
| Any Commercial Sex | 42% |

### St. Louis (33)

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Any Trafficking    | 18% |
| Sex Trafficking    | 15% |
| Labor Trafficking  | 3%  |
| Both Sex & Labor   | 0%  |
| Any Commercial Sex | 30% |

### Toronto (90)

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Any Trafficking    | 16% |
| Sex Trafficking    | 11% |
| Labor Trafficking  | 7%  |
| Both Sex & Labor   | 2%  |
| Any Commercial Sex | 26% |

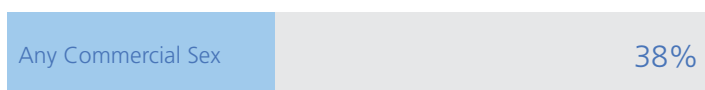
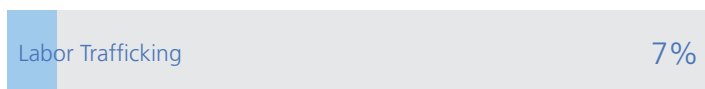
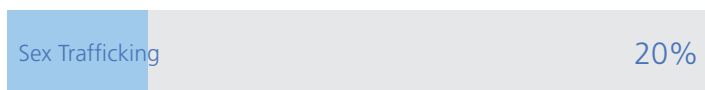
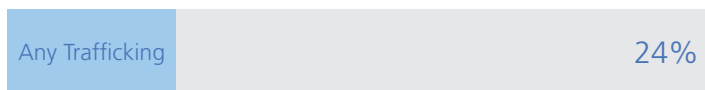
### Vancouver (85)

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Any Trafficking    | 27% |
| Sex Trafficking    | 21% |
| Labor Trafficking  | 9%  |
| Both Sex & Labor   | 4%  |
| Any Commercial Sex | 38% |

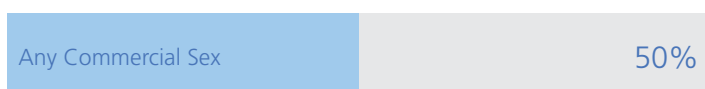
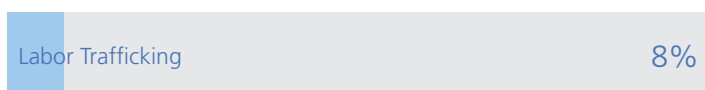
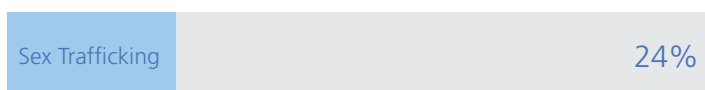
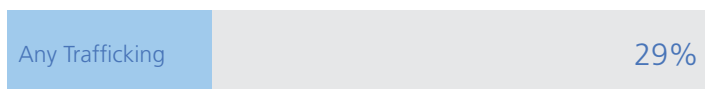


# Prevalence

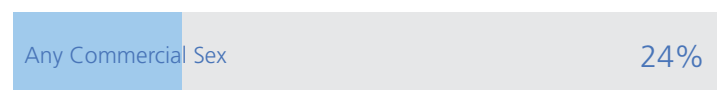
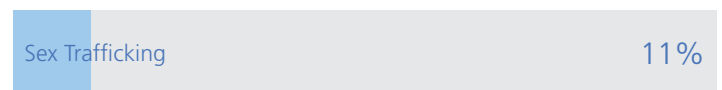
## Cisgender Female (243)



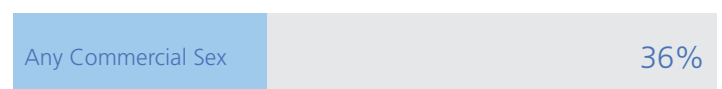
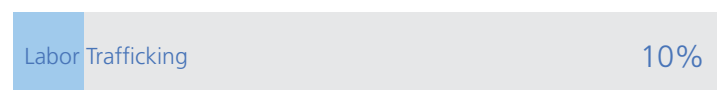
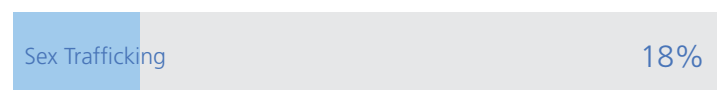
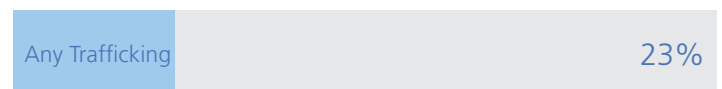
## LGBTQ Youth (123)\*



## Cisgender Male (383)



## Youth with Foster Care History (137)



**NOTE:** There are too few transgender people in the sample to provide adequate data for this study.

\*As identified by staff, using data from intake and case files, and corrected by research team only when subjects self-identify otherwise within interviews. Toronto does not collect data on sexual orientation, and therefore their data is not included here.

**African, African American or Black (342)**

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Any Trafficking    | 17% |
| Sex Trafficking    | 13% |
| Labor Trafficking  | 7%  |
| Any Commercial Sex | 38% |

**Multiracial (43)**

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Any Trafficking    | 20% |
| Sex Trafficking    | 21% |
| Labor Trafficking  | 2%  |
| Any Commercial Sex | 35% |

**American Indian/Native Canadian/Alaska Native (57)**

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Any Trafficking    | 26% |
| Sex Trafficking    | 9%  |
| Labor Trafficking  | 18% |
| Any Commercial Sex | 24% |

**Other (19)**

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Any Trafficking    | 20% |
| Sex Trafficking    | 11% |
| Labor Trafficking  | 5%  |
| Any Commercial Sex | 37% |

**Asian (19)**

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Any Trafficking    | 24% |
| Sex Trafficking    | 11% |
| Labor Trafficking  | 16% |
| Any Commercial Sex | 21% |

**White (121)**

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Any Trafficking    | 20% |
| Sex Trafficking    | 16% |
| Labor Trafficking  | 11% |
| Any Commercial Sex | 38% |

**Latino (38)**

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Any Trafficking    | 26% |
| Sex Trafficking    | 16% |
| Labor Trafficking  | 16% |
| Any Commercial Sex | 24% |

# 3. Sex Trafficking

## Defining Sex Trafficking

People who are victims of sex trafficking are compelled to engage in commercial sex through force, fraud, or coercion. While many people conflate consensual sex work and sex trafficking, the distinction must be clearly understood. Commercial sex or sex work is the exchange of sexual services for items of value. Typically, these activities occur between consenting adults. As with any form of labor, however, sex work can also be forced. It is when a lack of consent—through the use of force, fraud, or coercion—enters the exchange that trafficking occurs. By U.S. federal law, the crime of trafficking also includes engaging with a minor in a commercial sex act. Since the original passing of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA) in 2000, the United States’ federal definition of sex trafficking includes commercial sex acts “in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age” regardless of the person’s ability to prove force, fraud, or coercion by a third-party controller (colloquially known as a “pimp”). Since minors are unable to consent to sex under U.S. law, the TVPA removes the requirement to prove force, fraud, or coercion to determine trafficking, because any situation of commercial sex with a minor is in the eyes of the law non-consensual. When a minor is considered a victim of trafficking, he or she can be afforded opportunities to access services in response to victimization instead of being treated as a criminal. Though Canadian law understands the age of consent to be 16 and does not include minors as trafficking victims unless they can prove force, fraud, or coercion, this study uses the U.S. definition for the purposes of consistency and clarity.

## Sex Trafficking

Of the 641 youth we interviewed at Covenant House sites around the United States and Canada, 14% (92) are considered victims of sex trafficking if we apply the U.S. federal definition of trafficking. Of those youth who were identified as sex trafficking victims within the study, 58% (53) were in situations of force, fraud, or coercion, and 42% were minors involved in transactional sex but were not forced by a third-party to do so.

Among all those who were trafficked for sex, a little more than half (53%) were cisgender females, while cisgender men accounted for 44% of those who were trafficked. This means that about one in five (20%) of all cisgender women and one in 10 (11%) of all cisgender men had been trafficked. Three of the trafficked youth were transgender, and 36% (30) of the identified victims were LGBTQ. That means that LGBTQ youth were disproportionately affected, as 24% of them had been trafficked for sex.

## Force And Coercion

The 53 youth who reported situations of sex trafficking that involved force or coercion reported experiences of physical violence as well as severe threats to their lives and to their families lives. Many indicated that they lived in fear of their traffickers and were thus too afraid to walk away.

Some young people are lured into an intimate relationship with people who then turn violent. One young woman said of her pimp,

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“In the beginning, he was like a boyfriend to me. He changed. I was 17.” He forced her to sell sex, and she left him after a year. Shortly thereafter, she returned, and she found that he had been mentored by another pimp and that he had become more violent. She told us:

“His friend taught him that sometimes the girl needs to be disciplined and maybe the girl shouldn’t leave. That was not a good thing that he taught him. The first time, he wasn’t violent. [His mentor] taught him bad stuff—to be more violent, less caring.”

Another woman summed it up this way: “I could have been killed if I had stopped.” One woman even reported that one of her pimps had locked her in a dog cage at night. Violence held many of the trafficked respondents captive in their situations of exploitation.

Young men also reported being forced into trading sex. One young man told us that his boyfriend had introduced the idea of trading sex for money. The respondent turned over all the money he earned to his boyfriend, but even that did not satisfy his abusive partner. The respondent lived in fear of his boyfriend-turned-pimp’s unpredictable violence. He told us:

“It took about three months for me to realize that he has issues—that he is abusive. I got my ass whooped every day. Even if I brought home more money than we talked about bringing home that night, when I had done extremely well ... if he got mad, it was my ass.”

Sometimes the threat of violence is enough to keep a young person psychologically captive. One woman told us that she was unable to escape her pimp because he “threatened to shoot up my sister’s house, and he was crazy.... For my sister’s safety too, I had to [sell sex for him]. He threatened to shoot up the house, and she had kids, so I didn’t want that.”

Those who experience what the law calls “coercion” are psychological captives of their pimps. Some respondents reported having been recruited through what is commonly called “finesse pimping.” In these situations, a person posing as a boyfriend dates or pretends to be in love with a target and then reveals that s/he is expected to sell sex. When one respondent was asked how such an intimate partner maintained control over her, she admitted that he would “buy me stuff and love me like I didn’t have anybody love me before.” She continually wanted to run away because he was brutally assaulting her; however, he consistently prevented her from leaving by convincing her that he loved her.

When asked if she had ever traded sex for anything of value, one survivor of repeated forced commercial sexual exploitation discussed being forced to sell sex as a small child.

“My parents used to try to get—wanted me to do it.... My first time that it happened, that was kind of forced upon me, I was probably six.”

She explicitly said that her family members treated her “like a slave,” forcing her to have paid sex with men and to do all of the housekeeping. She described extreme emotional and psychological damage from those experiences, which led her to attempt suicide several times. Later, she was coerced to sell sex by a man who worked in the mental ward where she was hospitalized. He didn’t use physical force, but he did target her psychological instability and used it to pressure her into selling sex for his profit. For this young woman, sex trafficking in childhood resulted in vulnerabilities that exposed her to men who took her fragility as an opportunity for further exploitation.

