

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

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



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# 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.

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# Executive Summary

**19%**

were victims of human trafficking

**33%**

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

**2 of 3**

homeless females reported being solicited for paid sex.

**94%**

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

**67%**

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

**72%**

of sex trafficked victims had not graduated from high school

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.

Philadelphia interviews all took place with youth at Covenant House Pennsylvania. Of the 100 respondents in Philadelphia, 19% were identified as victims of some form of human trafficking. Eighteen percent had been trafficked for sex, 5% for other forced labor, and 4% of them were victims of both sex and labor trafficking. Fourteen percent engaged in “survival sex” to meet their basic needs. A total of 33% of those interviewed reported engaging in a commercial sex act at some point in their lives.

Two out of every three homeless females reported being solicited for paid sex. For all genders, 33% of those approached while homeless were approached on their very first night of being homeless. Transgender youth in this study were particularly vulnerable, with 75% of transgender youth reporting being offered money for sex, although the low number of interviewed transgender youth limits our ability to speak to their vulnerability more generally.

For youth who reported that they were victims of sex trafficking, 94% had a history of child maltreatment. While 57% reported having told someone that they were abused, only 48% of them reported that the person they told took some action on their behalf. Among those who were maltreated, the highest percentage of youth reported being sexually abused (57%), followed by physical abuse (39%).

A total of 56% of sex trafficking victims were in out-of-home placement at some point in their lives, and many experienced frequent moves. Youth from Philadelphia reported double the number of placement moves

as youth interviewed in the other two cities studied by the Field Center: Phoenix and Washington, DC. Fifty-seven percent did not have a place to live at some point prior to their 18th birthday, and all youth interviewed who experienced trafficking reported living in at least one place other than with a biological parent before the age of majority. Sixty-seven percent of those who were sex trafficked reported involvement with the child welfare system.

LGBTQ youth appear to have experienced a higher level of sex trafficking, with 38% reporting being trafficked. Transgender youth are particularly vulnerable, with 75% of those surveyed reporting sex trafficking, although the sample size was too small to generalize more broadly.

For those 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 four times more likely to have dropped out of high school than the full sample of homeless youth. Of those who reported being sex trafficked, only 22% had a high school diploma and 6% had attended some college. A full 72% had not graduated from high school, compared to 23% of the total sample. Thus, graduating from high school appears to be a protective factor.

# Introduction

## BACKGROUND

The young people interviewed for this research study resided at Covenant House Pennsylvania's crisis center emergency housing program in the City of Philadelphia. The length of residency for clients at the time of interview ranged from a few days to a few months, and some participants were repeat clients at Covenant House, having prior stays that did not result in a long-term transition to stable housing for a variety of reasons. Covenant House Pennsylvania residents were typically from Philadelphia or had a connection to the city.

Research participants in Philadelphia overwhelmingly reported a lack of access to resources and an inability to meet their basic needs. The life experiences of Covenant House Pennsylvania residents reflect the expansive poverty in Philadelphia, where 26% of

the city's residents live below the poverty level, according to the Pew Charitable Trusts report *Philadelphia 2017: The State of the City*. In addition, Philadelphia has the highest deep poverty rate, those with incomes below half of the poverty line, of any major city in the United States.

Respondents reported seeking a variety of legal and illegal sources of income to survive. Youth reported that their needs necessitated their actions, often leading to exploitative work experiences. Many youth spoke not only of poverty in their immediate families, but of under-resourced neighborhoods and schools and a multitude of negative influences in both their extended families and communities. For some respondents, this led to sexual exploitation.

Participants in Philadelphia who experienced out-of-home placement through the child welfare system had an average of twice as many placement moves as research participants in other cities. Before receiving services at Covenant House, homeless youth in Philadelphia had often cycled through multiple formal caregivers and placements including group homes, foster homes, kinship homes, and treatment facilities. Some respondents with juvenile criminal records spent many years in congregate care settings as they transitioned between delinquency and dependency placements, without ever obtaining permanency. Youth exiting systems of care without emotional or financial support from family or community continued to experience great difficulty surviving on their own, making them additionally vulnerable to exploitation.

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

One young woman reported that after being coerced into prostitution while on vacation with a friend's family, she later found out that her friend's mother had posted an ad on Backpage.com advertising her for sex.

Of the 100 respondents in Philadelphia, 19% were identified as victims of some form of human trafficking. Eighteen percent were victims of sex trafficking, 5% were victims of labor trafficking, and 4% 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.

- 21% of women, 11% of men, and 75% (3 of 4) transgender participants were sex trafficked.
- 38% of the 16 LGBTQ respondents were trafficked for sex. This was significantly higher than the 14% of heterosexual participants who were sex-trafficked.
- 50% of Latino respondents, 27% of Caucasian respondents, 15% of multiracial respondents, and 10% of African American respondents identified as victims of sex trafficking.
- 37% of those who either had a GED, were still in high school, or had dropped out of high school were victims of sex trafficking, more than four times higher than the 8% of those who either had a high school diploma as their highest level of education or had at least entered college.
- Of the 18 respondents identified as having been sex-trafficked, 10 were classified as victims because they had engaged in commercial sex acts while under the age of 18, one because he or she engaged in sex because of force, fraud, or coercion, and 7 were victims of sex trafficking as both a function of their age and force, fraud, or coercion.

