



HOMELESS YOUTH AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Brief Overview

Homeless youth attempting to survive from day to day on the streets are at constant risk of sexual exploitation by adults and of being recruited into the commercial sex industry.¹ Additionally, they may be enticed to engage in survival sex to meet their basic needs for food, shelter, or clothing. They are particularly vulnerable to these situations because many have histories of physical and sexual abuse, neglect, and abandonment

Commercial sexual exploitation occurs anytime a minor² engages in commercial sex acts (stripping, pornography, transactional sex, or prostitution) and anytime a young adult is induced into a commercial sex act by force, coercion, or fraud.³ Commercial sexual exploitation is also referred to as ‘domestic minor sex trafficking’ or ‘commercial sex acts’ in literature and is defined under the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2005.⁴

¹ The commercial sex industry involves business and commerce that supports pornography, stripping, phone sex, exotic dancing, mail-order brides, transactional sex, and prostitution.

² A minor is a youth under the age of 18.

³ Trafficking Victims Protection Act, 18 U.S.C. § 1591, et. seq. Some researchers use the phrase ‘transactional sex’ to include any activity where sex is exchanged for money, personal items, or services with monetary value.

⁴ Public Law 109–164. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2005 uses the same definition used in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 which states, “The term

‘Survival sex’ is the exchange of sex for food, shelter, clothing, or other basic needs.

This issue brief will review research regarding the involvement of unaccompanied, homeless youth in various types of sexual exploitation including survival sex and recruitment into the commercial sex industry and will recommend a series of programmatic responses to meet their needs. While research indicates that the majority of homeless youth avoid victimization in the commercial sex industry, its harmful impact on long-term health and wellness scars tens of thousands of youth annually. Current rates of victimization among homeless youth are unacceptable, and its continued existence indicates an urgent need for an increased national investment in outreach, supportive services, and housing.

Key Research Findings

Histories of abuse may heighten vulnerability to sexual exploitation in street environments.

Homeless youth are defined as youth ages 12 to 24 who are unaccompanied by a parent or

“commercial sex act” means any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person.” (22 U.S.C. 7102(3))

guardian and lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. This paper uses an expansive definition of homeless youth and reviews research that surveys youth living on streets or residing in shelters, as well as those unstably housed and moving frequently. Homeless youth are found in rural, suburban, and urban communities.

While most studies and community-based service providers agree that the homeless youth population is substantial and widespread, there are not accurate figures on its size. The few research studies that quantify the number of homeless youth in America are incomplete. A large, 1998 cross-sectional study of the adolescent population found that five percent of the adolescent population (1.6 million youth) experience one episode of homelessness each year, though the study only included youth under 18.⁵ However, this study found that adolescents in the general population had a surprisingly wide variety of experiences with homelessness: sleeping in adult shelters, public spaces, abandoned buildings, outside, underground, and with strangers.

Youth most often become homeless due to family breakdown and systems failure. Homeless youth often flee homes where they experience physical and sexual abuse. Approximately 40 to 60 percent of homeless youth have experienced physical abuse, and between 17 and 35 percent experience sexual abuse.⁶ A Minnesota statewide study of homeless youth in 2003 indicated that

⁵ Ringwalt, C., J. Greene, M. Robertson, and M. McPheeters. 1998. The prevalence of homelessness among adolescents in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health* 88 (9):1325-1329.

⁶ Fosburg, Linda B. and Dennis, Deborah L. Practical Lessons: The 1998 National Symposium on Homelessness Research. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, August, 1999: pp. 3-9.

homeless boys are seven times more likely and homeless girls are three times more likely to have a history of sexual abuse than their housed peers.⁷ With respect to systems failure, poverty, lack of affordable housing, low education levels, unemployment, and mental health disabilities all contribute to homelessness among youth. Some youth are discharged from child welfare placements, foster care, and juvenile treatment or detention facilities, and fail to find affordable, stable housing.

Histories of sexual abuse may make youth vulnerable to sexual exploitation, engagement in survival sex, or prostitution.⁸ Youth who are sexually abused by adults learn to use their bodies to meet their physical and psychosocial needs, and they are often coerced to take inordinate sexual and safety risks to achieve shelter and respite from the streets.⁹

Once homeless, victimization remains a constant risk for homeless youth.

A growing body of research concludes that youth experience amplified risk for physical abuse, commercial sexual exploitation, and sexual assault once homeless. Homeless youth are far more likely to be physically and sexually victimized than their peers who are housed,¹⁰ and they are more likely to

⁷ Owens, Greg. Wilder Research Center. 2003. *Homeless Youth In Minnesota: A statewide survey of people without permanent shelter*. Wilder Research Center, St. Paul, Minnesota.

⁸ Whitbeck, L. D. Hoyt, K. Yoder, A. Cauce, and M. Paradise. 2001. Deviant behavior and victimization among homeless and runaway adolescents. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 16(11): 1175-1204.

⁹ Halcon, L. and A. Lifson. 2004. Prevalence and predictors of sexual risk among homeless youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 33(1): 71-80; Tyler, K. A. and K. Johnson. 2006. Trading Sex: Voluntary or coerced? The experience of homeless youth. *The Journal of Sex Research* 43(3): 208-217.