One of the most severe cases of sex trafficking that we recorded happened to a single mother. Though she lived in the United States for most of her life, she was an undocumented immigrant and therefore only qualified for under-the-table work to supplement the \$300 government assistance provided to her family each month. When she answered a Craigslist job ad that promised thousands of dollars a night, she suspected that she was signing up for sex work, but she quickly learned that the lucrative opportunity she had been promised was merely a ruse. She was in fact earning the thousands, but her trafficker kept all of her earnings. He did not protect her from abusive clients who threatened her with knives and guns when she asked them to pay the agreed-upon prices.

“He would tell me it doesn’t matter whatever they’ll do to me outside because I had went through a couple sexual abuses on my dates, and he was like that doesn’t matter; no one cares if you went through it or not.”

When she threatened to leave, the trafficker kidnapped her son to exhibit his power over every aspect of her life. Though she had felt trapped by the trafficker for two months, the trafficker’s threats to her child finally emboldened her to call the police.

“One night, I came back to the hotel, and they weren’t there. They were out. They kidnapped [my son] .... I’m texting [the pimp] about where’s my son, bring him back. He is not gonna answer, but only one text saying ‘your son is OK, I’m at a partner’s house.’ Then I gave him a chance. I was like, ‘I’m going to give you a chance. You tell me right now where he is, or I will report you.’ He didn’t want to

tell me, so I reported him. Police came, gave him the kidnap case. I didn't tell them it was a prostitution case as well."

She explicitly described her experience of human trafficking as slavery: "You had to sleep in hotels. You had to eat outside food. You had to go through rules and just be in a room with one TV and not go outside and have your freedoms. It's slavery. It's slavery. I lost freedom, and I didn't see it at first—but then they took my son."

Several respondents reported being abducted by strangers or recent acquaintances and forced to trade sex. One respondent had only arrived at the shelter days before the interview after she escaped a local hotel room where a captor forced her to sell sex. Just before her 21st birthday, she met a young woman in her small hometown who quickly convinced her to move to a nearby city where she encountered her friend's pimp. He immediately used violence to force her to submit to his will.

"He was like, 'No, you're going to be having sex for money.' I was like, 'Oh no! I can't do that!' And that is when I kind of stood up, and he pushed me down. He was like, 'You are either going to work or I am going to sell you to another pimp or kill you.' Then I got terrified and he forced me to take pictures in lingerie."

Another young woman was walking down the street and accepted a ride with a stranger. There were several other women in the car, who told the respondent that they were prostitutes and that she was going to become one as well. Another young woman was kidnapped with several other girls and held in a hotel by a pastor who, she reported, used his authority as a clergyman to force the other girls to sell sex. She did not admit to selling sex herself, but she witnessed other girls being trafficked. These extreme cases were unusual, but they are illustrative of the use of physical and psychological violence used to maintain control over youth who are trafficked.

The mechanisms by which third-party controllers maintain power over young men and women included stalking, surveillance, psychological manipulation, drugging, threatened and actual physical and sexual violence, kidnapping, and threats to family members. This vast repertoire of physical and psychological violence can be employed by strangers, employers, intimate partners, and even family members.

### Survival Sex

Nearly one in five (19% or 121 respondents) of the youth we interviewed turned to survival sex at some difficult point in their lives, which means that they traded sex simply to meet basic needs such as food and housing. Half of the youth who were trafficked had engaged in survival sex as minors, and nearly two-thirds (63%) of all those who

**Indeed, for many young people, extreme poverty increases their vulnerability to people who take advantage of their obvious need. At about the age of 15, one female first engaged in survival sex as a means of simply putting shoes on her feet when her mother couldn't afford to.**

engaged in commercial sex in any way did so on at least one occasion by engaging in survival sex.

These numbers indicate that basic systemic problems—lack of adequate housing, food insecurity, lack of viable work opportunities, lack of social services—are important drivers of youth engagement in the sex trade. Therefore, attending to those basic needs will likely reduce the high rates of survival sex among homeless youth.

Indeed, for many young people, extreme poverty increases their vulnerability to people who take advantage of their obvious need. At about the age of 15, one female first engaged in survival sex as a means of simply putting shoes on her feet when her mother couldn't afford to.

"Like there was a time where the bottom of my sole was like there was no shoe. And my mom was like, you know how moms are, you can only get some new shoes at Christmastime or the beginning of the school year. I decided Christmastime. It snowed, I wore them out, so that's my fault. He's like, 'Yeah, I'll help you out. You do what I say, and I'll get you three pairs of shoes.' And I'm like, "Three?!" ... So I had sex with him."

Homeless youth are often forced to make decisions they otherwise wouldn't make to find a way to provide for their basic needs, and survival sex presents an immediate opportunity to sleep in a safe place or eat a meal. Even for those with low-pay jobs, survival sex is often perceived as the only way to survive between pay checks.

One LGBTQ female told a fairly common story of how she hadn't considered trading sex until the moment when she became homeless. She explained the dire circumstances that led her reluctantly to trading sex:

# Complicating The Portrait Of The “Pimp”

Though most representations of trafficking fixate on images of “pimps” as stereotypically black or foreign national men who treat their victims brutally and earn extraordinary amounts of money by exploiting young women, traffickers described by the respondents in this study were a much more diverse group than most depictions would suggest. Family members, intimate partners, and peers trafficked youth, using force and coercion.

As the story of the young woman who was trafficked several times suggests, parental and familial rights over children can be distorted to maintain absolute power and to mask exploitation. As Minh Dang, a survivor-scholar-activist reminded us, “I am going to say it over and over again that my parents were my pimps because people aren’t hearing that. They think it’s random strangers or something.”<sup>31</sup>

Within this study, we encountered nine youth who had been trafficked for sex by family members. One woman said her mother needed a place for the family to sleep, so she “gave me to this man so that way we could spend the night with him.” Later, when she was only 11 years old and a runaway from group homes, the same respondent reported engaging in survival sex in exchange for places to stay and money for food.

Another young woman reported being forced to trade sex for rent when she was living with her sister: “She’s like, you need to talk to him, and, you know, like play nice with him. You know like, so he’ll let me slide on the rent. Till I get the money to pay it.” Another young woman grew up in a house where all of the women were selling sex, and when she turned 12, they forced her to begin selling sex as well.

Like the young man whose middle school boyfriend encouraged him to trade sex, several people told us their intimate partners encouraged or forced them into the sex trade. The young woman whose trafficker had learned from a mentor that he should be violent had dated the man for a while before he started expecting her to sell sex. One young man dated a woman who forced him to have

sex with her friends for money and to act in pornographic films. Even after running away from their partners-turned-traffickers, they often felt a “trauma bond” with the people who exploited them and continued to describe them as boyfriends or girlfriends or exes, and did not understand them to be or describe them as “pimps.”

Furthermore, people who act as third parties in the sex trade are not always predatory or violent. Peers can sometimes help a person who is struggling to survive learn the skills necessary to avoid physical harm while working in the sex trade. Sometimes, to find clients or protection from the risks of selling sex, youth seek assistance and support from peers who then receive part of the money earned from the encounter. Respondents reported that peers can provide the knowledge and security that lowers the risk for the person who trades sex.

This study reveals that we need to think about third-party managers with a more complicated frame of reference. When we speak with youth about their engagement in the sex trade, asking about “pimps” is unlikely to elicit a response because many do not consider these third parties to be their “pimps” or did not engage with third parties at all. Youth who are held captive by parents, guardians, or loved ones often do not conceive of their traffickers as “pimps.” Those youth whose peers mentor or manage them in the sex trade also do not consider their peers to be “pimps.” These distinctly different experiences of the sex trade are relevant and require a sensitive approach to a youth’s relationships to people with and for whom they work in the trade.

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“I was living in my car at the time, so I kind of needed—I didn’t have a job, so I kind of needed money. So I had to do something. I just, you know, resorted to that.”

Many young heterosexual men also describe engaging in relationships with women solely because they needed a place to stay for the night where they did not feel endangered. Many of them described this as “taking advantage of” or “using” women. When asked whether he had ever had sex with someone simply to have a place to stay or something to eat, one young man describes “talking to” a girl as a euphemism for having sex with her and spending the night at her house.

“Yeah, I did that before—talked to a girl, like, I need somewhere warm. And she liked me, so ... It really made sense that I should be trying to talk to a girl instead of just being in an abandoned house.”

And when youth have dependents, the burden of providing basic necessities becomes urgent. A 19-year-old mother told us the following story when she was asked if she had ever done any dangerous work:

“Well, it was when I was in New York. I had sex for money, but it was just something so I could get my daughter some formula because she was a newborn, and I needed formula for her.... I wasn’t doing it just to get my hair done and my nails done. It was just to make sure my child had something to eat.”

Youth who engage in survival sex reported only doing so because of dire need. They engaged in survival sex because of pressures from poverty, homelessness, lack of employment, and lack of education. While identification and services that address the force, fraud, and coercion aspects of sex trafficking are critical, it is also crucial that we provide services that assist young people in meeting their basic necessities as an integral part of a comprehensive effort to address commercial sexual exploitation and survival sex.

## Commercial Sex

Of the 641 youth who were interviewed, 30% had engaged in some way in the sex trade at some point in their lifetimes (which includes all those who were trafficked for sex as well). Youth become engaged in the sex trade in a wide variety of ways. As mentioned earlier, the majority of those who had traded sex (63%) had engaged

“Well, it was when I was in New York. I had sex for money, but it was just something so I could get my daughter some formula because she was a newborn, and I needed formula for her.... I wasn’t doing it just to get my hair done and my nails done. It was just to make sure my child had something to eat.”

in survival sex. Eighteen and a half percent (18.5%) had been in relationships often referred to as “sugar babies,” as they were paid by a significantly older person (a “sugar mama” or “sugar daddy”) for sex and companionship. Nearly 8% had worked as exotic dancers or strippers. One percent (1%) had worked in pornography. (There is some overlap between types of sex work because some youth participated in more than one.)

Nearly a quarter (24%) of the men and more than a third (38%) of the women, reported being involved in the sex trade in some way. Half of the youth who identified as LGBTQ had been engaged in the sex trade in some way, most of them involved in survival sex. Although LGBTQ youth constituted only 22% of the people we interviewed, they represented 36% of those who were engaged in the sex trade. All demographic groups were most likely to be involved in the sex trade through survival sex.



# "Sugar Babies"

At every site, we met youth who had been in relationships with people they referred to as “sugar daddies” or “sugar mamas”—significantly older people who paid money to engage the youth as a sexual companion for an extended period of time. Some of these youth referred to themselves as “sugar babies.”

It was not until our Toronto site visit, halfway through the study, that a significant number of men began to identify their experiences as “sugar babies” as a commercial sexual exchange. Beginning in Toronto, then, we used sugar baby experiences as an example of “trading sex for anything of value.” At each of the five sites where we asked this question, youth answered that they had been involved in providing sex acts in exchange for gifts with an older person with whom they otherwise would not have had a relationship.

Even given those limitations on the findings and the resulting underreporting, 6% of all youth we interviewed indicated that they had been in a relationship with a “sugar mama” or daddy. 20% (38) of all youth who had engaged in the sex trade had been involved with an older “sugar mama” or “daddy” for at least one of their reported sex trade experiences. Their experiences as sugar babies were extremely varied—some enjoyed the gifts and attention, while others quickly found their partners to be abusively demanding and even controlling to the point of holding them captive.

