

# Human Trafficking Prevalence and Child Welfare Risk Factors Among Homeless Youth

Washington, DC



Debra Schilling Wolfe, MEd  
Johanna K.P. Greeson, PhD, MSS, MLSP  
Sarah Wasch, MSW  
Daniel Treglia, PhD, MPP

The Field Center for Children's  
Policy, Practice & Research  
University of Pennsylvania

January 2018

# Acknowledgments

The Field Center was inspired to engage in this important research following the convening of a plenary panel on the child welfare to child trafficking pipeline at our national *One Child, Many Hands: A Multidisciplinary Conference on Child Welfare*, held in June of 2015. It was through this work that Covenant House International initially approached the Field Center to become a research partner.

There are many people to thank, without whom this study could not have happened. David Howard, Senior Vice President—Research, Evaluation and Learning at Covenant House International, and Jayne Bigelsen, Director of Anti-Human Trafficking Initiatives at Covenant House New York and Vice President of Advocacy at Covenant House International, were the primary drivers of this work, and we cannot express enough gratitude for their support, guidance, and wisdom at every step in the process. We are deeply indebted to Kevin Ryan, President and CEO of Covenant House International, for his unwavering support of this research and his passion and commitment to the well-being of homeless youth.

Our research was strongly supported by administration and program staff at Covenant House Washington for facilitating the research process, including securing private space to meet with youth, recruiting participants and scheduling interviews, providing staff support for youth post-interview, and helping us maintain fidelity to our research protocols. In particular, the Field Center would like to thank Madye Henson, Executive Director of Covenant House Washington, and Darlene Bell, site liaison, who served as the “point person” for interviews and facilitated scheduling for all of the referred youth. Each of the on-site staff went out of their way to facilitate the interview process and seamlessly build this project into their already demanding workload.

This research could not have been completed without the hard work of our stellar graduate students in social work. Their contributions to this research and learning were an important part of this process and we wish to recognize the work of MSW students Jennifer Conn, Xuan Trinh, Julia Vadas, and Ran Zhang. In addition, we owe our gratitude to our transcriptionist, Karen Myers, who transcribed heartfelt and often difficult interviews with youth for further analysis.

The Field Center’s interdisciplinary team contributed greatly to conceptualizing this research study and we want to thank faculty directors Cindy W. Christian, MD, Cindy Connolly, PhD, RN, PNP, Kara R. Finck, Esq., Antonio Garcia, MSW, PhD, and Sarah Jaffee, PhD, for their support throughout this process. In particular, the authors wish to acknowledge Dr. Garcia for his dedication and work on the development of the Child Welfare Supplemental Survey tool alongside the study authors.

This research was commissioned by Covenant House International. We are most appreciative of the support of our founding benefactors who, through the generosity of the Joseph and Marie Field Foundation, provided supplemental support to underwrite this work.

The Field Center would not be able to devote resources to research such as this without the support of our partner organizations, the University of Pennsylvania Schools of Social Policy & Practice, Law, Nursing and Medicine, and the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, and affiliated faculty. We deeply appreciate the commitment of Deans John Jackson, Theodore Ruger, Antonia Villarruel, and J. Larry Jameson, and CEO Madeline Bell to promoting the well-being of our most vulnerable children and youth.

This report is dedicated to the youth who candidly and at times painfully shared their stories and themselves with us. We are indebted to their candor and only hope for the very best for them and the thousands of other youth who share similar stories.

# The Field Center

The Field Center for Children’s Policy, Practice & Research is an interdisciplinary collaboration of the University of Pennsylvania’s Schools of Social Policy & Practice, Law, Medicine, and Nursing, and the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia dedicated to improving the systemic response to victims of child abuse and neglect. By harnessing the expertise across the University of Pennsylvania, the Field Center facilitates reform through a “think outside-the-box approach.” Our efforts result in improved policies and laws, translating research to practice, and elevating service delivery across systems of care through education and training.

## Our Mission

Guided by the Schools of Social Policy & Practice, Law, Medicine, and Nursing, and the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, the Field Center for Children’s Policy, Practice and Research brings together the resources of the University of Pennsylvania to enhance and assure the well-being of abused and neglected children and those at risk of maltreatment. By moving beyond traditional approaches, the Field Center utilizes an interdisciplinary model to integrate clinical care, research and education, inform local and national policy, and prepare the nation’s future leaders, for the benefit of children and their families.

