

Philadelphia City Council
Children and Youth Committee
A Hearing on Missing and Exploited Children
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Testimony submitted by:

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Good afternoon. My name is Johanna Greeson. I am an **Associate Professor** of Social Work at the School of Social Policy & Practice and a Faculty Director at the Field Center for Children’s Policy, Practice, and Research at the University of Pennsylvania.

As an interdisciplinary center, we strive to improve the lives and long-term outcomes for abused and neglected children and advocate for those children who have no voice. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify to City Council today on the topic of missing and exploited children in Philadelphia.

Exactly three years ago this month, we finished data collection as part of **the nation’s largest research study to date on the prevalence of human trafficking among homeless and runaway youth.**¹

The Field Center interviewed nearly 300 homeless young people in three cities – Philadelphia, Washington, DC and Phoenix – as part of a larger study commissioned by Covenant House International. We also examined the history of child maltreatment, out-of-home placement, and protective factors among those who were sex-trafficked or engaged in the sex trade to survive.

The results of the Field Center’s three-city study were sobering.

One out of five young people reported experiences consistent with the definition of human trafficking.

17% of those interviewed were victims of **sex trafficking.**

¹ Wolfe, D. S., Greeson, J. K. P., Wasch, S., & Treglia, D. (2018). Human trafficking prevalence and child welfare risk factors among homeless youth a Multi-City study. The Field Center for Children’s Policy, Practice & Research, University of Pennsylvania.

14% had been **commercially-sexually exploited** for the first time while they were under the age of 18.²

Homeless and runaway youth and young people **disconnected from caregivers are particularly vulnerable**, and often predators know this.

In fact, 41% of the sex-trafficked youth identified in our research study were approached for commercial sex *on their very first night* of homelessness.

We heard stories of youth being approached for recruitment into illegal activities outside of the very same facilities where they visited seeking services.

Notably, **95% of those who were victims of sex trafficking had experienced some form of maltreatment as children**; about half were sexually abused.

They reported childhood experiences no child should face.

Two out of three victims of sex trafficking reported that they told someone that they were being abused as children, **but very few actually had anyone take any action to protect them.**³

We interviewed participants who reported that adults had offered them **excessive amounts of money for a sex act when they were young children.**

Lacking healthy connections to caring and supportive adults, these children were easy to exploit. We met teenagers rendered homeless by families that did not support their

² Greeson, J. K. P., Treglia, D., Wolfe, D. S., & Wasch, S. (2019). Prevalence & correlates of sex trafficking among homeless & runaway youth presenting for shelter services. *Social Work Research, 43*(2), 91-99.

³ Greeson, J. K. P., Treglia, D., Wolfe, D. S., Wasch, S., & Gelles, R. J. (2019). Child welfare characteristics in a sample of youth involved in commercial sex: An exploratory study. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 94*. DOI: [10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104038](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104038)

sexual orientation or gender identity, who then traded sex to meet their basic survival needs.

We interviewed young women who left abusive families as teenagers only to find a relationship that seemed safe turn violent when “the boyfriend” demanded they trade sex for **his profit**. Predators know exactly how to manipulate and control young people who are disconnected from their families and communities.

But there is hope.

Each young person who participated in our study was **actively seeking services to improve their lives**. We asked them if they had someone supporting them and they were more readily able to identify a **caring adult in their lives now than they were when they were children**.

We asked them why they decided to share their stories of childhood victimization with us, some for the very first time.

They expressed that they were so happy that researchers, service providers, and policymakers like yourselves were **finally trying to learn more about what homeless and runaway youth have been through**. One participant remarked that we were **the first person to ever ask**.

Now, we have the opportunity to not only ask, but also to truly listen and to work towards effective prevention and intervention strategies for vulnerable and exploited youth.

I conclude by offering you the following recommendations:

1. Support continued and increased **funding for programming for homeless and runaway youth** in Philadelphia. Specifically targeting street outreach services to **newly homeless youth** is critical.
2. Promote **psychoeducational intervention and access to evidence-based treatment** for victims of sexual abuse. Once a victim of sexual abuse is identified, an opportunity for intervention arises.
3. As **LGBTQ youth** were found to be more frequent targets, develop and implement specific services for this demographic.
4. Our study found that those **who received a GED or dropped out of high school** were also overrepresented among sex-trafficked youth compared to the rest of the survey respondents. Therefore, we must **promote evidenced-based programs that support youth to remain in school through graduation**.
5. We must also support policies that promote **out-of-home-placement stability** for youth in the child welfare system, as multiple moves place them at greater risk. Youth who were in foster care and at some point, engaged in commercial sex in Philadelphia experienced **twice as many placement moves** as their counterparts in Phoenix or Washington, DC., residing in nearly 5 foster homes on average. Further, we must assure that youth who exit the child welfare system are **financially literate** and are provided with transitional and after-care services to support a successful transition to adulthood.
6. Identify and support emotional attachments for vulnerable children and youth with family members and **other caring adults, including natural mentoring**

initiatives to help connect at-risk youth with caring adults in their lives. ***For example, my research-informed natural mentoring intervention C.A.R.E., or Caring Adults ‘R’ Everywhere, is one way to cultivate supportive relationships between caring adults and at-risk youth.***⁴ We must shift our focus from working to help these young people to **SURVIVE**, to instead championing them to **THRIVE**. Early identification of and facilitation of relationships with nonparental, caring adults, like natural mentors, can both prevent youth from becoming victimized and provide a resource should they end up needing support and assistance.

7. Finally, I must note that services and interventions need to acknowledge that being trafficked **does not define who youth are**, but rather **it is something that happened to them**. This is likely one in a series of traumas they have faced throughout their lives. Therefore, all services must be **trauma-informed**.

With a comprehensive prevention and intervention strategy, we can work to decrease the number of exploited and disconnected youth in our city.

Thank you.

⁴ Greeson, J.K.P. (2019). *Caring Adults ‘R’ Everywhere (C.A.R.E.): A Natural Mentoring Intervention for Older Youth in Foster Care*. Durham, NC: I Am My Life Publishing.