

Labor and Sex Trafficking Among Homeless Youth

A Ten-City Study Executive Summary

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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.



**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.

Executive Summary

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.

**Nearly
1 in 5** 
(19%) of interviewed youth were identified as victims of some form of human trafficking.

Labor Trafficking

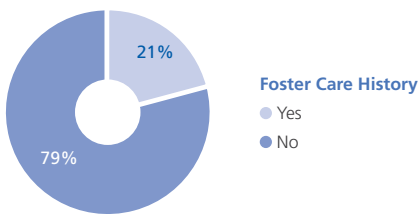
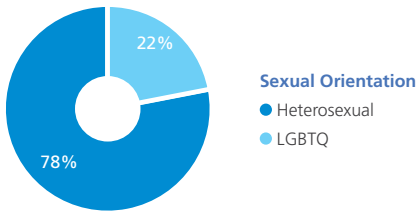
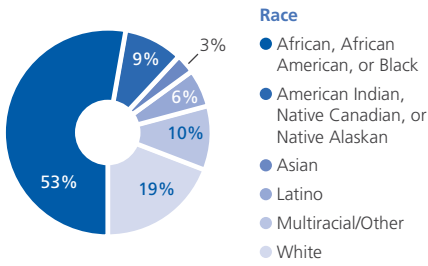
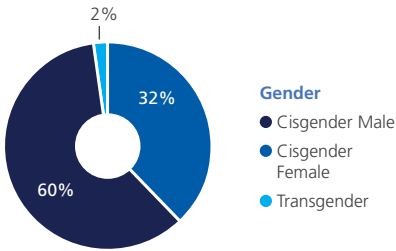
- 8% of respondents were found to have been trafficked for labor.
- Situations of forced labor included youth who were forced to work in factories, domestic labor situations, agriculture, international drug smuggling, sex-trade-related labor, and commission-based sales.
- The vast majority (81%) of labor 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.

Participant Characteristics and Prevalence

Participant Characteristics Total Participants: 641



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

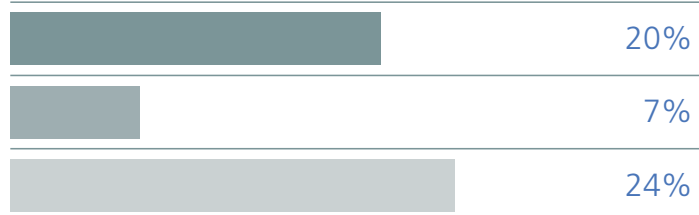
Human Trafficking Prevalence Rates

Sex Trafficking Labor Trafficking Any Trafficking

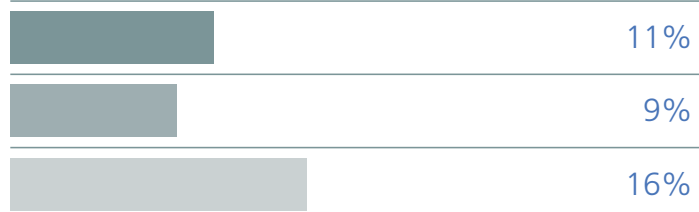
All Participants (641)



Young Women (243)



Young Men (383)



LGBTQ Youth (123)



Youth with Foster Care History (137)



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

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

be 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 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.

For questions about the content of this report, please contact **Dr. Laura Murphy**, Modern Slavery Research Project, Loyola University New Orleans, at lmurphy@loyno.edu.

For questions about Covenant House International's work, please contact **David Howard** at dhoward@covenanthouse.org.

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