¹⁰ Stewart, A., M. Steiman, A. Cauce, B. Cochran, L. Whitbeck, and D. Hoyt. 2004. Victimization and

experience repeated episodes of assault.¹¹ Sexual violence by rape and assault is a reality for homeless youth. Studies show that girls experience disparate rates of assault compared to homeless boys.¹²

Sexually exploited homeless youth rarely report their situation or seek help.

A small percentage of homeless youth seek treatment and support after experiencing sexual assaults and commercial sexual exploitation. A study of runaway and homeless youth at a Hollywood health clinic showed that 4 percent sought treatment for sexual trauma and two percent sought treatment for rape. It is difficult to determine whether homeless youth who are sexually assaulted seek treatment or avoid medical attention and care. However, even at these low percentages, the rate that homeless youth seek treatment for sexual assault and commercial sexual exploitation is two and a half to three times higher than their housed peers.¹³

Conversations with youth-serving professionals, however, support a common perception that the extent of sexual assault and exploitation against youth is grossly underreported. Several factors influence the

self-reporting of abuse, assaults, and rape among youth. Youth may not have a self-perception or vocabulary to identify their experiences as sexual exploitation. For example, youth may not process their status as victims when they are trading sex for a place to sleep or engaging in prostitution at the request of boyfriends. Further, even when youth comprehend their assault histories, the recollection of events may be too painful, embarrassing, or humiliating to share with others. Being the victim of sexual abuse or exploitation carries culturally-supported shame. Expecting youth to self-disclose their memories of rape, trauma, or degrading exploitation may be unrealistic. For all these reasons, studies showing low rates of self-disclosure or treatment are not surprising.

posttraumatic stress disorder among homeless adolescents. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 43(3): 325-331.

¹¹ Whitbeck, L. B., D. Hoyt, K. Tyler, K. Ackley, and S. Fields. 1997. *Midwest Homeless and Runaway Adolescent Project: Summary Report to Participating Agencies*. Unpublished. Iowa State University.

¹² Whitbeck, L. D. Hoyt, K. Yoder, A. Cauce, and M. Paradise. 2001. Deviant behavior and victimization among homeless and runaway adolescents. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 16(11): 1175-1204. Owen, G., M. Decker Gerrard, J. Heineman, E. Shelton, and M. Anton. 2006. *Overview of youth and young adult homelessness in Minnesota*. Amherst A. Wilder Foundation, Wilder Research. St. Paul, MN. Located on the web on September 21, 2009 at <http://www.wilder.org/download.0.html?report=2087>

¹³ Greenblatt, M. and M. Robertson. 1993. Life-Styles, Adaptive Strategies and Sexual Behaviors of Homeless Adolescents. *Hospital and Community Psychiatry*. 44, no. 12: 1177-1180.

Research finds significant involvement of homeless youth in commercial and survival sex.

Numerous surveys and studies of homeless youth address their engagement in the commercial sex industry, survival sex, or transactional sex (exchange of sex for money or drugs). However, the level of engagement varies widely among the studies, from two percent to forty-six percent, with a cluster of research finding 15 to 30 percent of homeless youth having experience with commercial sex.

STUDIES OF HOMELESS YOUTH

AUTHOR, DATE	LOCATION	SAMPLE SIZE	AGE RANGE	RESEARCH FINDINGS
Remafedi 1987 ¹⁴	Minneapolis, MN	29 gay male homeless youth	15 – 19	17 percent were involved in transactional sex.
Rotheram-Borus 1988-1989 ¹⁵	New York, NY	59 homeless youth	12 – 18	15 percent engaged in transactional sex. 14 percent gave money or drugs to females for sex.
Yates 1988 ¹⁶	Hollywood, CA	110 runaway youth	12 – 24	26 percent of the runaways reported engaging in survival sex. Less than one percent of the non-runaway youth surveyed engaged in survival sex.
Mundy 1990 ¹⁷	Hollywood, CA	96 street and shelter-using youth	12 – 17	20 percent reported they were the target of nonconsensual sexual activity involving someone other than a family member.
Kurtz 1991 ¹⁸	Southeastern United States	349 shelter-using youth	Under 18	5 percent reported history of prostitution or promiscuity. ¹⁹
Feitel 1992 ²⁰	New York, NY	150 shelter-using youth	13 – 22	21 percent of the boys and 5 percent of the girls said that they had engaged in sex in exchange for 'food, shelter, money, or drugs.

¹⁴ Remafedi, G. 1987. Adolescent homosexuality: Psychosocial and medical implications. *Pediatrics* 79.

¹⁵ Rotheram-Borus, M., H. Meyer-Bahlburg, M. Rosario, C. Koopman, C. Haignere, T. Exner, M. Matthieu, R. Henderson and P. Gruen, 199. Lifetime Sexual Behaviors Among Predominately Minority Male Runaways and Gay/Bisexual Adolescents in New York. *AIDS Education and Prevention*, Supplement: 34-42.