Though people of all genders and sexualities reported acting as “sugar babies,” perhaps the least discussed aspect of the sex trade and sex trafficking is the exploitation of heterosexual cisgender men. 8% of the heterosexual cisgender men we interviewed reported engaging in sexual exchanges with “sugar mamas,” and this is likely underreported because we only began including “sugar mamas” as an example in the second half of the study.

The vast majority of men we interviewed simply answered “no” when first asked questions about exchanging sex for anything of value. However, when asked whether they had ever engaged in a sexual relationship with an older woman or man who provided money or gifts explicitly in return for sex, some of those who answered “no” to other questions about sexual exchange suddenly answered “yes.”

Upon being released from prison, one young man sought the help of a woman at the recommendation of a fellow inmate, who said she would help him get back on his feet by giving him money on a daily basis in exchange for sex. Another young man met a woman who would buy him clothes and gifts in exchange for regular sex with her. Many young men celebrated these relationships with expressions of bravado.

However, in many of the cases, young men reported that the older women could become very demanding and even dangerous. Several young men reported that once the “sugar mamas” had arranged to pay them, the women in their 30s and 40s would expect to be able to dominate the young men. One young man reported being constantly “drained” by the sex the woman demanded. Another young man recounted a “sugar mama” relationship that made him uncomfortable from the start and quickly turned dangerously controlling. Some young men reported that their “sugar mamas” stalked them, and several reported being “forced” to have sex even when they refused. One young man was stabbed by his “sugar mama” when he tried to leave, and another had to break through a window to escape a “sugar mama” who locked him in the house to keep him from leaving her.

Many of the young men struggled to articulate what they felt about the sugar baby situations. One young man reported that he didn’t think the exploitation of men was taken as seriously as that of women:

“When it’s a male doing that [sexual exploitation of minors], anybody can look at it like, ‘Oh yeah, he’s trying to rape her, this and that. He’s a pedophile, this and that.’ But if it was a female doing it to a male, they’re not going to say that’s rape.... That’s not fair at all. That’s kinda crazy to me.”

These findings suggest that there is a hidden world of sex trade, sex trafficking, and sexual abuse—hidden intellectually even from those who are engaged in it—that is not being addressed. Young straight cisgender men are falling through the cracks and are not receiving the counseling or sexual education that they clearly need.

## Economic Drivers Of Youth Engagement In Trading Sex

Homeless youth engage in the sex trade for many reasons, but when asked, the majority of youth we interviewed suggested that the primary driver was economic. Indeed, 84% of those who engaged in the sex trade without being forced by a third party pointed to economic factors as the primary reason for doing so. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of the youth who had engaged in sexual labor had done so while homeless. In Oakland, 100% of the youth who had engaged in the sex trade reported being homeless while doing so.

When the youth we interviewed were indeed able to find temporary housing, they largely reported that they were living “from pillar to post,” in shelters, on friends’ and extended family’s couches, in motels, in vacant buildings, and in “trap houses.” Youth seek safe and affordable housing and sustenance, and they are seeking jobs that will allow them to attain those basic necessities. When they cannot find formal work at all, or none that will allow them to live independently or to support themselves and their families, they look to the informal economy for opportunities. Their strategies for ensuring that they would survive living on the streets included any route that would provide a safe shelter or a little bit of quick money.

At age 17, after a dispute with the relatives with whom she was staying, one young woman engaged in survival sex, which she called “the worst mistake I ever made.”

“And it was cold. It was in the wintertime....I was just upset, walking around. Then, this dude walked up to me and started talking to me. And at first I was ignoring him, but then, he kept walking up to me. I didn’t know him from a can of paint. And then you know, I ended up coming in the dude’s house, and I spent the night. I actually stayed there for like a week. And you know, it was like the worst mistake I ever made. I slept with this guy. He gave me chlamydia.”

Many young people get involved in trading sex because they have not been introduced to viable work alternatives. If they become homeless when they are extremely young, they may be naïve, impressionable, and unaware of the potential risks associated with their decisions. One young woman’s experience captures this confluence of risk factors well:

“I became homeless, let’s see—how did that happen? So I got arrested, and at that point, I didn’t know what I needed. I didn’t know about cleaning houses or none of that stuff.... I just knew that, men would come along like, ‘You’re too cute to be whatever, whatever [i.e. homeless].’ So, I would meet guys to, you know, like give me

# 84%

of those who engaged in the sex trade without being forced by a third party pointed to economic factors as the primary reason for doing so.

stuff that I might need like clothes or like food or whatever it is. In exchange, it would be like, ‘All I just want to do is screw you.’ And I’m thinking like, in the end, we’re going to get married. And that never happened.... So, over time, I kind of just got—I don’t want to say used to it, but it’s kind of an expected thing.... But it’s something that I’d rather not do.”

That same young woman confronted the stigma associated with trading sex by pointing to the lack of alternative employment available to support youth with little or no income if they decide to turn to the formal labor market.

“And somebody might tell you like, ‘It’s not a good thing,’ but if he gives you like 5,000 dollars just to have sex with him, and you’re like, well, if I’m working at this food place, it’s going to take me about a million years to make the same 5,000 dollars.”

Runaway youth are at particular risk for engaging in survival sex because their main priority is to find safe shelter. Working regularly in the sex trade may seem too risky for many youth, but engaging in survival sex for a place to stay with an acquaintance or even a stranger is often seen as a viable alternative to sleeping on the streets. Even more limited options exist for homeless youth who are discharged from shelters when they break the rules. When the safe havens that youth rely on become unavailable to them, they may resort to survival sex. One young woman told us:

“I was staying with a man because, you know, when you break the rules at Covenant House, and they discharge you? He was helping me out, and he would force himself on me, but I couldn’t go to Covenant House because I was discharged. I had two more weeks [until I could return to the shelter], and it happened. But I was wrong because—I don’t really like talking about it ... I just didn’t want to get kicked out on the street with my daughter again.”

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A transgender woman explicitly blamed the economy and a lack of viable job options for her engagement in the sex trade, which she refers to as “sex trafficking”:

“It’s just, you know, the economy today—it’s what makes people make the decisions that they make today. Because a lot of people don’t have to do sex trafficking if certain doors is open for them. Some people don’t understand the opportunities that’s out there that they can get engaged in except for sex trafficking. Because I’m not going to lie, that’s about the first thing that a person will look at—if they don’t have any money—is trying to have sex with somebody, because that’s about the easiest thing that you could do.”

When bills, responsibilities, and literal hunger demand immediate attention, it seems illogical to many homeless youth to turn to a minimum-wage job that might take weeks to get and then require that they wait another week or two for payment. Survival sex and the sex trade provide opportunities that address youth’s needs immediately. What the youth seek are alternatives that will provide them immediate shelter, food, and security so that they do not have to turn to trading sex in emergency situations.

When asked for recommendations to help young people avoid unwanted engagement in the sex trade, youth emphasized the need for more jobs, jobs skills training, internships, and a living wage. The majority concluded that if they had had an alternate route to taking care of their needs, they would take it—those opportunities simply were not available or known to them at the time they traded sex.

### Agency In Trading Sex

Of those youth who had engaged in the sex trade without being forced by a third party, 16% indicated a reason other than economic need had been the primary motivating factor. Other factors that encouraged youth to engage in trading sex included the search for self-worth or self-esteem, a desire for luxuries, encouragement by a peer, and a sense of empowerment. It is critical that we understand the varying reasons youth engage in the sex trade because focusing on one primary factor might lead service providers to neglect other reasons. All of the intersecting reasons why a youth might engage in the sex trade should be addressed and respected.

One young woman who engaged in commercial sex and had relationships with sugar daddies listed economic need as a primary motivating factor for her when she first began selling sex. She reported that she felt “empowered” by the work, and she especially liked working with “sugar daddies” because they provided her with

the illusion of being rich even when she was homeless.

“He used to give me money and buy me clothes and shoes. And like, I ran away from home, and he was doing all this stuff, and we was going, you know, to, like, upscale places and stuff. And I liked that stuff because that wasn’t something that I was doing, you know? And then it made me feel like—oh, I don’t know how it made me feel. It made me feel good. I’m like, ‘Damn. I like havin’ money!’ ... I was going to the shop to get my hair done. I was like, ‘Yes!’ I was feeling grown as hell.”

For her, trading sex was a means of gaining control over her poverty at a time when she felt she had little control over her own fate. Though she maintained minimum wage jobs throughout the time she traded sex, she relied on sex work to keep her out of poverty.

One young man who grew up in a middle class home explained his opinion that sex work is “legitimate” and “fun” work, and so he entered the sex trade even though he was not experiencing an economic crisis.

“It was never done because I needed to; it just came as a matter of course, you know what I mean, and personally, I find it empowering, you know what I mean? I find, you know, for example, when I hear—a lot of people have misconceptions about sex workers or porn actors and actresses, and some of them are vocal about the fact [that they believe] we’re not doing it because we need the money or because we have some sort of like weird complex that we’re suffering through. No, this is legitimate work. This is legitimate, what we’re doing, and besides, it’s a lot of fun and it’s empowering.”

Some of the youth who had engaged in the sex trade by choice as adults had a casual relationship to the experience. One said, “It was really exciting. It was quite the adventure.” Another called it “exhilarating.” One youth decided, “I can make money doing this. I’m this good at it, I like doing this, so what the hell?” Several youth felt they had a less traumatizing experience in the sex trade than others because they were careful about it. One young woman said, “Because I do this willingly, I don’t have a lot of the problems that other people do. I take care of myself during those situations. I get myself checked [for sexually transmitted diseases]. I know what I’m doing.”

Service providers who hope to support the needs of sex-trade-engaged youth must understand that some youth trade sex by choice and describe it as a route to gaining agency in their lives. These youth

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do not identify themselves as victims, and they do not want to be treated as such. The youth we interviewed were quite interested in programming on avoiding trafficking, on healthy sexuality, and on harm reduction, but they did not identify situations that were tantamount to the force, fraud, and coercion of trafficking, and indeed they expressed pride or enjoyment in the work they did in the sex trade. Recognizing and respecting this distinction is crucial in gaining the trust of youth and meeting them where they are. They may need some of the very same services that trafficking survivors require, but they are less likely to be interested if they are treated as if they do not have agency.

### Repercussions Of Youth Engagement In The Sex Trade

Regardless of how youth had entered into the sex trade, the vast majority of them indicated that there were negative repercussions that resulted. Many of the youth described severe physical and psychological repercussions related to the way in which they were objectified and violated while trading sex.

One transgender woman who began trading sex at the age of 14 and who indicated that she was still trading sex during the week of the interview told us that she had experienced severe abuse while working.

“There was multiple rapes with me. Multiple kidnappings.... I was stabbed in my leg. I was physically grabbed by some dude that wouldn’t let me go. I was almost cut by a dude. I’ve been pistol-whipped .... And some pimps that I didn’t know were pimps. They disguise themselves as clients, but they were actual pimps. I got in the wrong car at the wrong time.” At the time of our interview, this young woman was suffering from severe mental illness and experiencing bouts of dissociation, some of which she admitted was a result of her experiences of being trafficked as a child.

