FYSB Family & Youth Services Bureau

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Human Trafficking Prevention

Strategies for Runaway and Homeless Youth Settings

ISSUE BRIEF

Executive Summary

This Issue Brief explores strategies to integrate human trafficking (HT) prevention into Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) programs. These strategies emphasize the vital role that RHY programs can play in the prevention of sex and labor trafficking among runaway and homeless youth. It also highlights the importance of integrating public health, trauma-informed, and positive youth development principles in the development and implementation of HT prevention interventions.

Key highlights of this Issue Brief include:

- Integrating sex and labor trafficking prevention strategies based on the unique experiences, needs, and strengths of RHY.
- Building local capacity in HT prevention efforts by educating community stakeholders on the intersection of HT, runaway incidents, and youth homelessness.
- Using existing programmatic frameworks to incorporate HT prevention components into RHY settings.
- Addressing the root causes and social conditions in which RHY become vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and HT.

Introduction

I. Human Trafficking Among Runaway and Homeless Youth

Human trafficking victimization can happen to anyone — persons of any race, age, gender, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, or nationality. However, some people are more vulnerable to trafficking than others. While data are lacking on the prevalence of trafficking in the U.S. population in general, research suggests that runaway and homeless youth (RHY) populations are at a particularly high risk of becoming trafficking victims.[1] In two separate studies, nearly all trafficked youth surveyed had experienced homelessness or significant housing instability, and their exploitation occurred while they were homeless.[2] One recent study found that as many as 20% of sheltered homeless youth had experienced trafficking victimization in their lifetimes.[3] RHY are particularly vulnerable to trafficking because they often lack stable incomes, secure housing, and the strong support networks that would help them be resilient to the manipulation of traffickers.

Human Trafficking Definition

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000, as amended, defines "severe forms of trafficking in persons" in 22 U.S.C. § 7102 (11) as:

Sex Trafficking: The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in which the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age.

Labor Trafficking: The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services through the use of force, fraud, or coercion, for the purposes of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage or slavery.

Even within the RHY community, some youth experience particularly heightened risk. For instance, youth who have been involved with the child welfare system are at high risk of trafficking.[4] Additionally, several studies have shown that a disproportionate number of homeless trafficking victims are youth from vulnerable populations.[5] One report on suspected HT incidents between 2008 and 2010 indicated that people of color were significantly more likely to be trafficking victims than Whites.[6] Arrest reports suggest that more than half of all minor trafficking victims are African American.[7] Youth from vulnerable populations are also highly impacted by running away episodes. In 2005, Black and Latino youth were found to be more likely to run away than White youth.[8] According to the National Runaway Safeline (NRS), which is the federally funded National RHY Hotline, youth who reach out to their crisis services are disproportionately African American and Latino, when compared to the nation's general population. NRS also found an increase in the number of Native American youth reaching out regarding running away or experiencing homelessness. Between April 2015 and March 2019, NRS received 883 crisis contacts (via hotline, chat, email, or online forum) from youth who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native. Youth who run away and live on the streets will likely become prey to multiple victimizations, including HT.

Labor and sex trafficking prevention programs should be tailored to RHY populations and designed to be culturally relevant and culturally competent. Furthermore, HT prevention interventions targeting RHY should be based on trauma-informed and positive youth development principles.

II. Risks and Protective Factors

Recent research among homeless youth identified 10 distinct, but intersecting, risk factors for HT within this population: sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, history of arrest, foster care involvement, disabling conditions, mental health issues, witnessing violence in the home, family legal problems, and suicidality.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have a significant impact on future violence victimization and perpetration, and lifelong health and opportunity.[9] The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) survey measures 10 types of childhood trauma. Five items are focused on abuse and neglect: physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect. The five additional items are related to household challenges: a parent who is an alcoholic, a mother who is a victim of domestic violence, a family member in jail, a family member diagnosed with a mental illness, and the disappearance of a parent through divorce, death, or abandonment. Each type of childhood trauma counts as one score point; with scores ranging from 0 to 10. The higher the ACE score, the higher the risk for chronic disease, mental illness, and becoming a victim of violence.[10]