¹⁶ Yates, G., R. MacKenzie, J. Pennbridge, and E. Cohen. 1988. At Risk Profile Comparison of Runaway and Non-Runaway Youth. *American Journal of Public Health* 78: 820-821.

¹⁷ Mundy, P., M. Robertson, J. Robertson, and M. Greenblatt. 1990. The Prevalence of Psychotic Symptoms in Homeless Adolescents. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescence Psychiatry* 29(5): 724-731.

¹⁸ Kurtz, P. D., S. Jarvis, and G. Kurtz. 1991. *Problems of Homeless Youths: Empirical Findings and Human Services Issues*. National Association of Social Workers, Washington, DC.

¹⁹ Study failed to define components of 'promiscuity.'

²⁰ Feitel, B., N. Margetson, J. Chamas, and C. Lipman. 1992. Psychosocial Background and Behavioral and Emotional Disorders of Homeless and Runaway Youth. *Hospitality and Community Psychiatry* 43(2): 155-159.

AUTHOR, DATE	LOCATION	SAMPLE SIZE	AGE RANGE	RESEARCH FINDINGS
Rotheram-Borus 1992 ²¹	New York, NY	206 homeless youth	11 – 18	13 percent of males exchanged sex for money or drugs and 7 percent of females exchanged sex for money or drugs. 11 percent of males gave money or drugs to females for sex.
Greenblatt 1993 ²²	Hollywood, CA	93 homeless youth	13 – 17	33 percent had traded sex for money, food, or drugs.
Kipke 1995 ²³ 1997 ²⁴	Los Angeles, CA	409 street youth	12 – 23	43 percent reported experience with survival sex (46 percent of young men and 32 percent of young women).
Rotheram-Borus 1996 ²⁵	Four New York City youth shelters	190 homeless youth	Mean age 15.5	9 percent had engaged in sex work in their lifetime. Youth with a sexual abuse history were significantly more likely to engage in sex work, especially for those youth who experienced sexual abuse after age 13.
Unger 1998 ²⁶	Los Angeles and San Diego, CA	245 street youth	12 – 23 (young adolescents ages 12-15 compared to older adolescents ages 16-23)	8 percent of young adolescents had received money from hustling or prostitution. 13 percent of older adolescents had received money from hustling or prostitution. One percent of adolescents had received money from pornography. One percent of the older adolescents had received money from pimping.
Adlaf 1999 ²⁷	Toronto, Canada	217 street youth	13 – 24	10 percent engaged in the sex trade.
Greene 1997 ²⁸	National representative sample of adolescents	1,159 homeless youth (631 shelter-using youth and 528 street	12 – 21	27.5 percent of the street youth experienced survival sex. 9.5 percent of the shelter-using youth experienced survival sex.

²¹ Rotheram-Borus, M., H. Meyer-Bahlburg, C. Koopman, M. Rosario, T. Exner, R. Henderson, M. Mattieu and R. Gruen. 1992. Lifetime Sexual Behaviors among Runaway Males and Females, *The Journal of Sex Research*, 29, no.1: 15-29.

²² Greenblatt, M. and M. Robertson. 1993. Life-Styles, Adaptive Strategies, and Sexual Behaviors of Homeless Adolescents. *Hospital and Community Psychiatry* 44, No. 12: 1177-1180.

²³ Kipke, M., S. O'Conner, R. Palmer, and R. MacKenzie. 1995. Street Youth in Los Angeles: Profile of a Group At High Risk for Human Immunodeficiency Virus Infection. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* 149: 513-519.

²⁴ Kipke, M., J. Unger, S. O'Connor, R. Palmer, and S. LaFrance. 1997. Street youth: their peer group affiliations and differences according to residential status, subsistence patterns, and use of services. *Adolescence* 32(127).

²⁵ Rotheram-Borus, M., K. Mahler, C. Koopman and K. Langabeer. 1996. Sexual Abuse History and Associated Multiple Risk Behavior in Adolescent Runaways. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 66, no. 3: 390-400.

²⁶ Unger, J., T. Simon, T. Newman, S. Montgomery, M. Kipke, and M. Albornoz. 1998. Early Adolescent Street Youth: An Overlooked Population With Unique Problems and Service Needs. *Journal of Early Adolescents* 18, no. 4: 325-348.

²⁷ Adlaf, E. and Y. Zdanowicz. 1999. A Cluster-Analytic Study of Substance Problems and Mental Health Among Street Youths. *American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*. 25(4): 639.