One 22-year old woman recalled that clients who bought sex from her as a young teenager “were paying for the Lolita experience.” In addition to being paid for being very young, she was also objectified for her race, and she was very aware that “with people of color, a lot of the time we have more harm towards us, so we have to be extra protective toward each other.” Her time working in this environment where her age and her race were fetishized eventually took a toll on her. She told us:

“I ended up getting depression for two years in [the city where I worked], and then I had to get up and leave. When I was 20, I got up, and I left.”

She told us that people in the shelter never suspected that she had traded sex, and she intended to keep it that way. As a result, she was not receiving care for the trauma resulting from her trafficking situation.

The youth who had earlier declared the sex trade to be fun and empowering was nonetheless wary of commercial sex among minors, based on his own experience. He suggested that the harm came from the objectification and commodification of the person trading sex.

“I guess in our society, our capitalist society, we tend to ... love our stuff. We love our stuff, we love our products. But we have a certain detachment to them where—‘Oh, this isn’t working. Shit. I’ll buy another.’ Or, ‘Oh, this new model came out, damn. Well, I’m going to trade this in; I’m going to get that.’ You know? It’s very impersonal. It’s—things are treated [like] they’re disposable. And so I think that’s the risk, especially when it comes to unraised [immature] sex workers. Because with this consumerist viewpoint where things are disposable, and keeping that in mind, that can definitely be harmful when it comes to underage sex workers and adults, or customers that view them as a thrill, a good time, but disposable.... And when that happens ... people break—you know what they do. They break their phones and they’re like, ‘Oh shit, I gotta get another one.’ You know what I mean? And that mentality carries over, I would say, would carry over to that work.”

That sense of objectification prevented some youth from being willing to disclose their experiences. The young man who told us that his girlfriend forced him to have sex with her friends for money felt objectified, emotionally controlled, and abused. He had a hard time expressing himself when it came to this experience, and he felt like he had no one to turn to when he needed to process it. He told us:

“Sexual exploitation ... is such a big stigma, but especially so for males.... For females, of course, it’d be hard to admit, but for males, it’s even harder. So a big problem is that nobody, none of us, would admit it.”

When he later engaged in survival sex, he again thought of it in terms of objectification, and he was ashamed of “using” women simply to have a place to stay by arranging false dates with them on Tinder. It didn’t matter whether he was being exploited or whether he was only resorting to trading sex because he was homeless; he took all the responsibility for the outcomes in his life on himself, and because those outcomes were sexual in nature, he felt he could

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not turn to a counselor or a mentor to deal with his overwhelming sense of guilt.

Many youth who engaged in the sex trade as minors reported short- and long-term mental health issues related to their experiences. The stigma often attached to the sex trade affected the way they thought about themselves. Youth reported feeling that the sex trade "was all I was good for," that it "placed a heavy burden on my mind" and that it made them feel "hopeless." One young woman said that she felt that in addition to selling her body, she had also sold "my self-respect and dignity." Another said that it had "wreaked havoc on my mind." It was clear that for both those youth who were forced into the trade and those who were not, there was great risk of negative emotional, psychological, and physical repercussions.

### Median Age Of Entry

Many anti-trafficking programs make much of what they call "the average age of entry into prostitution." For over a decade now, unsubstantiated reports have declared 12–14 to be the average age that a young girl enters the sex trade and 11–13 the age that young boys enter the trade.<sup>32</sup> Though there have been many efforts to debunk the sensationalized narrative of the "average" 13-year-old "sex slave,"<sup>33</sup> the basis of which can be found in a widely misrepresented 2001 report focused on the commercial sexual exploitation of children,<sup>34</sup> this misinformation continues to hold significant sway in the anti-trafficking community.

Contrary to these unsupported reports, among the respondents in this study, the median age of entry into trading sex was 18, while the median age for those who were considered trafficked was 16. As one or two outliers can offset the average, it is more important to look at the median age of entry—that is, the precise middle of the range of ages reported—because it more accurately reflects the distribution of ages. Because the oldest person in our sample is only 25 years old, that means the median age of entry is lower than it would be if we included some older people who might have entered the sex trade after the age of 25.

These findings are in line with what Covenant House New York found when they performed this study—44% of their respondents and 47% of the respondents in the ten-city study had not entered the sex trade until they were 18 years old or older.<sup>35</sup> Even among studies that look specifically at survival sex among youth and children, including the

Urban Institute's recent study of LGBTQ youth and Ric Curtis's study of youth in New York, the average age of first engagement in trading sex is between 15 and 17 years old.<sup>36</sup> When Polaris Project reviewed the data they collect from the National Human Trafficking Resource Center Hotline calls, they found the self-reported average age of entry into sex work was 19.<sup>37</sup> A study in Minneapolis separated data for people who were "juvenile starters" and those who were "adult starters" and found that the median age of entry for the juvenile starters was 15, while the adult starters was 22.<sup>38</sup> The average age of entry is clearly dependent on the age and contexts of those being interviewed, but consideration of this higher median age helps us to consider factors particular to that age group as drivers for their engagement in the trade.

### "Aging Out" And "Coming Out" As Risk Factors

Aging out of foster care may be one reason so many youth are turning to the sex trade around the ages of 17 to 19. As many as 24,000 young people between the ages of 18 and 20 "age out" of foster care each year in the United States.<sup>39</sup> The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative estimates that one in five of those youth will end up homeless.<sup>40</sup> Many more youth run away from their foster placements and end up homeless. In our study, 21% of the youth interviewed had a history in the foster system, but 29% of those who were trafficked and 27% of the youth who were engaged in the sex trade had been wards of the state or in the foster care system at some point in their lives. While many youth indicated that they were abused or felt neglected in the foster care system, they found that when they turned 18 or left an abusive foster situation, they were unable to access services and they lost the support system of the foster families or group homes they previously relied upon. At the same time, youth indicated that most programs they encountered provided services only to adults, and so they had few places to turn.

One young woman felt particularly vulnerable when she was 17 years old. At that age, she was not old enough to enter an adult shelter, and she was neglected by many programs because she was bound to age out soon after entering. She said, "I even tried the [homeless youth program]... They were like, no you're almost 18." She explicitly stated that had the shelters in her area been able to take her in when she ran away, she would not have relied on trading sex for housing. She told us, "Nobody should be 17 and not have anywhere to go at all."



### Human Trafficking Prevalence Rates among Youth with Foster Care History

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Sex Trafficking    | 18% |
| Labor Trafficking  | 10% |
| Any Trafficking    | 23% |
| Any Commercial Sex | 36% |

### Human Trafficking Prevalence Rates among LGBTQ Youth

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Sex Trafficking    | 24% |
| Labor Trafficking  | 8%  |
| Any Trafficking    | 29% |
| Any Commercial Sex | 50% |

The youth who participated in this study corroborated these findings. One young woman who worked as a driver of sexually exploited girls told us that most of the girls with whom she worked had been in foster care as minors. Another young person told us that it was aging out of foster care that had left her homeless, which had been the impetus for engaging in the sex trade:

“I grew out of foster care when I turned 18, and then I just went homeless for a while, and then I moved from Denver to Vegas. That’s when I got myself into it.”

One young woman ran away from her foster parents who had sexually abused her. As a result, she was homeless at the age of 12, and she was left vulnerable to a brutal trafficker who forced her to sell sex in a hotel room.

Another young man had to turn to survival sex when he left an abusive foster care situation:

“I was in the street because I went to foster care, and then I fled ... then we met with another girl ... and I went to the girl’s house, and then I did some sort of services for three days while I was staying there.”

Foster youth were not significantly different from their non-fostered peers in terms of the prevalence with which they were trafficked or engaged in the sex trade. However, the poverty that results from aging out or running away from the foster system plays a significant role in increasing the vulnerability of those youth who were fostered.

The Pew Research Center found that the average age when a person first “comes out” to someone is 18 years old for gay men, 21 years old for lesbians, and 20 years old for bisexuals. Thirty-nine percent (39%) of the Pew respondents said they were rejected by family members for being gay.<sup>41</sup> Forty percent (40%) of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ, even though estimates suggest that LGBTQ people make up only about 7% of the general youth population. In a recent study funded by The True Colors Fund, the most frequently cited reason for homelessness among LGBTQ youth was family rejection because of their sexuality.<sup>42</sup>

Many of the LGBTQ youth we interviewed shared experiences that corroborated the findings of these studies: One young man’s story was indicative of what we heard. “I left, unfortunately, because of my sexual orientation. I was forced out. Since I was 18, I’ve been on my own.”

Nearly a quarter (24%) of youth who identified as LGBTQ reported experiences that fit the federal definition of sex trafficking, compared to 12% of youth who did not identify as LGBTQ. While LGBTQ youth accounted for 19% of all respondents interviewed, they accounted for 36% of the sex trafficking victims and an equal percent of all those engaged in the sex trade. Fifty percent (50%) of the LGBTQ youth had engaged in the sex trade in some way during their lifetimes.

In our study, we learned that youth were often kicked out of their family homes when they came out as gay, bisexual, or transgender. Several youth who participated in the study indicated that the unexpected trauma of abandonment and homelessness led them to engage in the sex trade.

# Drop-in/Street Youth

One young man who had turned to survival sex while homeless told us, “Once I got older—like, I’m gonna say 13 or 14—and I told them I was bisexual, that’s when they... everything changed. That’s basically why I left.”

The young woman who engaged in survival sex because she needed new shoes later began trading sex again when she and her girlfriend found themselves homeless after being kicked out by “judgmental” parents who did not approve of their relationship. As an adult, she turned to survival sex because she and her partner were hungry. She wanted to protect her girlfriend from having to engage in informal or illicit work, so she took on the responsibility to feed and house both of them.

“So it’s like, hey, we’re at the end of our money. I’m going to keep you safe regardless. I mean, I’m going to have sex with this person just so we can eat. And I’m a lesbian, so I mean it was a dude, so I mean I’m feeling uncomfortable. But still at the same time, I need to make my ends meet, at the end of the day.”

She and her girlfriend moved into Covenant House so that they could have a safe place to live together without having to turn to selling sex to survive.

LGBTQ youth are often more likely to engage in the sex trade during economic crises because of a variety of heightened risk factors that affect their economic stability, including a lack of parental emotional and financial support as well as discrimination on the job market. A bisexual youth, who was kicked out of his family home for his sexuality, felt compelled to engage in survival sex to support himself. When asked if he would have traded sex if he weren’t homeless, he said:

“No, I would never. Only because I needed money, badly, I had to get something out, needed something, so that was the only way that I thought that I could get money at that time.”

Research is now pointing to the increased vulnerability of foster youth and LGBTQ youth to survival sex and the sex trade, and this study suggests that these vulnerabilities may be most acute among those aged 17 to 19. Indeed, these more complex contours of sex trafficking and commercial sex must be both acknowledged and addressed if we are to assist all young people equally. For so many of the trafficked youth we interviewed, vulnerabilities associated with aging out of foster care or being shunned by family for their sexuality, combined with the poverty and homelessness that resulted from these situations, led to their engagement in the trade.

