



## **A Study of Trafficking and Exploitative Labor among Homeless Youth in New Orleans**

**Laura T. Murphy**, Sheffield Hallam University

**Rae Taylor**, Loyola University-New Orleans

**Christian L. Bolden**, Loyola University New Orleans

According to the Global Slavery Index, about 60,000 people are currently suffering under conditions of forced labor in the United States. But more detailed and systematic data are needed – especially about U.S. cities said to be “hubs for human trafficking.” In Louisiana, official data are starting to be collected after a law was passed in 2014. Meanwhile, as part of a larger national effort, we have undertaken a study of trafficking among homeless youth in New Orleans.

Located at the edge of the French Quarter, Covenant House New Orleans provides shelter and services to homeless, runaway, and at-risk youth ages 16 to 22, and to their children. In a replication and extension of a previous Covenant House study in New York, we interviewed 99 New Orleans clients, asking about various kinds of victimization and probing to see if their work experiences met federal legal criteria for *sex trafficking*, in which “a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud or coercion” or the person is under 18 years old; or for *forced labor*, defined as “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.”

Overall, our study revealed that 14% of respondents were identified as victims of some form of legally defined trafficking, with eleven who said they were trafficked for sex, five who reported being subject to other kinds of forced labor, and two reporting both kinds of exploitation. Covenant House New Orleans cares for about 615 youth aged 16 to 23 over the course of a year, and our results indicate that about 85 residents per year are likely to have been trafficking victims as currently legally defined.

More broadly, almost a third of our respondents reported having been approached by strangers on the street to trade sex or to engage in other illegal or informal work. Most assumed they were being offered an opportunity to work in the sex trade. Recruitment into the drug trade happened very young, with one respondent starting at age nine and others in their teenage years. Our study also revealed that homeless youth are vulnerable to other kinds of exploitation – such as dangerous work conditions or wage theft.

### **Experiences of Trafficking – Primarily for Sex**

We uncovered only five legally defined labor trafficking cases, and four of them were youth forced into drug dealing. Only one person reported being brought into factory labor via fraud in Mexico.

Forced sexual labor was the main form of trafficking experienced by victims in our study, reported by eight

females and three males. Three victims identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

- Of the 11 people who were trafficked for sex, seven are considered trafficking victims by law because they were selling sex under age 18 either voluntarily or through force, and three of those seven continued to be coerced by pimps as young adults. Four older respondents reported situations of force, fraud, or coercion that compelled them to engage in sex work, so they too would be considered trafficked regardless of their age. Two young men who reported engaging in sex work as children indicated that they had not experienced any compulsion to participate.

## Sexual Labor and Sex for Survival

One fourth of our respondents had been involved in sexual labor of some form. Thirteen respondents had worked as commercial sex workers, ten had worked in the sex industry as exotic dancers, and two had worked in the French Quarter as “shot girls” who use sexual flirtation to entice customers to buy drinks.

- One third of all the young women we interviewed and almost a fifth of the men had engaged in sexual labor of some kind. In a typical year, therefore, Covenant House serves about 154 residents likely to have engaged in this kind of labor.
- Fifteen respondents had engaged in “survival sex,” performing a sex act in exchange for food, housing, or some other basic necessity they believed they had no other way to obtain.
- Because there has been significant attention to survival sex prevalence among transgender youth, we analyzed that data and found that there were no clear cases of trafficking among the three transgender respondents. One reported resorting to survival sex on occasion for survival purposes. All three transgender respondents had experienced both sexual and physical abuse.

## Lessons and Policy Implications

- Covenant House and similar shelters should increase beds and space for homeless youth, especially those involved in the sex trade. In cooperation with other providers, shelters should do more to help victims of sex trafficking, including young men as well as women.
- Private and public agencies should improve work opportunities and training for young adults.
- Currently, young adults “age out” of many legal protections and eligibility for foster care. Legislators should look for ways to ensure greater continuity into young adulthood.
- The legislature and local police departments should fund and require programs to help law enforcement officers identify victims of trafficking; and community activists, legal professionals, and service providers should spread information about Louisiana’s new law to vacate convictions for people who turn out to be trafficking victims.
- To help communities cope, more research is needed on patterns of forced drug dealing.

Read more in Laura T. Murphy, Rae Taylor, and Christian L. Bolden, **“Trafficking and Exploitative Labor among Homeless Youth in New Orleans,”** Modern Slavery Research Project and Loyola University New Orleans, March 2015.