# Table of Contents

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ..... 2

## INTRODUCTION ..... 4

Background

## OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY ..... 5

Objectives

Definitions

## RESULTS ..... 6

Sex Trafficking

Survival Sex

Commercial Sex

Labor Trafficking

Human Trafficking Findings for Homeless vs.

Non-homeless Youth

## CHILD WELFARE FACTORS ..... 10

Child Maltreatment

Living Situation

Social Supports and Peer Relationships

## RECOMMENDATIONS ..... 12

Policy and Practice Recommendations

# Executive Summary

**23%**

were victims of human trafficking

**40%**

of those interviewed reported engaging in a commercial sex act at some point in their lives.

**3 of 4**

homeless females reported being solicited for paid sex.

**93%**

of those who were sex trafficked had a history of child maltreatment.

**69%**

of those who were sex trafficked reported involvement with the child welfare system.

**29%**

of victims of sex trafficking had dropped out of high school compared to 17% of the total sample.

The Field Center completed a three-city study as part of a larger initiative by Covenant House International to research human trafficking among homeless youth encompassing nearly 1,000 young people across 13 cities. The Field Center interviewed a total of 270 homeless youth, 100 in Philadelphia, 100 in Phoenix, and 70 in Washington, DC, to learn about the prevalence of human trafficking, and 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.

Youth interviewed in Washington, DC were interviewed at Covenant House program sites. Of the 70 homeless youth interviewed, 23% were victims of human trafficking, including 20% who were victims of sex trafficking, 6% who were victims of labor trafficking, and 3% who were victims of both sex and labor trafficking. Additionally, 19% of youth interviewed engaged in “survival sex” to meet their basic needs. A total of 40% of those interviewed reported engaging in a commercial sex act at some point in their lives.

An additional 22 youth who were participating in Covenant House Washington programming but were not homeless were also interviewed. Of the non-homeless population, none were found to be sex-trafficked, compared with 20% of the homeless population.

Three-quarters of homeless females reported being solicited for paid sex. For all genders, 33% of those approached while homeless were approached during their very first night of being homeless.

For homeless youth who reported that they were victims of sex trafficking, 93% had a history of child maltreatment. Fifty-four percent reported telling someone that they were abused, and only 14% of them report that the person they told took some action on their behalf. Among sex trafficking victims who were maltreated, the highest percentage of youth reported being sexually abused (57%), followed by physical abuse at 47%.

Two homeless sex trafficking victims were in out-of-home placement at some point in

their lives. All but one lacked a place to live at some point prior to their 18th birthday, and 69% reported involvement with the child welfare system.

Bisexual youth appear to have experienced a higher level of sex trafficking, with 40% reporting being trafficked, compared to 18% of straight participants. Although the sample size was too small to generalize, it is indicative of increased risk.

For those homeless youth who were sex trafficked, when asked what could have helped prevent them from being in this situation, the most frequent response was having supportive parents or family members. Youth who lacked a caring adult in their lives were more likely to be victims of sex trafficking.

Education was also distinguished in the data. Victims of sex trafficking were much more likely to have dropped out of high school than the full sample of homeless youth. A full 29% had dropped out from high school, compared to 17% of the total sample. Thus, graduating from high school appears to be a protective factor.

# Introduction

## BACKGROUND

Covenant House Washington serves the community through a variety of programs targeting homeless, disconnected, and at-risk youth. Their innovative programming revolves around a bustling Service Center that offers job training, education, case management, a child development center, a food pantry, and other supportive services. Although Covenant House Washington also provides crisis shelter through the Safe Haven Program and longer-term transitional housing through their Rights of Passage and Supportive

Housing Programs, the Service Center programs do not require that the client is currently experiencing homelessness or is residing at a Covenant House program.

Most youth accessing services at Covenant House Washington indicated that they were from Washington, DC or neighboring suburbs in Maryland and Virginia. Many youth reported previous stays at other shelters before finding their way to Covenant House; others avoided public support systems by seeking shelter in abandoned houses,

illegal residences, or living out of a vehicle. Respondents shared experiences of poverty necessitating developing survival strategies ranging from street performing to criminal activity. Some respondents had active or pending criminal cases, often increasing their risk of financial exploitation. Most of the participants expressed a desire to take advantage of the multiple services offered at Covenant House to assist them in finding stable housing and/or employment.

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 80,000 youth in 31 cities in six countries.