In all, 46 “drop-in” youth were interviewed for this study. They were youth who were not sheltered in Covenant House at the time, but they visited the shelter during working hours to access services such as rapid rehousing, medical and psychological care, job skills training and placement, or other mentoring services. The incidence of trafficking among these youth was high relative to the sheltered cohort: 24% were trafficked for sex, 13% for labor. Forty-one percent (41%) of the whole group had engaged in the sex trade in some way at some point in their lives. One-third (33%) of them had engaged in survival sex as either adults or minors. These limited data suggest that youth who are living on the street are at significantly higher risk of engaging in survival sex and commercial sexual exchange and of being exploited by labor traffickers. Because we only were able to interview 46 unsheltered youth, we recommend more research that explores the prevalence of trafficking among street youth. Since it seems likely that unsheltered youth are more at risk of feeling the economic pressures that might lead to vulnerability to traffickers and engaging in trading sex, outreach and drop-in efforts should be directed at that particular population to identify trafficking and exploitation as well as provide harm reduction strategies.

**24%** were trafficked for sex.

**13%** were trafficked for labor.

**41%** engaged in the sex trade.



# 4. Labor Trafficking

## Defining labor trafficking

Labor trafficking is defined by U.S. law as 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.”<sup>43</sup> Canada uses a similar definition, indicating that the “exploitation” characteristic of labor trafficking takes place when someone causes another “to provide, or offer to provide, labour or a service by engaging in conduct that, in all the circumstances, could reasonably be expected to cause the other person to believe that their safety or the safety of a person known to them would be threatened if they failed to provide, or offer to provide, the labour or service.”<sup>44</sup> In both countries, labor trafficking is a crime that occurs when someone forces another person to work by employing physical force, psychological coercion, threats of harm, or fraudulent promises, contracts, or visas.

While most North American anti-trafficking efforts focus attention, funding, and advocacy on sex trafficking, labor trafficking presents a significant problem in both the United States and Canada. The National Human Trafficking Resource Center Hotline received reports of 721 U.S. labor trafficking cases in 2015 alone. The primary industries for forced labor in the United States were domestic labor, agriculture, restaurants, and magazine sales crews.<sup>45</sup>

Though not all calls are necessarily confirmed cases of trafficking, this is likely just the tip of the iceberg. Sheldon Zhang found that among undocumented laborers in San Diego alone, 31% of his respondents had experienced a form of labor trafficking and 55% a form of extreme labor exploitation.<sup>46</sup> Though most commonly encountered in agriculture, factory labor, and domestic work, labor trafficking occurs in practically all fields of work. Recent cases were detected in the education sector, entertainment, and even hair braiding. Many of the

victims of labor trafficking are immigrants—both documented and undocumented—who are seeking opportunity in the United States and Canada. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that both Canadian and U.S. citizens are also being lured into forced labor by traffickers who offer misleadingly alluring opportunities.

Eight percent (52) of the participants in this study reported experiences that qualify as labor trafficking. Among those, two told of experiences of forced domestic labor, one respondent had been a child victim of forced factory labor in Mexico, and one youth had been smuggled across the U.S.–Mexico border without his or his family’s consent and forced to carry drugs. Several were forced to do excessively dangerous and legally prohibited agricultural labor by their birth or foster families. Though these more familiar forms of labor trafficking appear to be relatively unusual among the homeless youth who have taken refuge at Covenant House shelters, trends seem to suggest that two significant forms of trafficking are emerging among the youth: situations of forced drug dealing and unpaid and/or fraudulent commission-based sales jobs.

## Forced Drug Dealing

The vast majority of labor trafficking cases reported in this study were instances of forced drug dealing. Of the youth interviewed, nearly 7% percent (42) and, thus, 81% of all labor trafficked youth, had been forced into working in the drug trade. They either felt that they were psychologically coerced into selling drugs or physically forced to remain within the trade after they expressed that they no longer wanted to be involved.

The U.S. guidance for human trafficking task forces indicates that trafficking can occur in “almost every segment of the workforce,” including “drug smuggling and selling,” thus making forced drug

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dealing a recognized form of human trafficking.<sup>47</sup> When Fordham University studied trafficking among Covenant House clients in New York, they found that four (2%) of their respondents had been trafficked in forced drug dealing situations.<sup>48</sup> This study suggests that forced drug dealing proves a significant problem in both the United States and Canada. As little other research on this issue exists, the findings from this study suggest that human trafficking in the drug trade is a field of research that requires immediate attention.<sup>49</sup>

As with the sex trade, youth are initiated into drug culture in a wide variety of ways. We considered an experience to be “forced drug dealing” when the requisite “force, fraud, or coercion” was explicitly involved. These cases, which reflect 20% of youth who admitted to selling drugs at some point in their lives, involved people who considered themselves as not making an individual choice in pursuing that line of work. Youth suggested that economic pressures and the seduction of fast money were not the only reasons young people get involved in selling drugs.

Indeed, they reported the serious psychological harm that is characteristic of coercion. As in the situations of sex trafficking with which most service providers are more familiar, often the levers of love, community, health, and well-being are used to keep young people psychologically captive in the drug trade. In all of these cases, youth reported circumstances of psychological coercion that made them feel compelled to continue performing labor within the drug trade even when they wanted to stop.

### **Familial And Cultural Coercion**

For some youth, parents or family members employed them in their own drug trading operations when the respondents were very young and still unaware of what was happening. Sixteen of the respondents had been forced to work in the drug trade by their parents or immediate family members. One youth told us how his father tricked him into delivering drugs in the afternoons after he returned from elementary school:

“My daddy, before he was locked up, he had me selling drugs.... Yeah, at first I didn’t know what I was doing. I would just come home from school, getting the book bag, taking it around the corner. Then they give me a paper bag, and I knew it was money in there, but I didn’t ever open it. I just bring it back to my daddy.”

He never questioned his father because he was young, but he felt forced to do as his father instructed, even when he learned that what he was doing was illegal and dangerous.

**“I feel like it was my family business. Like, my family’s always been on that side of things, right? So it was just my time, you know... Like I didn’t have other choices.”**

One young woman was first introduced to the dangers of the drug trade when a dealer assaulted her because of a debt her father owed. She told us:

“My biological dad, actually. My dad—well, when I was 10 years old, I woke up with two guns to my head and I woke up crying because I was like, ‘What the fuck?’ And then my dad fucked up in the game to where my dad had to watch them do some shit to me that he never thought he would have to see.... ”

Within a couple of years, her brother forced her to sell drugs for him. She said he “pushed [her] into it.”

“I was 12. I sold weed at first and then I started selling coke when I was 14. When I was 16, I was the drug master, like all the kids around me called me.”

She was accessing drop-in services when we talked with her. At the time, she was homeless, selling and using drugs, trading sex to survive, physically and mentally frail, and she spoke of almost nothing other than fighting for her life.

One young woman was 12 years old when her grandmother told her she would have to deliver drugs if she wanted to live in her house. At the time of the interview, she was living on the streets in an effort to escape the pressure her family put on her to sell drugs. Other youth sold drugs for their parents when their parents fell ill or when they

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succumbed to their own drug addictions. Some recognized at a very young age that the family struggled financially and that all of the children were expected to pitch in by selling drugs.

Many of the youth indicated that they never thought they had a chance to refuse participation in the drug trade because of their families' involvement in the trade. Others suggested that drug dealing was a cultural norm in their communities and that there was never an opportunity to do otherwise. One young man told us:

"I feel like it was my family business, you know. Like, my family's always, you know, been on that side of things, right? You know, so it was just my time, you know.... Like, I didn't have a, you know, I didn't have other choices."

Another respondent said, "I felt that my family just thought I had a duty to do something." Still another claimed, "I could never say no to my family."

One respondent told us he was 11 when he first started selling drugs. When asked whether he ever felt forced to do that work, he said "100%." He explained: "Well all of my peers and my family, they were involved in that lifestyle, and just being involved, you don't really know, you just grow up around it and that's it."

He was asked whether he ever tried to leave the drug trade, and he said he wasn't able to:

"I didn't really have a choice in that area because it's kind of—once you're involved, you know all of the secrets. You know like that black book. You know everything. You don't really have a choice to leave."

Any insinuation that these youth had a choice to perform work or to walk away does not take into account the means by which they began the work, nor does such an accusation comprehend the power of familial and cultural authority over young children. Stories that youth tell indicate situations of genuine coercion by family that would not be acceptable for any other line of work. These youth clearly conceptualize familial or cultural pressure as forms of coercion and force.

### Initiation by Suppliers

Some of those coerced into the drug trade indicated that they were targeted by suppliers in the trade who preyed on their youth and vulnerability to lure them into the work. As young people

**"It was all about fear, threats, violence, acts of violence, acts of power, and trying to place yourself over someone else... literally the term kill or be killed works in that situation—like, literally."**

experimenting with drugs or other criminal activities, these youth were approached by someone who saw those behaviors as a gateway into selling drugs.

When asked if he had ever been tricked into doing work against his will, one young man told us that as a defiant 14-year-old, he attended a music festival where he drank alcohol for the first time and met an older man who seemed very cool. This youth shared how this older man quickly became his "plug" or drug connection.

"I got totally tricked into [selling drugs]. Like it was just like you took advantage of a drunk kid by giving him drugs? He gave me cocaine! Like, what is that supposed to do to a child? Probably not make him better. So, yeah, the thing for me was very clearly now, like seeing it in hindsight, I'm just like, oh, well like that probably wasn't my choice as much as I thought it was my choice."

He explained how the older man took advantage of his poverty, his youth, and his need for parental support. He admitted that as a naive youth unaware of the consequences of his actions, he'd fallen victim to the physical and psychological coercion and control of the dealer, which continued over the course of years.

Another youth told us that the violence of their dealers held them in mental captivity:

"It was all about fear, threats, violence, acts of violence, acts of power, and trying to place yourself over someone else. So maybe they might threaten you and say you have to do this or this is going happen ... literally the term kill or be killed works in that situation—like, literally."

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Even within familial drug dealing networks, physical force and psychological coercion were primary factors in maintaining power over youth. Youth consistently indicated that they were afraid to leave, knowing that choice meant certain violence or death. For many of these youth, quitting the job was not an option; their only exit was through escape.

### Gang-Related Drug Dealing

Though gang participation was not a standard question of the HTIAM-14 questionnaire, 9% (60) of the youth we interviewed volunteered responses that indicated they had been affiliated with a gang at some point in their lives. Many explained that they had joined gangs precisely because of the struggles for basic necessities that resulted from homelessness, and many were homeless once again precisely because they were currently escaping the drug trade.

While acknowledging violence as endemic to gang practices, many of the young people involved did not see the organizations as coercive, suggesting that the choice to be in a gang was nonetheless the responsibility of the individual.

Many others, however, believed that gangs employed that sense of responsibility to coerce young people into behaviors in which they otherwise would not have engaged. Of the 42 youth who were trafficked for drug dealing, nearly half (20) of them indicated that they were compelled to do the work because of their involvement in a gang. They pointed to the especially young age of initiation, the violence of initiation, the violent maintenance of power within the gang, and the violence involved with exiting the gang as methods of force and coercion tantamount to trafficking.

