

# Responding to Youth Homelessness

## A Brief Overview

An estimated 4.2 million young people (ages 13–25) experience homelessness annually, including 700,000 unaccompanied youth ages 13 to 17, according to research from Chapin Hall at The University of Chicago. Many of those young people will become victims of sex or labor trafficking. Research from numerous studies have found trafficking rates among youth and young adults experiencing homelessness ranging from 19% to 40%. Although the varying populations and methods of these studies do not allow for a definitive number, this means, using the lower end estimates, that about 800,000 of the youth and young adults who experience homelessness in a year may also be victims of sex or labor trafficking in cities, suburbs, rural communities, and American Indian Reservations across the country.

Some youth experiencing homelessness are even more vulnerable to trafficking than these incredibly high numbers suggest, and interviews with these youth illustrate some common themes and pathways:

- Basic needs, such as the lack of a safe place to sleep at night, often play a role in their trafficking experiences.
- Homelessness and trafficking begin early, often well before age 18.
- LGBTQ youth and youth who have been in foster care experience trafficking at higher rates than other youth experiencing homelessness.
- Girls and young women are more likely to experience trafficking, but boys and young men also experience high levels of trafficking.
- Youth experiencing homelessness who have also been victims of sex trafficking are more likely to have mental health and substance use issues, to have experienced physical and emotional abuse by parents or guardians, and to have a history of sexual abuse.

Using this research, policymakers, service providers, and advocates can and must bring about change to meet the basic needs of young people to prevent and address homelessness and trafficking.

*The discussion and recommendations in this document are adapted from the National Network for Youth white paper Responding to Youth Homelessness: A Key Strategy for Preventing Human Trafficking. Please see that document for additional information and analysis of the research, prevalence, and pathway information above, as well as the recommendations below.*

### **Policy and Practice Solutions**

The pathways from homelessness to trafficking discussed above can and should be disrupted with policy and practice changes, including cross-sector collaboration, as well as increased resources. Many of the recommendations below—and in the full white paper—focus on providing services and supports to



address youth homelessness and to meet youth and family needs. That is because, as the above discussion illustrates, *homelessness prevention and services are trafficking prevention*.

*Policymakers* should reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act and the Trafficking Victim Protection Act, pass the Homeless Children and Youth Act, pass laws addressing homelessness and trafficking at the state level consistent with the recommendations in this paper, and fund those laws at levels adequate to meet the tremendous need outlined above. Policymakers must also align and expand federal and state definitions so all youth experiencing homelessness and/or trafficking can receive needed services.<sup>1</sup>

*Housing and homelessness services agencies* should address homelessness, and therefore reduce vulnerability to trafficking, by quickly and appropriately responding to a young person's homelessness, with a range of options designed to meet the needs of youth and young adults in different circumstances. This includes the ability to access housing for youth who may face the most barriers, such as poor credit histories or juvenile/criminal records. Providers serving youth experiencing homelessness and victims of trafficking already collaborate closely in many communities across the country, and homelessness providers are increasingly recognizing how many of the youth they serve have experienced trafficking. These efforts should be continued, informed by the research shared above and supported by federal and local policies, and funding should continue to increase. All professionals working with or on behalf of young people experiencing homelessness and/or trafficking should receive education about the intersection of homelessness and trafficking.

*Child welfare systems* should provide services that can allow youth to safely stay with or rejoin family members, when possible, and otherwise provide placements that meet youths' needs. Responses to youth who "run" from care should not be punitive, and every effort should be made to keep youth with the same caseworker until they exit system custody. Child welfare agencies should also provide transition planning that prepares youth to become independent and self-supporting adults, and they should provide services and education to youth in ways that can interrupt the pathways to homelessness and trafficking described above.

*Education systems* should be proactively identifying and providing services to youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness. This includes educating teachers, counselors, administrators, and McKinney-Vento liaisons about the warning signs and prevalence of homelessness and trafficking among their students. Federally funding McKinney-Vento liaisons at appropriate levels and supporting early childhood education are key to these efforts.

*Behavioral health agencies* should provide in-home and residential services from clinicians with appropriate expertise and experience. Community-based care is ideal when it meets a young person's needs, but for youth who do not have stable housing, or require more intensive treatment, having residential programs with targeted services is essential.

*Justice and law enforcement agencies* should ensure youth are not criminalized for survival acts or in misguided attempts to "protect" them. Courts should avoid ordering secure confinement for survival acts, based on the known harms of incarceration. Law enforcement and governments should also ensure practice and policy address the growing role of technology in exploitation.

*All agencies serving youth who may be experiencing homelessness and/or trafficking* should ensure their own staff are knowledgeable about how to work effectively with youth who've experienced trauma. They should also work with other local agencies (e.g., schools, behavioral health clinics, other social services) to provide information about signs of homelessness and trafficking, as well as resources to address them.

*All stakeholders* should ensure the above recommendations are carried out with a focus on reaching and serving those who most often experience homelessness and trafficking, including LGBTQ young people, youth of color, young people who have experienced abuse, and young people who haven't graduated from high school. They should also ensure that policy and practice responses are designed and implemented in collaboration with young people who have lived expertise.

The full white paper is available at:  
[www.nn4youth.org/learn/youthhomelessnesshumantrafficking](http://www.nn4youth.org/learn/youthhomelessnesshumantrafficking).



<sup>1</sup> Currently the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the biggest federal funder of housing and homelessness services, uses a definition of homelessness that is narrower than other federal agencies, and one that does not fit with current research on youth homelessness.