# Overview of Methodology

## OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are twofold:

1. To examine the prevalence of human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation among homeless youth in multiple cities through replication of an earlier study utilizing the previously validated Human Trafficking Interview and Assessment Measure (HTIAM-10), and
2. To gain insight into the child maltreatment, child welfare and out of home placement experiences as well as resilience factors for victims of child sex trafficking.

## PARTICIPANTS

Participation in the research was voluntary, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. The interviewer administered the Human Trafficking Interview and Assessment Measure (HTIAM-10) to all youth. The HTIAM-10 was previously validated by Fordham University and was designed to detect and identify victims of human trafficking, including both sex and labor trafficking.

Participants who identified that they engaged in any commercial sex act were then administered the Child Welfare Supplemental Survey (CWSS), containing additional questions pertaining to potential child welfare risk factors for engaging in commercial sex and potential protective factors. This supplemental instrument, developed by the University of Pennsylvania's Field Center for Children's Policy, Practice &

Research, asks victims of human trafficking and youth who have engaged in commercial sex about their history of child maltreatment, involvement in the child welfare system, social support networks, living situations, and preparation for independent living.

# Results

When one female respondent was repeatedly raped as a young child by her mother's boyfriend, she eventually ran away from her mother's home at age 10. On the same night that she left her mother's house, she met a man on the street who became her pimp. The pimp kept her hidden, out of school, and forced her to have sex with adult men for a year before police discovered her at age 11.

**Of the 70 homeless respondents in Washington, DC, 23% were identified as victims of some form of human trafficking. Twenty percent were victims of sex trafficking, 6% were victims of labor trafficking, and 3% were victims of both sex and labor trafficking.**

## SEX TRAFFICKING

Sex trafficking is defined as a commercial sex act induced by force, fraud or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age.

- 28% of women and 5% of men were sex trafficked.
- Two of the five (40%) bisexual respondents were trafficked for sex. This was much higher than the 19% of heterosexual participants who were sex-trafficked; none of the participants identified as either gay or pansexual.
- 33% of those who dropped out of high school were victims of sex trafficking, more than double the 14% of those who either had a high school diploma as their highest level of education or had at least entered college.
- Of the 14 respondents identified as having been sex-trafficked, 10 were classified as victims because they had engaged in sexual acts while under the age of 18, two because he or she engaged in sex because of force, fraud, or coercion, and two were victims of sex trafficking as both a function of their age and force, fraud, or coercion.



“I’m going to be honest with you, I probably did it like three weeks ago, but I didn’t get money. I needed somewhere to go. I lost a lot of friends because of me doing what I was doing. But I feel like, damn, you don’t understand, you got y’all parents out here, y’all got people that wanna look out for you. I don’t have nobody but myself.”

## SURVIVAL SEX

Consistent with studies by Fordham and Loyola University New Orleans, this study defined “survival sex” as involving individuals *over age 18* who trade sex acts to meet the basic needs of survival (e.g., food, shelter, etc.) without overt force, fraud or coercion of a trafficker, but who felt that their circumstances left little or no other option. While the small sample size limits our ability to generalize to other survival sex/commercial sex victims, we think it's important to provide some descriptive information about the young people we interviewed.

- 13 participants (18%) engaged in survival sex, and they were nearly evenly split between men and women.
- Those who at least graduated high school had half the rate of survival sex as those who did not (12% vs. 29%).

## COMMERCIAL SEX

Commercial sex is defined as any sex as in which anything of value is given or received by any person, and it includes sex trafficking, survival sex as well as commercial sex that does not fall under these categories.

- 40% of respondents engaged in commercial sex at some point in their lives.
- 50% of women and 32% of men engaged in the sex trade.
- 40% of bisexual participants and 41% of straight participants engaged in commercial sex.
- Among respondents with a high school diploma or higher level of educational attainment, 31% had engaged in commercial sex, compared to 54% of those with less than a high school education.

- 19% who engaged in commercial sex placed an online ad or were advertised on the internet.
- Of the 46 who were approached by someone who wanted them to sell sex, 37% were approached while homeless; one-third of them experienced this during their first week of homelessness.

Several female respondents reported leaving employment as strippers only due to getting pregnant. One explained, "I don't want that to be brought to my son like 'hey, I seen your mom dancing at the club.' That's embarrassing for a child."

## LABOR TRAFFICKING

Labor trafficking is 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.

- 6% of respondents were victims of labor trafficking.
- Three of the four labor trafficking victims were male and one was female.
- Education and race varied among those who were labor trafficked, with no obvious trend among the four victims.