Homelessness, discrimination, teenage pregnancy, and poverty converged in the life of one LGBTQ female respondent, rendering her easy prey for a gang. After her parents kicked her out of the house at the age of 12 for being gay, she was “jumped into” a gang (beaten severely as an initiation) and forced to sell drugs at the threat of death. “I got into a gang, and I got booted out of my parents’ house because I was gay at 12, so I had to kind of like fend for my own to protect myself—a way of survival/protection/means of having a roof over my head. So in [this city], the only thing you have to worry about is making it past the age of 18, and in that case, around every corner you hit, there’s a gang. I was around that for like six years, so that part of my life was just strictly sell drugs, jump into a gang—you pretty much were the gang’s bitch, pretty much. I mean, you just had to do whatever they asked you to do.” One young male indicated

Youth who are desperate for both work and opportunities for growth are easily manipulated by these commission-based sales jobs ... we spoke to dozens of youth who were not paid what they were promised, defrauded by their managers, or abandoned at the end of the jobs.

that he had been forced to sell and take drugs as a requirement of membership in a gang. When asked if he was able to walk away from the job, he told us:

“No, it wouldn’t have been safe. I could have been killed if I had stopped. ‘Cause they said if I stopped working for them they’d find me and kill me. I mean it was gang-involved so I had to do what I had to do.” Having limited choices does not necessarily signify trafficking—almost all of the youth we interviewed had a very limited range of choices for work. However, his inability to quit the job due to coercion qualifies his experience as trafficking. One young man told us he first joined a gang for personal protection, but instead he found that they forced him to sell drugs for them:

“[It was] fully forced. Because at first, I just wanted to have friends to back me up, you know. A little bit of money in my pocket. But then it got serious to where you do what he says or you’ll be hurt.” Another young man claimed that drug dealing is often only the beginning of the forced labor one encounters in a gang:

“When it’s drugs, it’s not just always drugs, you know what I’m saying? It’s way more than that. It can be pimping. It can be stealing. It can be a lot, so yeah, I mean, it’s scary. Because you know, people might try to make you do stuff sometime you don’t want to do. And if you don’t do it, they threaten you. Or you know, you always get beat up every time you come down a certain block.” Several youth had been forced to engage in other activities by gangs against their will, including driving escape vehicles or engaging in violence, theft, and robbery. Though many of the youth admitted to performing illegal activities by choice, several of our respondents indicated that it was only because of constant threats of violence that they engaged in these activities.

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## Forced Drug Dealing As Forced Labor

The drug trade is a business enterprise much like any other: along with calculated supply and demand considerations, there are hierarchies within operations, complete with power struggles and promotions. However, as this enterprise is deemed illegal, the status of its workers remains obscured, and little effort has been made to uncover instances of labor exploitation within criminal business operations such as the drug trade or gangs. Youth who have been violently forced or psychologically coerced into criminal activities, however, are very explicit about the forced nature of the work. One young man who had already responded that his work in the drug trade was dangerous was later asked whether he had ever been the victim of forced labor or felt he had been forced or tricked into doing work against his will. He told us:

“The whole drug trade is forced labor. It is. A lot of people get into it thinking ‘Easy money!’ and ‘Aww, this is gonna be fun.’ Unless you get into it as an individual, as an entrepreneur [that is not true]. If you are under somebody else, it is automatically [forced labor]. If you get into it through a gang, it’s automatically forced labor. That’s just how it is. Most people, matter of fact, most everyone I’ve ever known that joined a gang and started doing that just to start doing that wanted to get back out of it. As soon as they got into it they were like, ‘How do I get out of this, man?’ People just sitting there looking like they are having an anxiety attack. If they are not strong in the mind I have seen people just go crazy off it. I’ve seen people commit suicide. I’ve seen all sorts of stuff. So, I mean, all of it is forced labor.”

One youth compared the drug trade to sex trafficking, describing it as psychologically coercive and physically violent:

“It’s the most forced labor out there I want to say... Except for the most extreme ones, like sex trafficking and stuff like that, but I don’t know. It’s just forced. It’s like a job where you have a schedule and you have to meet a quota. You have to sell a certain amount in a certain amount of time or you get threatened and smacked around or whatever... When it comes to trafficking and selling drugs, it’s more of a—it’s more psychological, not as physical as it used to be, I want to say. It’s more like they treat you good, but then there’s times where they freak out and spaz and they scare you and stuff, smack someone else around in front of you, show that they’re powerful and stuff—just mentally tell you you can’t go anywhere... I’ve seen it happen to other people where you can’t get out, and if you get out, you end up in the hospital for a while. And then once you’re out of the hospital, you end up back in until you go back and work. Yeah, I’ve seen that lots.”

One youth put it bluntly by saying, “It’s extreme slavery.”

Youth often indicated that choice and force were a false dichotomy and instead described their experiences along a spectrum of force that sometimes shifted from force to choice and sometimes back to force again over time. Still, three characteristics clearly classify these cases as forced labor: first, work against their will or through manipulation; second, inability to walk away from their employers; and third, violence used in the maintenance of power. When a youth is forced into the sex trade under these circumstances, their work is clearly identifiable as trafficking—the same should be true of drug dealing and other gang-enforced labor.

## Commission-Based Sales

Many of the youth we interviewed found jobs in commission-based sales in which the pay was dependent on the successful sale of a product or a service, whether it be a magazine, lawn care, or a car. Youth found advertisements for these jobs online and on posters across town, promising high wages and career development opportunities. Though some of these jobs were indeed legitimate sales jobs that paid as promised, many of them were exploitative. Youth recalled canvassing door-to-door for long hours without any training or reasonable explanation of the job, only to find that they would not get paid if they did not make sales. While many quit these jobs upon recognizing this discrepancy between their earnings and the promised wages, others found themselves in very threatening circumstances.

When asked if he had ever had a job in which he felt tricked or forced into working against his will, one young person replied with a story of commission-based sales fraud that turned threatening. This respondent applied online for a magazine sales position that proved to be a credit card scam ring.

“I was supposed to get income but never actually received it... They did not intend to pay me. They tricked me into working... [It] was a sales agent job from Craigslist... This LLC was run by meth-heads, and they were doing a credit card scam, but it was my first job—and it was from Craigslist, and I never knew anything. So I never ever got a paycheck or anything like that! ... Never saw a paycheck. So that was exploiting me because of my—because I was youthful.”

What defines this situation as trafficking is that the youth remained unpaid throughout the duration of the job and the employers used force, fraud, and coercion to ensure the youth continued to work. When this young person tried to leave the job, both employers used coercive tactics to get him to remain in their service.

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“I was like, ‘I want to quit. I don’t think I’ll be able to do this.’ To me, I was like I should be able to leave any job.... She [the female employer] did it through manipulation of words. He [the male employer] did it through aggressive body language. So creating fear in me so that I wouldn’t want to leave and I would continue working for free, basically.”

Another young person worked extremely long days on a magazine sales crew, and then the boss never paid him the promised rate for his sales. In the end, what he experienced was a debt bondage situation.

“You have to pay off your rent if you don’t make any money doing the sales. Then it’s going to go; you’re going to be in the hole. So whatever you do make, they take it.... So whatever you do, when you start making money, you start off in the hole already.”

After not paying him for several months, the employer left the youth in Kansas on his own:

“I ended up getting stranded out there, and that’s when I started being homeless.”

Another youth worked for a street marketing team for several years. She was defrauded of her pay, despite working excessively long hours and giving the company her complete dedication. Instead of pay, the company used incentivizing language suggesting that the professional development and personal growth opportunities they provided her were payment enough. The young woman was completely taken in by the self-help narratives that her boss promoted, and she felt that her own sense of self was connected to the organization. Though they paid her only a tiny fraction of what they owed her, she felt pressured to stay at the job because of the psychological coercion of the managers.

**“I ended up getting stranded out there, and that’s when I started being homeless.”**

Youth who are desperate for both work and opportunities for growth are easily manipulated by these commission-based sales jobs. Though only a few youth were in commission-based sales situations that amounted to trafficking, we spoke to dozens of youth who were not paid what they were promised, defrauded by their managers, or abandoned at the end of the jobs. Their stories reveal a significant risk for trafficking and other exploitation in these fields.



## 5. Escape and Interventions

### Trauma Bonding And Difficult Escapes From Traffickers

For those who are forced into the sex or drug trades, escaping traffickers can be harrowing and potentially life-threatening. Respondents reported escaping by employing elaborate lies to get out of the house, sneaking away in the middle of the night, being rescued by police, and hiding in homeless shelters. For many of them, routes to escape were a constant concern, and they plotted their escapes long before they found a way to implement their plans.

One young transgender male (who identified as a female at the time of exploitation) was selling sex for an escorting agency and was repeatedly told that he was too valuable to the business for them to allow him to leave. When he tried to convince them to let him go, they began to threaten him explicitly.

"I would try anything to get out, like, 'Hey, I can't do this,' or 'I'm too young.' But they already knew my age, so that really didn't work.... Like one of the many times I tried to quit, they were like, "Hey, you know we also have your information and we could go public with it." ... To this day they're still trying to get me back.... I mean, they seem like good people at the time, but once you want to quit and get out, they turn into the green-eyed monster.... Because they see it as, the more profit, the more people we bring in, the more money we make, the more our website gets up, the more clientele we get, the more girls we have out there, you know, promoting us." This youth tried to leave the job over the course of several months, but the threats of the traffickers were constant and believable. Nonetheless, after being held captive by them for over a year, the youth snuck away and changed his phone number and his physical appearance in order to escape their power. When we interviewed him, he had gotten himself a placement in the homeless shelter and was motivated to remain free of his traffickers.

The young woman who sought the protection of a gang when she was abandoned by her parents for being a lesbian told us there were only two choices once you joined the gang—sell drugs or die:

"You had to [sell drugs] in order to keep the protection to have a place to call home. I mean, I didn't want to sell drugs, but ... that was the only two options, and they both led to death, so either way."

She decided to move into Covenant House as a way to escape the gang and go into hiding, yet she still struggled with her sense of responsibility to the gang.

These psychological tactics are commonly used among people who exploit youth, and they make it difficult for people to walk away. Some youth remain in exploitative situations because of what psychological experts call "trauma bonding." Some of these youth recognize the violence that is being inflicted on them but nonetheless find it difficult to leave because they are dependent on their traffickers economically and emotionally. One young woman reported: "It was a mind control thing. He called it free will. But it wasn't free will. You can leave. He made you think you wanted to stay. You know that you don't want to do that type of work. He didn't beat anybody up for leaving but [rather] for not doing what he said or talking back."

She eventually had to run away from him when he turned to brutal violence to keep her in his control. When we met her, she was heavily self-medicating to handle the trauma.

One young woman reported that her boyfriend forced her to sell sex, and he would use reverse psychology to keep her under his control:

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“He got to the point where he was like, ‘I’m gonna leave you,’ and I would be like, ‘No, don’t leave me because my whole life, I felt like nobody loved me. You were always telling me like, I love you. I support you. I’ll do everything for you.’”

Similarly, the young man who was introduced to the drug trade by a charismatic man he met at a concert told us that he still very much admired the charm, prowess, and success of his trafficker. Though he knew the man had exploited him as a child, he remained committed in many ways to the man and, at the very least, to the image of the man that he first embraced.

