

Labor and Sex Trafficking Among Homeless Youth

Anchorage, Alaska



As part of a ten-city study of labor and sex trafficking among homeless young people, this report provides a **detailed account of labor and sexual exploitation** experienced by homeless youth in Covenant House's care in Anchorage, Alaska.



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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.

MSRP

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 data-driven, community-based research that better serves survivors and supports advocates who are on the front lines of identifying and assisting those held captive 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.

Though there is increasing awareness of both sex and labor trafficking in the United States, research on the subject at the state and local levels is scant. In 2013, the State of Alaska Task Force on the Crimes of Human Trafficking, Promoting Prostitution, and Sex Trafficking released a report that surveyed known service providers that assist trafficking victims and found that eleven organizations had assisted at least one victim of trafficking. Their study indicates that these organizations estimate that they serve at least one or two victims of trafficking each year, but the report concluded that this is likely under-reported because most organizations did not have a protocol for identifying victims and were simply determining victim status through law enforcement officer referrals of clients. The report points to the fact that, like most U.S. states, Alaska lacks more comprehensive studies of trafficking across the state, in the cities, and among service providers. This study is a step toward a more nuanced portrait of human trafficking at the local and national levels.

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 24. 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.

Key Findings

Anchorage, Alaska

In Anchorage, we interviewed 65 youth. 46 of them were residents of the Covenant House shelter, and 19 of them were utilizing their drop-in services.

- 28% of respondents 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.
- 20% of the total population had been trafficked for sex, 18% for other forced labor. (7 respondents were trafficked for both sex and labor.)

Sex Trafficking

- 27% of women interviewed were trafficked for sex; 17% of men.
- 43% of LGBTQ youth interviewed were trafficked for sex. While LGBTQ youth constituted 22% of all respondents, 46% of all identified sex trafficking victims identified as LGBTQ.
- Of the people who were trafficked for sex, all but one would automatically be considered trafficking victims by law because they were trading sex (either individually or through a third-party controller) under the age of 18. Nonetheless, 3 of those youth also reported extreme situations of force, fraud, or coercion that compelled them to engage in commercial sex, so they would be considered trafficked regardless of their age.
- Of the cases of sex trafficking, 8 had engaged in survival sex as minors. They traded sex because they were unable to access basic necessities.
- Of the youth who were trafficked for sex, 77% were homeless at the time.
- Drop-in youth accounted for half of the cases of trafficking, though they only accounted for 29% of the interviews. This disproportionate representation is likely a circular situation: because these youth do not have a stable place to stay, they are more likely to engage in the sex trade. Because they are then engaged in the sex trade, they find it more difficult to remain in a stable residential environment.

Sex Trade and Survival Sex

- A total of 29% of the clients we interviewed indicated that they had engaged in the sex trade at some point in their lives.
- 36% of women had engaged in the sex trade, while 27% of men had. 43% of LGBTQ-identified youth had traded sex commercially, making up 43% of all those who reported trading sex.
- 68% of those who had engaged in any way in the sex trade were homeless or marginally housed (i.e. living in a hotel room) at the time.

28%
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Labor Trafficking

- 18% of respondents were found to have been trafficked for labor.
- Of those trafficked for labor, half were male and half were female.
- All of labor trafficking cases involved forced drug dealing or forced criminal activity such as working as muscle or a thief for a gang. These young people were forced to sell or deliver drugs or to engage in other illicit activities without their consent by family members and friends.
- 7 of the victims of labor trafficking had engaged in the sex trade when they were minors and therefore are considered both sex and labor trafficking victims.

Ten-City Study Findings

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.

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 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

91% of youth across 10 cities reported being offered lucrative work opportunities that turned out to be fraudulent, scams, or sex trafficking.

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.

68%

Across 10 cities, 68% of the youth who had been trafficked or engaged in survival sex or commercial sex had done so while homeless.

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.

At the national level:

- 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.
- 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.

**At the state level:
Relevant Victim Protection Laws:**

Code	Statute	Description
§ 11.66.100(d)	Prostitution	Names as “trafficking” the inducement of a person to engage in prostitution, including minors

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.
- require 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.
- address the housing and security crisis experienced by youth aging out of foster care.
- raise the age for aging out of foster care to 21.

Alaska has very few laws regarding trafficking and few protections for victims. Alaska might consider some of the following legislation in order to better protect victims of trafficking:

- clearly define forced labor as a form of trafficking and provide penalties and remedies for the crime of labor trafficking.
- create “Safe Harbor” protections that explicitly immunize minors from prosecution for engaging in commercial sex acts, regardless of the use of force, fraud, or coercion.

- allow vacatur of convictions for those found guilty of crimes committed as a direct result of being trafficked.
- create alternatives to detention that provide specialized services for victims of human trafficking.
- require training for law enforcement to identify labor and sex trafficking victims and on how to use trauma-informed techniques to interview potential victims.
- require that law enforcement refer juveniles who are detained for engaging in commercial sex or other forced illicit behavior to child protective services agencies.
- remove the defense that a trafficker did not know the age of a minor victim of trafficking at the time of the exchange.
- remove the defense that a juvenile consented to a commercial sexual exchange.
- allow for civil damages to be sought by trafficking victims

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