AUTHOR, DATE	LOCATION	SAMPLE SIZE	AGE RANGE	RESEARCH FINDINGS
Wagner 2001 ²⁹	Seattle, WA	289 homeless youth	13 – 22	41 percent of the youth had been sexually exploited in survival sex or prostitution. 47 percent of females and 37 percent of males were propositioned to sell sex.
Halcon 2004 ³⁰	Minneapolis, MN	208 Homeless youth	15 – 22	20 percent reported a history of exchanging sex for money, drugs, and material possessions.
Milburn 2006 ³¹	Los Angeles, CA	618 Homeless youth	12 – 20	6 percent reported engaging in sex work.
Owen 2006 ³²	Minnesota	151 homeless youth	11 – 21	12 percent of younger adolescents (11-17 years) engaged in sex in exchange for food, shelter, clothing, or other things. 15 percent of older adolescents (18 – 21 years) engaged in sex in exchange for food, shelter, clothing, or other things. 22 percent of urban homeless youth and 12 percent of rural youth (11 to 21) have been approached and encouraged to work in the sex industry.
Solorio 2006 ³³	Los Angeles, CA	688 homeless youth	12 – 20	12 percent of homeless youth traded sex for money.
Tyler 2006 ³⁴	Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska	40 homeless youth	19 – 21 years	18 percent (7 female youth) had direct experience with the sex trade , and 10 percent (4 female youth) had been propositioned.

²⁸ Greene, J., S. Ennett, and C. Ringwalt. 1999. Prevalence and Correlates of Survival Sex Among Runaway and Homeless Youth. *American Journal of Public Health* 89(9): 1406-1409. See, also related research by Jody M. Greene: Greene, J., S. Ennett, and C. Ringwalt. 1997. Substance abuse among runaway and homeless youth in three national samples. *American Journal of Public Health* 87(2): 229-235; Greene, J. and C. Ringwalt. 1998. Pregnancy among three national samples of runaway and homeless youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 23(6): 370-377.

²⁹ Wagner, L., L. Carlin, A. Cauce and A. Tenner. 2001. A Snapshot of Homeless Youth in Seattle: Their Characteristics, Behaviors and Beliefs About HIV Protective Strategies. *Journal of Community Health* 26, no. 3: 219-232.

³⁰ Halcon, L. and A. Lifson. 2004. Prevalence and predictors of sexual risk among homeless youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 33(1): 71-80.

³¹ Milburn, G., M. Rotheram-Borus, E. Rice, S. Mallet and D. Rosenthal. 2006. Cross-National Variations in Behavioral Profiles Among Homeless Youth, *American Journal of Community Psychology* 37, no. 1/2: 63-76.

³² Owen, G., M. Decker Gerrard, J. Heineman, E. Shelton, and M. Anton. 2006. *Overview of youth and young adult homelessness in Minnesota*. Amherst A. Wilder Foundation, Wilder Research. St. Paul, MN. Located on the web on September 21, 2009 at: <http://www.wilder.org/download.0.html?report=2087>.

³³ Solorio, M. R., N. Milburn, R. Andersen, S. Trifskin, and M. Rodriguez. Emotional Distress and Mental Health Service Use Among Urban Homeless Adolescents. *The Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research*, 33(4): 381-393.

³⁴ Tyler, K. A. and K. Johnson. 2006. Trading Sex: Voluntary or coerced? The experience of homeless youth. *The Journal of Sex Research* 43(3): 208-217.

It is difficult to compare these rates to the rate of victimization of youth in the general population, which is affected by lack of research and tracking, common misidentification, frequent plea agreements, and declined prosecutions.³⁵ A 2001 study by Richard Estes and Neil Weiner from the University of Pennsylvania estimated that over 211,000 homeless, runaway, and street youth were 'at risk' to engage in commercial sex, compared to just over 77,000 housed youth. While not a study of actual cases of commercial sexual exploitation, the study was helpful in articulating discrete subgroups of children who are at greatest risk – homeless youth being the highest.³⁶

Research shows a disproportionate experience of homelessness and sexual exploitation among LGBTQ youth.

Research on homeless youth in America has consistently noted the prevalence of lesbian,³⁷ gay,³⁸ bisexual,³⁹ transgender,⁴⁰ and queer⁴¹ (LGBTQ) youth in the population.

³⁵ Shared Hope International. 2009. *National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: America's Prostituted Children* located on the web at http://www.sharedhope.org/dmst/national_report.asp.

³⁶ Estes, R., and N. Weiner. 2001. *The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U. S., Canada, and Mexico*, located on the web at http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/~restes/CSEC_Files/Exec_Sum_020220.pdf.

³⁷ Lesbian youth are young women who have a sexual orientation or attraction to other women.

³⁸ Gay youth are young men who have a sexual orientation or attraction to other men.

³⁹ Bisexual youth are young men and women who have a sexual orientation or attraction to persons of either sex.

⁴⁰ Transgender youth is an umbrella term encompassing diverse gender expression, including drag queens and kings, bigenders, cross-dressers, transgenderists, and transsexuals. These youth are people who find their gender identity in conflict with their anatomical gender.

⁴¹ The word queer was a historically derogatory term for a gay man, lesbian, or gender-nonconforming person. The term has been widely reclaimed, especially by younger LGBT people, as a positive social and political identity. Queer is sometimes used as an inclusive or umbrella term for all LGBT

A cluster of research yields to the conservative estimate that at least 20 percent of the homeless youth population self-identifies as LGBTQ,⁴² which is double the number of LGBTQ youth in the general population.⁴³

Once homeless, LGBTQ youth are at higher risk for sexual victimization than heterosexual homeless youth. Further, LGBTQ youth experience higher rates of sexual assault *before* becoming homeless. Research has found that their pre-homeless rate of sexual victimization is twice that of their heterosexual peers.⁴⁴ Once homeless,

people. More generally, queer has become common as a term of self-identification for people who do not identify with restrictive or binary terms that have traditionally described sexual orientation (for instance, gay, lesbian, or bisexual only).