Trauma bonding makes youth feel dependent on their traffickers and as if leaving them will create more harm than good. As a result, young people struggle psychologically to find the strength to escape. Youth expressed conflicted feelings about their traffickers, and they told stories of returning to their traffickers several times before finally making a break from them.

Nonetheless, young people most often leave their situations of trafficking and exploitation through their own means. One young woman managed to get one of her traffickers’ guns, and she shot at them to get them to allow her to leave. It was dangerous, but it was successful. Another young woman who was being held captive in a hotel by a brutal trafficker escaped by secretly informing the hotel desk clerk, who in turn called the police. Many of the youth who had been forced into the drug trade escaped by changing their phone numbers and getting on a bus to another town. Others used the shelter to hide from their traffickers.

Because human trafficking is often hidden, youth are often forced to find their own routes to safety. They need to know that they have the right not to be exploited and that they have a safety net that will assist them when they do walk away. They need the self-empowerment to leave as well as the housing and economic security that will provide them a sustainable existence when they have successfully escaped.

### Harm Reduction Strategies

Youth are aware that when they engage in intimate labor, they are taking on some degree of risk. Many of them reported they felt they were also at risk of physical or other harm (albeit in different ways) when performing many of the other forms of work available to them: construction, landscaping, door-to-door sales. Still, youth were generally unlikely to actually consider any work they did explicitly “dangerous,” whether that was because they had never been harmed themselves, or because they were accustomed to risk taking, or because they had a general sense of invincibility. Nonetheless, as

## One young woman reported that her boyfriend forced her to sell sex, and he would use reverse psychology to keep her under his control.

we have discussed, youth reported a wide range of harms inflicted on them while engaging in the sex trade, from sexually transmitted diseases to physical and sexual assault to kidnapping.

Youth reported that they took precautions when engaging in the sex trade to avoid the potential dangers. Several young people said they advertised exclusively online because it allowed them to screen potential clients. Some indicated that they always told their friend networks where they were going and with whom in case they were harmed.

“I was living with my friends. They knew what I was doing. They just made sure I used protection. They knew where I was going. They had the phone number to the person and the address.... I always got picked up in a public area, so if people would see me get into a car, my friends always knew the number, the address, car make, car everything. They knew everything so I’d be safe. And essentially it was safe for me.”

He carried a taser with him, but he never had to use it. Other youth were not so lucky as to have such a supportive network and nonviolent clients. Youth used fake phone numbers, false identities, client review websites, client ground rules, friend networks, sex trade mentors, and tasers and knives to protect themselves from potential harm while trading sex.

Many of the sex-trade-involved youth we spoke with, however, indicated that they had not thought carefully about how to protect themselves from risks involved in the sex trade, whether that be from violence or sexually transmitted diseases. Because many of them had returned to selling sex when they hit hard times, many predicted that they might return to the sex trade again at some point in their lives. They indicated that they would be interested in learning more about ways to be safe if they were to be engaged in the sex trade.

Harm reduction strategies do not promote engagement in the sex trade, but they can assist those youth who are involved in it. Best practices suggest that arming youth with the tools they need to



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# Escaping The Drug Trade: A Victim Protection Program

We asked all of the youth whether they had recommendations for programs that could aid youth with similar experiences. Several youth involved in situations of forced drug dealing called for a network of shelters that would agree to allow young men and women to take refuge in a new city. At those shelters, youth would escape the surveillance and seemingly inevitable violence that would befall them if they tried to escape the drug trade while remaining in the same town. For many of the youth who were forced to sell drugs, homeless shelters are safe havens. One young man told us:

“In the last two years, I moved 15 times because of this. They will find you. They will hunt you down.”

The first youth who suggested this exchange network program described it as an “out program.”

“There should be an ‘out program’ ... You don’t necessarily need to be relocated, but maybe some people do. So we offer you like a Greyhound ticket, let’s just say to [a city far from here]. And then talk to resources out there to get you set up with a place and stuff, fresh start, a job, maybe a counselor or something, right? That would be great.”

Later that same week, another youth provided a list of what an escaping youth would need:

“A bus ticket, a backpack of supplies, and there’s a shelter in that city over there. ‘Go try again.’”

Many youth were adamant that a new start in a new city was required for people escaping the drug trade, and it seems likely that a similar program would be beneficial for those leaving sex trafficking situations as well. Their ideas for an exchange program may be precisely what youth need to make that new start.

protect themselves when they engage in trading sex is the best way to protect them from harm.<sup>50</sup> At times when youth are not being directly assisted by service providers or other support systems, they need to be prepared to navigate the risks they confront if they do engage in the sex trade.

Service providers can partner with youth who have been engaged in the sex trade to improve their ability to assist those who are being exploited. Youth who are currently engaged in commercial sex are most likely to identify cases of minor sex trafficking and other exploitation in their daily routine, and they are most likely to be able to safely share harm reduction strategies with others who are working. One transgender sex worker told a story of a time she encountered a minor working on the track but did not know how to respond. Had this youth known of services that could have assisted the 14-year-old, she may have had the opportunity to provide her support instead of reacting with surprise. Partnering with youth engaged in sex work provides an opportunity to discuss harm reduction with the youth and empowers them to advocate for those who are being exploited in the trade.

## Service Provider Interventions

Many of the youth who had been trafficked reported that programs that serve them had been integral in their empowerment to escape situations of exploitation. When asked what they needed in order to escape traffickers or to quit engaging in unwanted transactional sex or the drug trade, several youth actually indicated that the shelter, food, and support Covenant House provided was precisely what they needed to be able to leave the sex trade and the drug trade. Several youth with whom we spoke were living in the shelter precisely because it provided a safe haven from situations of force and coercion. In general, youth indicated that they needed a support system for escape; secure housing and other basic needs were their main priority.

One young woman was afraid the trafficker who had forced her to sell sex as a minor would find her when she first came to Covenant House, but her case managers helped her feel safe. She said:

“I tried to leave [the shelter], and [the case managers] were like, ‘[redacted name], please just sit down. We’ll buy you food, we’ll buy you something to drink. Get rest. Stay here. We’re going to figure out what to do. We’re going to figure out who’s following you.’ And then I was there probably for, like, eight hours, and they’re just taking

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care of me and ... they were like, '[redacted name], we can't let you leave. We're scared. You're family to us.' And that's how these youth centers are. It's family to us people that don't have family."

Another young woman told us that she only began to understand what was happening to her because a Covenant House case manager talked to her about trafficking:

"I think I opened up to a caseworker. I kind of let them in about what was going on—not majorly—and they were trying to tell me, you know, 'I think your boss was pretty much like pimping you and all this stuff and pushing drugs to you.' We just had a training course on this, and I'm telling you, this is what happened."

This speaks to the importance of training case managers and other staff at shelters about trafficking and identification of survivors. If it weren't for the training this case manager received, the young person would never have understood her rights and would not have received specialized services that addressed her particular needs.

One young person explained how another service provider that specializes in serving youth engaged in the sex trade assisted in changing her life:

"[The organization] helps you pay for things so you don't have to make your own money. They take care of lunch ... and then they have a variety of other counseling and therapy—all these other like resources that you could go through. They will help take you off the street or help you find a place so you don't have to focus on escorting yourself, and they will help lead you the right way off the track that you are going through."

One respondent actually credited the strict rules of the homeless shelter for her making a commitment to leaving the sex trade:

"Well, then [at] 18 I came here, and they told me I couldn't do anything like that... So they would have kicked me out, you know? Because it's considered trafficking, I think... Prostitution, trafficking, panhandling wasn't allowed. Stuff like that. So, I stopped, and I tried to be better."

Most of the youth who had been trafficked or who had engaged in the sex trade reported that they turned to shelters as a safe haven

when they decided to escape or leave the trade. The housing and meals provided the basic necessities, but they reported supportive counselors and case managers as well as other programming as the key to their sustained development and growth after the trauma of trafficking. Because youth suggest that they are using shelter services as an escape from traffickers and exploitation, it is imperative that homeless shelters provide significant training on trafficking for their staff members and provide specialized, trauma-informed care directed at trafficked and exploited youth.

# 6. Recommendations

Many youth are vulnerable to labor and sex traffickers and engage in the sex trade precisely because they are trying to survive in an economy that has left them behind. If we want to make a real difference in the lives of runaway and homeless youth who are being trafficked, we must learn from their own ways of understanding the issue as it affects them directly. We interviewed 641 runaway and homeless youth about their experiences of work exploitation, and we identified 124 who had been trafficked for either sex or for labor (or both). Respondents enthusiastically provided recommendations for how service providers can best reach and assist youth who had experienced exploitation.

Runaway and homeless youth shelters and programs are particularly poised to meet the needs of trafficked youth because they address the root economic problems that make youth vulnerable to exploitation. With the addition or enhancement of evidence-based programs that directly respond to the heightened needs of trafficking victims, runaway and homeless youth shelters can effectively help trafficking victims and prevent other homeless youth from being exploited. We recommend a four-pronged approach that includes prevention, outreach, confidential and inclusive identification, and specialized interventions.

## PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS:

### Prevention

**Jobs:** 84% of the youth engaged in the sex trade cited an economic reason for having been exploited. Labor trafficking occurs precisely because youth are looking for employment and a living wage. When we asked for recommendations for how to decrease the chances that a youth would be trafficked, respondents in nearly all cases suggested that they needed more job opportunities and skills training programs.

They were vulnerable to offers of dangerous or illicit work because they were seeking a sustainable wage and were often lured in by the mirage of fast money. They seek job skills training and placement programs that introduce them to careers (such as cooking, hair care, and construction) rather than high-turnover and low-paying jobs in the service industry. They also require job search training; 91% of the youth had been approached by someone offering them a fast money opportunity that turned out to be a scam. Programs that train them to avoid fraudulent or dangerous job listings should be integrated into all job programs for youth.

**Housing:** Youth need more opportunities for affordable and free housing, on both a short- and long-term basis. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of the youth who had traded sex were homeless at the time they did so. One in five of the youth we interviewed had engaged in survival sex while they were homeless. Street youth who were not enrolled in Covenant House's shelter programs had a higher incidence of both labor and sex trafficking. When asked what could help youth who were being trafficked or exploited, they often responded that they were in particular need of the services provided by youth-serving shelters. Expanding beds, programming, and shelters for runaway and homeless youth is a direct route to preventing and responding to trafficking.

**Healthy Sexuality/Relationships:** Though respondents were typically willing to discuss their own sexual histories in a confidential setting, they reported a variety of different misconceptions about sex and sexuality as well as a lack of knowledge of basic physiology. Many of the young male respondents believed that men are not physically capable of being the victim of sexual assault. Men and

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women lamented the crisis of hyper-masculinity, which they believe leads to the objectification of both men and women and the seemingly required performance of machismo among men. Men and women both reported knowing little about sexual health. In all but a few instances, youth indicated that they would be interested in programming that taught about healthy sexuality and relationships. Such programming could empower youth to avoid exploitation and aid in a cultural shift that liberates men and women from the silence surrounding exploitation.

### Outreach

While many activists and outreach programs expend substantial energy patrolling entertainment districts and strip clubs, homeless youth are being approached by people who would exploit them for labor and sex in banal places where they seek economic assistance as well. When we recognize that trafficking is essentially an economic problem, we can broaden our efforts for smart and effective outreach.