## **HUMAN TRAFFICKING FINDINGS FOR HOMELESS VS. NON-HOMELESS YOUTH**

In addition to the 70 homeless youth interviewed, 22 youth who were receiving services at Covenant House but were not homeless were also interviewed for this study. None of the non-homeless youth were identified as victims of human trafficking, compared with 20% of the homeless participants experiencing sex trafficking and 6% experiencing labor trafficking. Only one non-homeless youth disclosed engaging in any commercial sex after age 18.

Even for participants who had not experienced trafficking or commercial sex, the youth who did not identify as homeless reported more positive experiences in the workplace and less incidences of financial or personal exploitation or control. The young people interviewed for this study who still resided with their families or successfully maintained their own apartments expressed that they were better equipped to deal with financial challenges and thus were less likely to find themselves in situations where employers could take advantage of them. Many of these youth were able to identify healthy survival strategies and techniques for coping with difficult situations.

# Child Welfare Factors

## CHILD MALTREATMENT

Of the 28 respondents who engaged in commercial sex, 79% reported having been maltreated at some point during their childhood. Sexual abuse was the most prevalent response (46%) followed by physical abuse (31%) and neglect (36%). Half of those who experienced maltreatment were abused by a biological parent, the most prevalent perpetrator of abuse. A parent's partner (18%) was second. Of the 19 participants who provided the age at which abuse began, 47% were abused by the age of 5, and all but one were abused by the age of 10. Fifty-four percent had told someone about their maltreatment; of those, only 25% of them reported that this person took some action on their behalf. However, 59% reported receiving some type of services or treatment to help cope with the maltreatment.

Fifty-four percent had told someone about their maltreatment; of those, only 25% of them reported that this person took some action on their behalf.

## LIVING SITUATIONS

A history of residential instability was prevalent within the sample of youth who engaged in commercial sex. Ninety-three percent reported having lived with someone other than a biological parent, and 68% reported that at some point in their youth they had no place to sleep. Only one person reported having lived in only one place (other than with a friend or boyfriend/girlfriend). Sixteen (64%) reported that they had some child welfare involvement growing up, and 44% of them experienced at least one out-of-home placement; 5 of them spent time in a foster home, and 4 had lived in a group home or congregate care setting.

“I wasn’t born in a stable house. It was in the beginning, but it broke down early so I got kind of used to it. I used to get kicked out when I was real young. I’m talking about when I was probably like 11.”

## SOCIAL SUPPORTS AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS

While many youth suggested that additional social and community supports would have been helpful in avoiding or evading trafficking, some sex trafficking victims respondents indicated the presence of a caring adult (other than a caregiver). Nine of the 14 (64%) reported having a caring adult in their lives prior to turning 18, and the same proportion reported having a caring adult at the time of the interview. These supports varied widely, from parents to siblings to caseworkers and others. Many also found support among their peers; 57% had a group of friends they could rely on. Fourteen percent were, at some point, members of a gang.

“I had sex for money before. I was at my lowest. I lost all my friends and I was in abusive relationships. I let myself go for a long time.”

# Recommendations

## Policy and Practice Recommendations

In light of the findings from this study, which provide the opportunity to make an impact on current policy and practice, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Utilize data to identify populations at highest risk for human trafficking and create targeted prevention services.
2. Support continued and increased funding for programming and beds for homeless youth on both state and federal levels.
3. Target street outreach services for newly homeless youth, and support continued funding of this critical service.
4. Promote psychoeducational intervention and access to evidence-based treatment for victims of sexual abuse.
5. As straight youth were found to be less frequent targets, develop and implement victimization minimization services for LGBTQ youth.
6. Promote programs that support youth to remain in school and graduate from high school. Preliminary data indicates that graduating from or being in school, as opposed to attainment of a GED, may be a protective factor.
7. Support policies that promote out-of-home-placement stability for youth, as multiple moves place them at greater risk.
8. Explore implementing new and innovative out-of-home placement models that are targeted to older youth.
9. Assure that youth who exit the child welfare system are financially literate and are provided with transitional and after-care services to foster a successful transition to independence.
10. Identify and foster emotional attachments for vulnerable children and youth with both family members and other caring adults, including natural mentorship initiatives to help connect at-risk youth with caring adults in their lives. Early identification of and facilitation of such relationships can serve both to prevent youth from becoming victimized and to provide a resource should they end up needing support and assistance.
11. 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.

The photographs on the cover are representative of youth interviewed across all cities in the study and are not photos of actual youth participants.



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