Results of one ACE survey showed that trafficked homeless youth were far more likely to have a high number of ACEs. In fact, 94% of trafficked youth had ACE scores of six or higher, compared to 43% of youth who had not been trafficked. In addition, 61% of trafficked youth reported an extraordinary 9 out of 10 adverse childhood experiences.[11] In another study, 66% of trafficked respondents had ACE scores of four or more.[12] Other risk factors include having an individualized education program (IEP) or 504 plan.[13] A study of youth experiencing homelessness found that previous substance abuse, self-harm behaviors, and suicide attempts were prevalent among youth who were later trafficked.[14] Numerous studies confirm these behaviors as risk factors in addition to poverty, unstable living environments,[15] and other socioeconomic factors.

Although few studies have been conducted on specific interventions to prevent HT among RHY, research has demonstrated the importance of social connections, emotional competence, and nurturing relationships as protective factors to prevent or reduce the likelihood of vulnerable youth being trafficked. The most significant factor in reducing the recruitment of RHY into trafficking situations was having a supportive adult in their lives. Mentoring programs within RHY settings can provide the social, emotional, and nurturing relationships that can help youth build their self-confidence and connect them with community resources to increase support and opportunities for RHY.[16]

More importantly, these protective factors extend beyond the experiences and competencies of the affected youth to the familial and societal relationships that support them — including parental knowledge of parenting skills, parental resilience, and concrete support for families.[17]

This suggests a need for RHY programs to help build resilient communities of connectedness around youth to resist trafficking and create opportunities for RHY to reach their full potential. Creating connections — with families, parents, or other caring adults — can be a protective factor for youth receiving services in RHY programs.

III. The Importance of Prevention

Deliberate efforts to prevent HT are critical within RHY settings to reduce the likelihood of exploitation. Prevention means building individual skills and knowledge and creating an environment in which RHY are bolstered by protective factors. These efforts help youth learn to be resilient against exploitation and risk in their lives at home, school, work, and the community.

Public health researchers have developed a three-tiered system of prevention to inform our understanding of prevention of HT among RHY.

1. **Primary prevention** stops the violence before it occurs. Primary prevention strategies include strengthening and creating healthy relationships, reducing risks within the individual's environment, and increasing protective factors.
2. **Secondary prevention** provides an immediate response to violence as it occurs. These services include first responses, such as basic services and emergency and medical care that address short-term consequences.
3. **Tertiary prevention** activities are long-term responses that occur in the aftermath of violence, such as rehabilitative services (e.g., long-term housing, job training, therapeutic counseling, and other supportive services) that seek to prevent revictimization.[18]

Comprehensive HT prevention requires communities to attend to all three levels of prevention described above. The recommendations provided in this Issue Brief focus on the efforts that RHY service providers can consider to address trafficking before it actually occurs to youth in crisis, runaway youth, and youth experiencing homelessness. The recommendations also highlight prevention education, awareness, risk reduction, resilience building, and community support systems development. These approaches may apply to individual youth, community stakeholders, and RHY service providers.

In developing prevention efforts, RHY providers and their partners are encouraged to consider the social and economic factors in their communities that may contribute to the trafficking of RHY. These factors, often referred to as the social determinants of health, are defined as the "conditions (i.e., social, economic, and physical) in the environment in which people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks."[19] It is essential to understand and identify the root causes and social conditions in which RHY become vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and HT. Understanding these factors can ensure that prevention interventions are effective and sustainable. Communities should also proactively confront the economic factors and social conditions that make RHY vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation.[20] RHY programs can address

these community protective factors as well as build resilience within individual youth. This means encouraging RHY programs to consider the following three approaches:

1. Educating and engaging individual RHY.
2. Engaging with key stakeholders.
3. Building local capacity on the intersections of HT and RHY.