“He used to act like he cared at first....But by the end of that week it was him choking me up, ‘You need to do what the guys tell you to do.’ It was either I did it or he would grip me up, smack me up, or beat me.”

## 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.

- 14 participants engaged in survival sex; 10 of them were straight; 4 identified as LGBTQ; 7 were female, 4 were male, and 3 were transgender.
- Those with some college had the highest rate of survival sex (33%), followed by those who had dropped out of high school (26%) and those still attending high school (9%).

One single mother reported trading sex to help take care of her daughter. She would contact men she thought of as “friends with benefits” and would engage in sex acts with them in exchange for money, stating that “it was quick and easy and I needed to get my daughter some milk.”

“There’s been a couple of times where I slept with people that I knew and some people that I didn’t know just to get by. It’s not the fact that I wanted to choose this. It’s like I felt like I was at my end-road. I didn’t know what to do or where to go or who to turn to.”

## COMMERCIAL SEX

Commercial sex is defined as any sex act 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.

- 33% of respondents engaged in commercial sex at some point in their lives.
- 40% of women, 24% of men, and 75% (3 of 4) transgender participants engaged in the sex trade.
- Although the numbers of such individuals were low, 56% of bisexual participants and 100% of pansexual participants engaged in commercial sex, higher than the 30% of heterosexual and 25% of homosexual participants.
- 58% of those with at least some college education participated in the sex trade, compared to 43% of those who did not complete high school and 21% with only a high school degree. The data show that among those who engaged in commercial sex, 21% had some college education, compared to only 7% of those who did not engage in commercial sex.
- 36% who engaged in commercial sex were advertised on the internet.
- Of the 54 who were approached by someone who wanted them to sell sex, 44% were approached while homeless; one-third of them experienced this on their first night of homelessness.

## 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.

- All five labor trafficking victims were heterosexual males.
- Education and race varied among those who were labor trafficked, with no obvious trend among the five victims.
- All five labor trafficking victims also engaged in commercial sex, and two engaged in survival sex. Four of the labor trafficking victims either engaged in the sex trade as minors or were engaged in the sex trade through force, fraud, or coercion, and were therefore also characterized as victims of sex-trafficking.

“My dad used to make me go get the money all the time and stuff like that. If I didn’t sell drugs, he might snap on me, like ‘get out of my house,’ or something like that. So I had to do what I had to do cause I was younger.”

# Child Welfare Factors

## CHILD MALTREATMENT

Of the 33 respondents who engaged in commercial sex, 85% reported having been maltreated at some point during their childhood. For youth who were designated as victims of sex trafficking, 94% reported a history of child maltreatment. Sexual abuse was the most prevalent response (57%) followed by physical abuse (39%) and neglect (18%). Half of those who experienced maltreatment were abused by a biological parent, the most prevalent perpetrator of abuse. Other relatives (excluding siblings) were a close second at 46%, and other non-family members were the third most frequent source, at 21%. Placement caretakers were a source of abuse for only two participants (7%). Of the 24 participants who provided the age at which abuse began, 46% were abused by the age of 5, and 79% were abused before the age of 10. Fifty-seven percent had told someone about their maltreatment; of those, only 48% reported that this person took some action on their behalf. However, 76% reported receiving some type of services or treatment to help cope with the maltreatment.

“The physical abuse was from when I was nine until I was about 16. (My adoptive mom) took this metal cane and she started beating me with it. She had a taser at that time, too. ... I kept screaming because all I felt was like my bones were breaking.”

## LIVING SITUATIONS

A history of residential instability was prevalent within the sample of youth who engaged in commercial sex. Twenty-eight respondents (85%) reported having lived with someone other than a biological parent, and 52% reported that at some point in their youth they had no place to sleep. Only two reported having lived in only one place (other than with a friend or boyfriend/girlfriend), and more than one-third reported having lived in at least ten places. Twenty (61%) reported that they had some child welfare involvement growing up, and 80% of them experienced at least one out-of-home placement; 14 (42%) spent time in a foster home, and 11 (33%) had lived in a group home or congregate care setting.

Out of the young people in the three cities studied, youth from Philadelphia reported the highest number of placements among those involved in these settings, with an average of four placements each.

## SOCIAL SUPPORTS AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS

The presence of a caring adult appears to be a protective factor, as fewer of those who were sex trafficked reported having a caring adult in his or her life than those who were not sex trafficked but did engage in commercial sex. Of the youth who engaged in any form of commercial sex, 82% of those who did not have a caring adult in their lives were sexually trafficked, as opposed to only 45% who reported having a caring adult being sex trafficked. Many also found support among their peers; 61% had a group of friends they could rely on. Twenty-eight percent reported that they were, at some point, members of a gang.

“I’ve been raped at the age of 3, at the age of 12, at the age of 13, at the age of 14, and at the age of 16. One of them was my stepfather. The others I was in foster care; I didn’t know them. I used to run away from my foster homes because they would beat me, abuse me. I’ve just been through so much.”

# 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 LGBTQ youth were found to be frequent targets, develop and implement victimization minimization services for this population.
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. Philadelphia youth reported double the number of placement moves than youth in the other two cities in this study.
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.



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