⁴² Adlaf, E., and Y. Zdanowicz. 1999. A Cluster-Analytic Study of Substance Problems and Mental Health Among Street Youths. *American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse* 25, no. 4: 639-660. Clatts, M., Davis, W., Sotheran, J. and Atillasoy, A. 1998. Correlates and Distribution of HIV Risk Behaviors Among Homeless Youth in New York City. *Child Welfare* 77, no. 2: 195-207. See also Hyde, J. 2005. From Home to Street: Understanding Young People's Transitions Into Homelessness. *Journal of Adolescence* 28, no. 2: 171-183.

Cochran, B., Stewart, B., Ginzler, J. and Cauce, A. 2002. Challenges Faced by Homeless Sexual Minorities: Comparison of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Homeless Adolescents with their Heterosexual Counterparts. *American Journal of Public Health* 92, no. 5: 773-777.

Johnson, T. and Graf, L. 2005. *Unaccompanied Homeless Youth in Illinois: 2005*. Chicago, IL: Survey Research Laboratory – University of Illinois Chicago. p.46. Found on the web on September 4, 2007 at

<http://www.srl.uic.edu/Publist/StdYRpts/HomelessYouthIllinois2005.pdf>. Milburn, N., Rotheran-Borus, M., Rice, E., Mallet, S. and Rosenthal, D. 2006. Cross-National Variations in Behavioral Profiles Among Homeless Youth. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 37, no. 1-2: 63-77.

⁴³ Dempsey, C. (1994). Health and Social Issues of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Adolescents. *Families in Society*, 75:160-167. It should be noted that a youth's need for social desirability may result in underreporting when asked about issues pertaining to sexual orientation, gender identity, and family and personal substance abuse.

⁴⁴ Rew, L., Whittaker, T., Taylor-Seehafer, M. and Smith, L. 2005. Sexual Health Risks and Protective Resources in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Homeless Youth. *Journal for Specialists in Pediatric Nursing* 10, no. 1: 11-20.

LGBTQ youth are victims of 7.4 more acts of sexual violence during their lifetime than their heterosexual homeless peers.⁴⁵ LGB homeless youth are more likely to report being asked by someone on the streets to exchange sex for money, food, drugs, shelter, and clothing than heterosexual homeless youth.⁴⁶ Consequently, more LGB homeless youth than heterosexual homeless youth report engaging in the trade of sexual behavior to meet their basic needs.⁴⁷ Finally, one study concluded that LBT females are more likely to exchange money for sex than GBT young men.⁴⁸

A Summary of Research Findings

A review of the existing literature, studies, and surveys on homeless youth finds that unaccompanied, homeless youth are disproportionately at risk of being involved in and harmed by the commercial sex industry. Contrary to some stereotypes that most runaway youth become entrenched in street prostitution, the research shows that only a minority of youth become victims to commercial sexual exploitation (including stripping, pornography, and prostitution). However, a cluster of research indicates that somewhere between 15 to 30 percent of all

homeless youth have engaged in commercial sex or exchanged sex for basic needs. Given the under-reporting prevalent with this population, it is significant that between one-fifth and one-third of the population self-report their involvement.

A review of research literature above, as well as other studies, offers the following conclusions:

- A minority of homeless youth (maybe less than a quarter) ever engages in survival sex, transactional sex, stripping, pornography, or prostitution.
- The risk of involvement in and harm from commercial sexual exploitation increases the longer youth remain homeless, with recent runaway and shelter-using youth showing less involvement than street-dependent youth.⁴⁹
- Sexual exploitation of homeless youth is not just a big city or coastal phenomenon, but also includes youth in rural areas and Middle America.⁵⁰
- The risk of involvement in and harm from commercial sexual exploitation increases with prior history of sexual

⁴⁵ Cochran, B., Stewart, B., Ginzler, J. and Cauce, A. 2002. Challenges Faced by Homeless Sexual Minorities: Comparison of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Homeless Adolescents With Their Heterosexual Counterparts. *American Journal of Public Health* 92, no. 5: 773-777. Rew, L., Tayler-Seehafer, M. and Fitzgerald, M. 2001. Sexual Abuse, Alcohol and Other Drug Use, and Suicidal Behaviors in Homeless Adolescents. *Issues in Contemporary Pediatric Nursing* 24: 225-240.

⁴⁶ Van Leeuwen, J., Boyle, S., Salomonsen-Sautel, S., Baker, D., Garcia, J., Hoffman, A. and Hopfer, C. 2006. Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Homeless Youth: An Eight City Public Health Perspective. *Child Welfare* 85, no. 2: 151-170.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Moon, M., W. McFarland, T. Kellogg, M. Baxter, M. Katz, D. MacKellar, and L. Valleroy. 2000. HIV risk behavior of runaway youth in San Francisco: Age of onset and relation to sexual orientation. *Youth & Society* 32(2): 184-201.