IV. Human Trafficking Prevention for Runaway and Homeless Youth Settings

Educating and Engaging Individual RHY

Prevention efforts within programs serving runaway and homeless youth should be based on public health, trauma-informed, and positive youth development approaches. RHY programs must recognize the strengths and resilience that runaway and homeless youth already have and leverage these skills to reduce or eliminate the possibility that they will be trafficked (or re-trafficked).

RHY service providers can use the following recommendations to integrate or enhance HT prevention efforts within their existing programs. Many of the proposed strategies below are designed to build preventive skills and support.

1. Flexible, Client-First, "Non-Linear" Programs

RHY programs recognize that youth, especially those who are at the highest risk of victimization, do not move linearly from vulnerability to resilience. Instead, they are likely to grow in spurts, at times seeking support and services and at other times refusing it altogether. Social work researchers have developed and applied a model for shared decision making for youth victims of sex trafficking that provides them with agency in determining their course of action.[21] Research suggests that building flexibility into trafficking prevention programming is important because it recognizes that youth may return to unsafe situations while still participating in RHY programs. RHY programs should utilize trauma-informed and evidence-based models to understand these behaviors and use prevention interventions that prepare staff and youth for these eventual situations. Low-barrier, or "high-threshold" programs, that do not turn away youth even when they engage in undesirable behaviors may work best in terms of prevention. Flexible programming allows youth to go through the stages of change that are typically found in youth who have run away or are experiencing homelessness. It also allows youth to prioritize their own needs when they feel they need support and build life skills that will allow them to thrive when they feel less vulnerable.[22]

2. Job Skills Training

Job skills training programs should be at the forefront of trafficking prevention strategies. RHY who were exploited by traffickers report being unable to differentiate between a legitimate work opportunity and one that was exploitative.[23] They also struggle to locate

work in the formal economy that would support their basic needs. Providing youth with opportunities to complete their General Education Diploma (GED), enroll in college, or complete technical training, will help them build skills and have better job opportunities that will lead to reasonable standards of living and a safer transition into adulthood. RHY programs could integrate an HT perspective to their job skills training to educate youth about labor exploitation and trafficking. For example, RHY providers can build youth knowledge to help them recognize employee's rights and how to identify false job ads on social media that may result in HT victimization. These types of skills may help RHY build resilience against potential labor exploitation and trafficking situations. Collaborations with local youth workforce programs are also important to bring a trafficking-prevention perspective to community-wide job skills training and prioritize programs to help RHY gain the skills and knowledge to enter the workforce safely.

3. Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships Curriculum

It is crucial for RHY to understand how to engage in healthy relationships and identify unhealthy ones. Most RHY lack support networks that model healthy relationships. They may have experienced multiple traumas and adversity throughout their lives. Consequently, they may not have a clear understanding of what constitutes exploitative behavior, coercion or force, grooming, or outright abuse, and they may struggle with the concept of consent. They may not be able to discern the characteristics of healthy relationships that include mutual support, respect, honesty, and trust. Having practical discussions on healthy and unhealthy relationships, dating violence, and intimate partner violence with youth in RHY settings will help build resilience against potential trafficking situations and may also prevent youth from becoming a victim or a perpetrator. These discussions should include topics such as coercive relationships and grooming tactics used by potential traffickers and how RHY can seek help and support.

4. Integrating Discussions about Social Media

Social media platforms provide RHY with the opportunity to build supportive networks, connect with families, reach out to service providers, and find assistance when needed. The lack of housing does not mean that youth experiencing homelessness lack access to cell phones or other means of online communication. They may use their personal cell phones or public library computers, or they may borrow a device to get online. Unfortunately, traffickers use social media to connect, groom, and recruit RHY into trafficking situations. They manipulate the youth's desire to have meaningful relationships (i.e., a sense of belonging, feeling wanted, or being safe) or the need to find a job. RHY service providers can build safe online behaviors among RHY by integrating harm-reduction approaches that are internet affirmative, strengths based, trauma informed, and youth oriented as part of their HT prevention efforts. RHY settings can create opportunities to discuss social media and HT recruitment with RHY from a positive youth development perspective.