Youth are being approached by those who want to exploit them from every direction. Ninety-one percent (91%) reported being approached by someone who was offering an opportunity that was too good to be true. This included situations that turned into trafficking as well as fraudulent commission-based sales, credit card scams, stolen phone sales, and check fraud. They were approached in a wide variety of venues, including on social media, on job listing sites such as Craigslist, at bus stops and stations, and even outside government assistance offices and homeless service providers. Programs that offer services to homeless youth should take a lesson from those who would exploit that same population. Homeless services should be advertised on Instagram, where fast money schemes appear on youth's feeds regularly. They should promote their programs in online job listing pages, where fraudulent check scammers are targeting unsuspecting youth. They should post signage in bus stops and bus stations, where people promise a pathway to fame and fortune to runaway youth. They should advertise information about shelter programs in government assistance offices, where impoverished women and men are being approached to sell sex.

### Confidential and Inclusive Identification

**Inclusivity:** It is clear from our research that all homeless youth—men and women, LGBTQ and heterosexual, people of all ethnicities—are vulnerable to sex and labor trafficking. In our efforts to identify and assist youth who have been trafficked, service providers must look beyond the stereotypes of what constitutes trafficking. Appropriately asking

questions about survival sex and “sugar mamas” and “sugar daddies” will allow young people to articulate their experiences of sexual exploitation. Asking youth if anyone has ever forced or tricked them into work against their will (including in the drug and sex trades) destigmatizes illicit labor and allows them to recognize their rights as laborers.

**Confidentiality:** Youth sought confidential opportunities to share their experiences of exploitation. Because admitting to being exploited makes youth feel vulnerable, they are not typically willing to share those experiences with others. When youth were asked in what situations they would be willing to disclose situations of exploitation, they often explained that they would only tell someone who would not share that information with others, would not use it against them personally, would not judge them, and would not call law enforcement. For full disclosure to be possible, youth want to be guaranteed confidentiality.

**Low Stakes Intake:** Youth reported that they often did not disclose exploitation or engagement in illicit or high-risk behaviors during intake in social service programs because they feared they would be denied services. In order to facilitate disclosure, youth must be guaranteed that such a disclosure will not determine their ability to access services. They also do not want exploitation to dominate their case management plans or force them to be publicly treated differently from other youth. Youth are most likely to self-identify if they can be guaranteed these protections.

### Specialized Interventions

Youth need specialized programs that address the short- and long-term repercussions of trafficking.

**Drop-in Programs:** Because many youth who are selling drugs or sex are not ready to enroll in shelter programs that have curfews, many access services through drop-in programs. We found that the incidence of both labor and sex trafficking was higher among youth accessing drop-in programs. As a result, trafficking intervention programs, including education on exploitation, counseling services, and job skills training programs, and those that provide an exit opportunity for exploited youth, should be provided on a drop-in basis.

**Orientation:** Though youth often do not self-identify as “trafficking victims,” all orientation and case management programs should provide some information regarding trafficking so that youth know how to identify exploitation and know how to access relevant services.

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**Trauma-informed Counseling:** All service providers who work with homeless and runaway youth should use trauma-informed approaches with their clients. Youth who have been trafficked suffer from a wide variety of trauma-related mental health issues, including complex PTSD, trauma bonding or Stockholm Syndrome, depression, mood disorders, and anxiety. Service providers who interact with trafficked youth should provide confidential, trauma-informed care that takes into account the neurological, biological, psychological, and social repercussions of trafficking and that takes trauma into account in the case management for the affected youth.

**Harm Reduction:** Youth often return to situations of exploitation many times before they are finally ready to receive help. Service providers should encourage youth who are being commercially exploited for any form of labor to prioritize their safety when engaging in high-risk situations. For youth engaged in the sex trade, this means protecting oneself from sexually transmitted diseases as well as providing for one's own physical safety.

**Safety Planning and Relocation Programs:** Youth who are trafficked for sex or labor in illicit industries require dedicated safety planning that allows them to escape the scenario in which they were trafficked. The development of a trafficking victim protection program that relocates youth to new locations would assist them in escaping traffickers and starting a new life free of coercive labor.

### Policy Implications

Social service providers cannot protect young people from commercial sexual exploitation or effectively help them overcome related traumas without significant support. Legislators must play a role in ensuring that our youth are protected from trafficking. The following legislative changes could assist us in identifying and helping more trafficking survivors.

- U.S. Congress should pass the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act, which provides much-needed funding for services to prevent and address trafficking among homeless and runaway youth populations.
- Dedicated funding should be allocated for additional shelters and shelter beds equipped with wraparound and specialized services to serve survivors of trafficking and exploitation in both the United States and Canada.
- All U.S. states should pass comprehensive "Safe Harbor" laws that allow young trafficking survivors to be treated as victims of a crime rather than as criminals.
- Criminal justice reform in the United States and Canada should take into account the context in which youth engage in the drug trade and exclude victims of forced labor from prosecution.
- Specialized human trafficking training for law enforcement should be required and funded in every state and province and should include training on appropriate interview techniques as well as the variety of forms trafficking takes.
- Legislators need to address the housing and security crisis experienced by youth aging out of foster care.
- Every U.S. state should raise the age for aging out of foster care to 21.



# Appendix: Methods

## Site Selection

All U.S. and Canadian Covenant House sites were invited to participate in the study, and sites were selected based on their interest in participating. The ten sites included Covenant House shelters in New Orleans, Atlanta, Oakland, St. Louis, Fort Lauderdale, Toronto, Los Angeles, Detroit, Anchorage, and Vancouver. The size of the sample from any one site was based on the number of beds available at that site, and thus the sample from each city is proportional to the size of the site.

## Participant Recruitment

At each site (except for New Orleans), a census indicated the number of the youth residing in the shelter at the time of the site visit, and we aimed to interview everyone age 18 or older who was willing to participate and was available during a one-week site visit by the research team (in Vancouver, youth age 16 and over were allowed to participate because of the lower age of consent in Canada). Between 80 and 100% of residents currently sheltered at each site volunteered to participate. At two sites (Anchorage and Vancouver), drop-in youth were interviewed in addition to those who were sheltered. In New Orleans, the selection was different because it was pursued as an independent project prior to the multi-city study. There, interviews were conducted on one day each week over the course of three months. Interviews were conducted until there were few if any youth residing in the shelter who had not been interviewed.

To meet the participation target of at least 80% of residents at each site, the research team met with case managers and other staff at the beginning of the site visit to develop relationships with the staff and to explain the study and the protections available to those who volunteered. In turn, case workers and other staff briefly explained the study to residents, indicating the study was focused on work experience,

and introduced those who volunteered to the interview team. Staff were given explicit instructions to publicize the study to all clients and to avoid targeting recruitment based on a particular youth's background.

Volunteers were provided and read aloud an informed consent form, which indicated that the study was entirely voluntary, that it would be recorded, that the interview was entirely anonymous, that participation did not affect their services in any way, and that there was some risk of potential retraumatization. Those who participated were provided a gift card incentive of \$10–15 (USD) or \$20 (CAD).

Each respondent was assigned a participant ID number, and no record of their names was provided to the research team. Using the participant IDs instead of names for identification, shelter staff entered demographic data into a spreadsheet, using their own internal databases as the source of the information.

The research team utilized the HTIAM-14 to conduct semi-structured interviews, with additional follow-up questions that encouraged youth to expand on their experiences of exploitation. Respondents were also asked to provide recommendations for how clients who experienced similar exploitation might be better served by service providers. Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and were transcribed by Modern Slavery Research Project interns at Loyola University New Orleans, who all signed confidentiality agreements. At the conclusion of the analysis of the interviews, the recordings were destroyed to protect the anonymity of the respondents. Each of the interviews were coded using Atlas.ti software by at least two members of the research team to ensure coding reliability. Statistical analysis of the quantitative codes were analyzed using SPSS software.



# Notes

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- <sup>4</sup> “Global Slavery Index: United States (2016),” *Global Slavery Index*. Online: <http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/country/united-states/>.
- <sup>5</sup> “Global Slavery Index: Canada (2016),” *Global Slavery Index*. Online: <http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/country/canada/>.
- <sup>6</sup> Sheldon X. Zhang, *Looking for a Hidden Population: Trafficking of Migrant Laborers in San Diego County* (San Diego, Calif.: San Diego State University, 2012), 17.
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- <sup>14</sup> Jayne Bigelsen and Stephanie Vuotto, *Homelessness, Survival Sex, and Human Trafficking: As Experienced by the Youth of Covenant House New York* (New York: Covenant House and Fordham University, 2013), 6.
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- <sup>17</sup> Lutnick, *Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking*, 48.
- <sup>18</sup> Meredith Dank et al., *Surviving the Streets of New York: Experiences of LGBTQ Youth, YMSM, and YWSW Engaged in Survival Sex* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2015), 1.
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<sup>22</sup> *Knocking at Your Door: Labor Trafficking on Traveling Sales Crews* (Washington, D.C.: Polaris, 2015). See also: Darlena Cunha, "Trapped Into Selling Magazines Door-to-Door," *The Atlantic Magazine* (20 April 2015).

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<sup>25</sup> Laura T. Murphy, Rae Taylor, and Christian Bolden, *Trafficking and Exploitative Labor Among Homeless Youth in New Orleans* (New Orleans, La.: Modern Slavery Research Project and Covenant House, 2015), 19.

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<sup>27</sup> 42 U.S.C.S. § 330(h)(5)(A) [Public Health Service Act].

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<sup>29</sup> Inter-NGO Programme on Street Children and Street Youth, *Sub-regional Seminar for the Mediterranean, Marseilles (24–27 October 1983)*, summary of proceedings.

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<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, Duran Banks and Tracy Kyckelhahn, *Characteristics of Suspected Human Trafficking Incidents, 2008-2010* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 2011).

<sup>33</sup> See E. McCartin, "The Average Age of Entry Myth" (Polaris Project, 2016). Online: <https://polarisproject.org/blog/2016/01/05/average-age-entry-myth>; G. Kessler, "The Four-Pinocchio Claim that 'On Average, Girls First Become Victims of Sex Trafficking at 13 Years Old,'" *The Washington Post* (11 June 2015). Online: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/06/11/the-dubious-claim-that-on-average-girls-first-become-victims-of-sex-trafficking-at-13-years-old/>.

<sup>34</sup> Richard J. Estes and Neil Alan Weiner, *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the United States, 1997–2000* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2001), 92.

<sup>35</sup> Bigelsen and Vuotto, *Homelessness*, 6.

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<sup>37</sup> McCartin, "The Average Age," n.p.

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# A Ten-City Study

Anchorage

Atlanta

Detroit

Fort Lauderdale

Los Angeles

New Orleans

Oakland

St. Louis

Toronto

Vancouver

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## Labor and Sex Trafficking Among Homeless Youth

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### A Ten-City Study

Between February 2014 and June 2016, researchers from **Loyola University New Orleans's Modern Slavery Research Project** were invited by **Covenant House International** and ten of their individual sites to serve as external experts to conduct a study of trafficking among homeless youth aged 17 to 25 in ten cities.



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