⁴⁹ Greene, J., S. Ennett, and C. Ringwalt. 1999. Prevalence and Correlates of Survival Sex Among Runaway and Homeless Youth. *American Journal of Public Health* 89(9): 1406-1409; Unger, J., T. Simon, T. Newman, S. Montgomery, M. Kipke, and M. Albornoz. 1998. Early Adolescent Street Youth: An Overlooked Population With Unique Problems and Service Needs. *Journal of Early Adolescents* 18, no. 4: 325-348.

⁵⁰ Halcon, L. and A. Lifson. 2004. Prevalence and predictors of sexual risk among homeless youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 33(1): 71-80; Owen, G., M. Decker Gerrard, J. Heineman, E. Shelton, and M. Anton. 2006. *Overview of youth and young adult homelessness in Minnesota*. Amherst A. Wilder Foundation, Wilder Research. St. Paul, MN. Located on the web on September 21, 2009 at <http://www.wilder.org/download.0.html?report=2087>.

abuse, especially if the youth experiences sexual abuse after the age of 13.⁵¹

- Studies are inconclusive as to whether there are gender disparities between females and males with respect to sexual exploitation. Some studies note that homeless girls have a disproportionate rate of sexual abuse histories as compared to boys,⁵² while others note higher rates of involvement in survival sex and prostitution for homeless male youth than female youth.⁵³
- Homeless youth who survive the trauma of rape, sexual assault, and sexual exploitation may suffer post-traumatic effects.⁵⁴ Prolonged

⁵¹ Rotheram-Borus, M., K. Mahler, C. Koopman and K. Langabeer. 1996. Sexual Abuse History and Associated Multiple Risk Behavior in Adolescent Runaways. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 66, no. 3: 390-400.

⁵² Halcon, L. and A. Lifson. 2004. Prevalence and predictors of sexual risk among homeless youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 33(1): 71-80; Robertson, M. J. 1989. Homeless youth in Hollywood: Patterns of alcohol use. Berkeley, CA: Alcohol Research Group, School of Public Health, University of California at Berkeley; Tyler, K. A. and K. Johnson. 2006. Trading Sex: Voluntary or coerced? The experience of homeless youth. *The Journal of Sex Research* 43(3): 208-217; and Wagner, L., L. Carlin, A. Cauce and A. Tenner. 2001. A Snapshot of Homeless Youth in Seattle: Their Characteristics, Behaviors and Beliefs About HIV Protective Strategies. *Journal of Community Health* 26, no. 3: 219-232.

⁵³ Feitel, B., N. Margetson, J. Chamas, and C. Lipman. 1992. Psychosocial Background and Behavioral and Emotional Disorders of Homeless and Runaway Youth. *Hospitality and Community Psychiatry* 43(2): 155-159; Kipke, M., S. O'Conner, R. Palmer, and R. MacKenzie. 1995. Street Youth in Los Angeles: Profile of a Group At High Risk for Human Immunodeficiency Virus Infection. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* 149: 513-519; and Rotheram-Borus, M., H. Meyer-Bahlburg, C. Koopman, M. Rosario, T. Exner, R. Henderson, M. Mattieu and R. Gruen. 1992. Lifetime Sexual Behaviors among Runaway Males and Females, *The Journal of Sex Research*, 29, no.1: 15-29.

⁵⁴ Trauma is defined as an overwhelming experience that involves a threat to safety or wellbeing which results in feelings of vulnerability and loss of control, helplessness, fear, and interferes with relationships and beliefs. A

exposure to trauma, such as periods of time spent in prostitution, exchanging sex for basic needs, or being raped, have great influence on a youth's emotional and cognitive development. The retardation of development due to the negative consequences of trauma may require additional supportive services focused on mental health, life skill training, and interpersonal relationships.

- A few studies indicate that homeless youth are not only exploited in the commercial sex industry but may also be perpetrators (consumers and pimps). Several studies noted that older homeless male youth may recruit their peers for involvement in the commercial sex industry or may exchange money or drugs for sex with young females.⁵⁵ While not highly prevalent, youth-serving agencies should be aware of the risk of exploitation and recruitment of homeless youth from among their peers.
- LGBT homeless youth are significantly more likely to be solicited and

continuum of responses may be experienced by survivors of trauma including flight, aggression, inability to move and thought disruption. Homelessness Resource Center, located on the web on October 28, 2009 at:

<http://homelessness.samhsa.gov/Channel/View.aspx?id=29>.