5. Safety Planning and Harm Reduction

RHY often need a set of practical strategies and skills they can use to prevent harm when engaging in work in both the formal and informal sectors. RHY should understand the risks they take when accepting new jobs, including workplace safety and workers' rights. Principles of harm reduction, including the acceptance that some RHY sometimes engage in harmful behaviors as a result of their traumatic experiences, can be instructive in trafficking prevention efforts. Teaching youth about prophylaxis, safety planning, substance abuse, sexually transmitted infections, and signs of exploitation are themselves forms of HT prevention that are important for youth living on the streets.

Harm reduction and safety planning efforts must focus on helping RHY identify how to increase their safety in the present moment and teaching them skills for maintaining safety in the future. Generally, safety planning refers to formal or informal risk assessments, preparations, and contingency plans designed to increase the safety of youth at risk for HT.

The following strategies may be considered by RHY programs when developing safety plans:

- Identify support sources.
- Recognize, develop, and practice coping strategies.
- Create detailed plans to respond to, or plan for, dangerous situations.
- Identify safer strategies for youth who are still being trafficked.
- Develop short- and long-term plans, with conversations and role-playing opportunities.

Safety planning components include:

- Potential red flags of sex trafficking and labor trafficking.
- Description of concerns surrounding trafficking, such as isolation and fear for safety.
- Tips for youth when exploring "too good to be true" employment offers.
- Tips for youth who are traveling out of state.
- Ways to escape traffickers who use physical violence or coercion.
- Places to call for assistance (i.e., hotlines).
- Learning how to use social media from a positive youth development perspective.
- Recognizing the danger signals in relationships and what to do when threats occur.

- Identifying available resources for emergency shelter and basic needs, such as youth hotlines.

6. Support Network Building

Trafficked RHY consistently report they lacked the support system they needed to prevent them from engaging in illicit activities, falling for schemes that were too good to be true, or being vulnerable to the coercion and deceit of traffickers. Researchers recommend that RHY programs create strategic, family-focused plans to reunite youth with their families, when possible, and to build trust that would lead to support network expansion.[24] Parents and family members of trafficked as well as at-risk youth can be engaged as stakeholders in the prevention process through family counseling. Peer-to-peer programs offer opportunities for youth to assist each other in building protective resilience by supporting one another in times of crisis and building a trusted support network. Social network interventions can also assist in creating supportive environments to successfully create opportunities for RHY in local communities.

7. Street Outreach and Drop-in Center Interventions

Street outreach strategies identify homeless youth and provide them with information regarding shelter and service options should incorporate raising awareness of sex and labor trafficking. Unstably housed or unsheltered youth may not be in a shelter program precisely because they are engaged in illicit work or coercive situations.[25] Educating youth about potential recruiting incidents, including their rights regarding work or tactics used by traffickers, can help them avoid risky situations and provide them with knowledge of available support systems if they encounter any type of exploitation or victimization.

Collaborating with Key Stakeholders on Prevention Strategies

Collaboration is key to any anti-trafficking effort, including prevention initiatives. After assisting individual RHY, the goal of RHY programs is to create a trafficking-resilient community and safety net that will form the foundation of prevention efforts.[26] To recruit the community's assistance in preventing trafficking, RHY providers can share their knowledge on the intersection of HT and RHY. RHY providers can also collaborate to influence system change, including implementing policies to prevent trafficking among RHY.

In the last few years, many first responders, medical professionals, law enforcement officers, juvenile justice staff, courts, and child welfare officers have received training on identifying and responding to cases of HT. However, few of them recognize the role they can play in *preventing* trafficking among RHY. The concept of "planting a seed," whereby they inform youth of their rights as well as the risks of certain behaviors, can successfully be developed within these professional circles as well.