⁵⁵ Rotheram-Borus, M., H. Meyer-Bahlburg, C. Koopman, M. Rosario, T. Exner, R. Henderson, M. Mattieu and R. Gruen. 1992. Lifetime Sexual Behaviors among Runaway Males and Females, *The Journal of Sex Research*, 29, no.1: 15-29, indicated that 11 percent of homeless males gave money or drugs in exchange for sex with others, as compared to 1 percent of males in a national sample of adolescent males, in Hofferth, S. L., J. R. Kahn, and W. Baldwin. 1987. Premarital sexual activity among U. S. teenage women over the past three decades. *Family Planning Perspectives* 19: 46-53.

engaged in survival sex than their heterosexual homeless peers.⁵⁶

- One study noted that of the youth engaging in survival sex, 48 percent reported exchanging sex for housing or food, 22 percent traded sex for drugs, and 82 percent traded sex for money.⁵⁷
- Predictive factors for engaging in survival sex include: youth who report a history of: multiple sex partners,⁵⁸ suicide attempts,⁵⁹ drug use (especially injection drug use), pregnancy, and heavy drinking (15 or more drinks weekly).⁶⁰

Research rarely tracks youth homelessness in a longitudinal fashion and cannot answer the question of how long youth engage in survival sex or prostitution, either while homeless or after they are housed. Youth-serving agencies report that behaviors related to commercial sex exploitation (stripping and prostitution) may not stop with housing or shelter usage.

Recommendations for Ending the Sexual Exploitation of Homeless Youth

⁵⁶ Kipke, M., S. O'Conner, R. Palmer, and R. MacKenzie. 1995. Street Youth in Los Angeles: Profile of a Group At High Risk for Human Immunodeficiency Virus Infection. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* 149: 513-519.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Greene, J., S. Ennett, and C. Ringwalt. 1999. Prevalence and Correlates of Survival Sex Among Runaway and Homeless Youth. *American Journal of Public Health* 89(9): 1406-1409.

⁶⁰ Halcon, L. and A. Lifson. 2004. Prevalence and predictors of sexual risk among homeless youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 33(1): 71-80. Interestingly, this study also concluded that demographic factors like race and age were not predictors of involvement in survival sex for homeless youth.

The most direct way to reduce the risk of sexual exploitation among homeless youth is to end their homelessness by housing them, either with their families or independently. Progress has been made in the past three decades in expanding a variety of shelter, housing, case management, and outreach services available to homeless youth. Since the enactment of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act in 1974⁶¹ and the Stuart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act⁶², there now exist shelters and housing resources for homeless youth in every state. Despite this progress, most communities and cities lack enough temporary or permanent housing to meet the need. Of the 740,000 federally-funded street outreach contacts made with homeless youth in 2008, less than eight percent (approximately 47,000) received a successful referral to shelter or housing.⁶³ This is important because, as the research points out, youth who are homeless are at greater risk of sexual exploitation.

Furthermore, few community-based programs specialize in services for youth who are recruited or coerced into survival sex or the commercial sex industry. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children suggests that there should be a spectrum of services available for youth who have been sexually exploited, including prevention education, outreach, and housing.

The most effective interventions for sexually exploited youth are outreach, early intervention/mental health services, intensive case management services, provision of respite shelter care tied to family reunification counseling, and housing

⁶¹ 42 U.S.C. § 5701 et. al.

⁶² Public Law 100-77.

⁶³ Department of Health and Human Services (2007), Runaway and Homeless Youth Management Information System data.

coupled with life skills training and positive youth development services. Following are descriptions of these interventions.

- (1) **Street- and community-based outreach.** Outreach services meant to help sexually exploited youth should focus on the places where youth congregate and are targeted by adults for recruitment into the commercial sex industry. These include public spaces, malls, schools, and the internet. Outreach workers are encouraged to have a close working relationship with law enforcement to learn about latest trends and locations, without compromising their independence or the confidentiality of their clients.
- (2) **Early Intervention, Mental Health Services to Improve Family Functioning.** Specialized mental health service models have been shown to be effective in improving family functioning, decreasing the risk of abuse and neglect, and avoiding out of home placement. They are especially effective when utilized before youth become homeless or during the early stages of homelessness. Multisystemic Therapy (MST) is an intensive family- and community-based treatment model that addresses serious antisocial behavior in adolescents and encourages behavioral changes by building on strengths. This treatment model, characterized by frequent home visits by a team of clinicians over the course of 3 to 6 months, acknowledges the importance of the external

systems impacting youth behavior – family, peers, school, and neighborhoods – and provides services in these contexts. Like MST, Functional Family Therapy (FFT) aims to help youth stop antisocial or unhealthy behaviors. FFT aims to motivate members of the family toward change and involves between 8 and 30 one-hour sessions conducted in outpatient clinics or in the clients' home. FFT is a multisystemic prevention program which first works to develop family members' psychosocial strengths and then works to empower them to improve their situation incrementally.

- (3) **Intensive Case Management Services.** Evidence-based research has noted the efficacy of intensive case management in improving the mental health and self-perception of homeless youth. It should be incorporated in shelters, drop-in centers, and youth housing programs.
- (4) **Respite Shelter Tied to Family Reunification Services.** Many homeless youth access emergency shelter to meet their basic needs and receive counseling and services geared toward family reunification. Shelters are often the 'gateway' that youth use to escape sexual exploitation. Shelters are successful in ending youth homelessness by achieving family reunification or ensuring access to long-term housing opportunities. Once discharged from emergency shelters, more

than half (53 percent) of homeless youth return to their parents' home. Recent studies have noted that, while not perfect, those who reunify with their families have more positive outcomes than those who reside with others or go back to life on the streets.⁶⁴

- (5) **Housing Options.** Youth require housing to escape prostitution and end reliance on survival sex. Available models include transitional housing, permanent supportive housing, host homes, and rental assistance coupled with case management support. Services in such housing may include education, vocational assistance, life skills, health, and others. Youth housing models differ from adult or family supportive and transitional housing because they employ service delivery approaches that incorporate positive youth development principles.

In developing an array of housing and services for homeless youth who have been sexually exploited, it may be helpful to incorporate harm reduction and positive youth development principles. For example, some youth may not initially end their involvement in the commercial sex industry or survival sex. However, youth may seek support and services to lessen their exposure to harm or risk, and the incremental reduction of exposure to such harm should

⁶⁴ Bass, D. 1992. *Helping vulnerable youths: Runaway and homeless adolescents in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Press; Thompson, S., A. Safyer and D. Pollio. 2001. Differences and predictors of family reunification among subgroups of runaway youths using shelter services. *Social Work Research* 25(3): 163-172.

be a goal. Programs may wish to do self-evaluation with youth participants to show that the delivery of resources and services resulted in contemplative decisions to change behaviors and in incremental changes along a harm reduction spectrum. For example, programs may show how relationship-building and case management services have decreased unsafe sex practices, reduced the number of sex partners, reduced the level of chemical consumption, increased access to medical care, improved mental health, or increased mastery of life skills.

Also, services should bolster positive youth development. Homeless youth are in a life phase of continual physical, emotional, and cognitive development and change. Multiple overlapping problems in family and community environments will negatively affect youth development. The cumulative impact of negative life experiences on homeless youth produces the need to offer long-term, social integration services often tied to opportunities for experiential learning. Any consideration, intervention, or program model must consider how adolescent positive youth development is both retarded and enhanced through programmatic responses.

The approach and delivery of services must be culturally competent and trauma informed. The high incidence of sexual exploitation among girls and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth calls for culturally competent services that address gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Services should also be informed by the impact that trauma has on youth cognitive, emotional, and psychological development.

Finally, services should collect data and employ evaluation measures to ensure youth experiencing sexual exploitation are

achieving positive outcomes. Intake procedures in youth shelters, drop-in centers, and housing programs should seek information about past sexual abuse histories and exposure to trauma (as a predictor of involvement in survival sex or commercial sexual activity). By identifying risk factors, programs can more accurately assess consumers and offer referral to intensive

case management services, mental health treatment, or residential services. Community-based services should identify common outcome goals and issue joint reports on progress to the community in abating the exposure of youth to the commercial sexual industry or involvement in survival sex.

What Can I Do To Help Stop the Sexual Exploitation Of Homeless Youth In My Community?

- Be the home in your neighborhood that welcomes youth. Youth should know adults in their community that are kind, caring, and take an interest in them! Be the adult role model that reaches out to youth, spends time with them, and knows about community resources to help youth find help.
- Talk with your neighbors, your faith community, and your local school about what is known about youth homelessness in your community. It may be a hidden problem that needs to be discussed.
- Be an advocate for increased federal and local resources for community outreach and relationship-building for older adolescents. Are there local programs in your area or city that reach out to youth in a professional and coordinated manner? How do youth know where to turn for help?
- Be a vocal advocate for increased housing resources. Youth are less likely to be exploited when they are off the streets and in stable housing. There are model youth housing programs that can be developed in rural, suburban, and urban neighborhoods. Is there enough affordable housing in your neighborhood for older teenagers and young adults who are fleeing abuse and neglect?
- Ask for expanded support (mental health counseling, life skills training, and access to employment programs) for teen girls and mothers. Commercial sexual exploitation is often focused on vulnerable teen girls.
- Ask if there are mental health treatment programs in your area that youth can easily access.
- Make sure that local law enforcement is targeting the businesses (pimps, strip clubs, escort services) and customers (johns) of the commercial sexual industry and not the victims (youth and young adults) for prosecution. Work to build partnerships between nonprofit programs and law enforcement to offer diversion to community-based services and housing to victims when they are picked up by police officers.

For more information:

Catholic Charities USA's issue brief on the *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children* found at: <http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=1379>.

Shared Hope International's National Report on Domestic *Minor Sex Trafficking: America's Prostituted Children* (2009) located on the web at http://www.sharedhope.org/dmst/national_report.asp.

The U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice's report on the *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children*: <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/215733.pdf>.

Contributing authors:

The Alliance wishes to thank the following persons for their contributions and edits to this research brief: **Trudee Able-Peterson**, Youth Service Consultant, Minneapolis, Minnesota, trudeeablepeterson@gmail.com; and **Mary Jo Meuleners**, MPH, MSW, HIV Services Coordinator, Hennepin County, Minnesota, mary.jo.meuleners@co.hennepin.mn.us.