1. Integration of Prevention into Local Coalitions and Taskforces

Task forces and other anti-trafficking alliances produce significant training, but there is little effort related to training on HT prevention among RHY. RHY programs can be critical in becoming ambassadors for prevention efforts by providing programmatic training that contributes to prevent sex and labor trafficking among RHY, such as job training, social connections, and life skills. Most awareness campaigns focus on individual-level factors that perpetuate trafficking, rather than the importance of intervening more broadly at the community level (and beyond) to change environments and systems that perpetuate trafficking. RHY programs can encourage task forces and local coalitions to integrate comprehensive prevention strategies addressing each level of the social-ecological model (individual, relational, community, and societal) that impacts RHY and makes them vulnerable to traffickers.

2. Partnering with Groups Serving RHY Populations

Runaway and youth homelessness prevention conducted in the community can go hand-in-hand with trafficking prevention. When building relationships with youth-serving organizations, youth job programs, local health care centers, schools, or after-school programs, RHY providers can discuss approaches and partnerships to prevent trafficking and — potentially — homelessness and runaway incidents. Runaway and homelessness prevention play a major role in the prevention of human trafficking among RHY.

Building Local Capacity on the Intersections of Human Trafficking and RHY

1. Ensuring Prevention Education Materials Are Not Re-Traumatizing or Exploitative

Prevention education materials should be fact-based, survivor-centered, and trauma-informed. The materials should tell young peoples' real stories and the factors that influenced and led to their trafficking victimization. RHY are highly impacted by sex and labor trafficking; therefore, information and prevention should address both. In addition, materials should include images of empowerment and should reflect the diversity of RHY from underserved populations affected by trafficking. Prevention materials should assist the public in understanding the particular experiences of RHY youth — including the reality of RHY trading sex to meet basic needs — the reasons for running away, and how RHY over the age of 18 experience labor and sex trafficking.

2. Court Interventions

Involvement of RHY in the juvenile justice system is considered a risk factor for sex or labor trafficking. Judges can play an integral role in preventing trafficking among RHY by building their capacity not only to identify victimization, but also to screen RHY who are at higher risks for sex or labor trafficking. Judges may also recommend or mandate interventions, such as job skills training or self-efficacy programs, which might prevent trafficking. These interventions may also assist youth in avoiding future involvement in the criminal justice system, especially for RHY between the ages of 18 and 22.

3. Promoting Prevention in Rural and Tribal Areas

There is a perception that trafficking and youth homelessness are problems isolated to urban areas and that rural areas are not highly impacted by these issues. In fact, RHY in rural areas are exposed to fraudulent labor recruitment and coercive commercial sex. Additionally, Native American youth living in rural locations are highly impacted by running away episodes and homelessness, which can lead to human trafficking incidents. RHY programs can discuss the vulnerabilities to trafficking impacting these youth and support the integration of sustainable prevention approaches, which can include early identification of high-risk youth and culturally appropriate interventions to reduce circumstances that may lead youth to running away, becoming homeless, and being recruited into sex and labor trafficking.

4. Increasing Awareness of Runaway Incidents

Youth who have reached out for help before running away have identified family dynamics (i.e., child abuse and neglect, a death in the family, family conflict, domestic violence, teen parenting, family homelessness); peer pressure (i.e., bullying, cyberbullying, isolation); and mental health (i.e., depression, thoughts of suicide, eating disorders, physiological or behavioral problems) as the main reasons for running away.[27] Clearly, running away is a coping mechanism used by youth to deal with these overwhelming life situations. Youth run away to escape their situations without knowing that they may be putting themselves at risk to traffickers who may prey on their vulnerabilities. Reducing runaway incidents by building youth life skills, understanding their experiences, and providing alternatives to running away is an effective intervention to prevent HT among youth at risk and runaway and homeless youth.

RHY programs can integrate prevention counseling services and life skills activities into their programs to help reduce chronic runaway situations. RHY providers can also be instrumental in educating the public on the intersection of running away and HT. These efforts should shine a light on the factors contributing to youth running away and becoming homeless, and how these factors impact non-system-involved youth (i.e., youth not involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems), youth between 18 and 22 years old, and RHY from vulnerable populations.

Additional Resources

In addition to the research cited in this Issue Brief, the following resources provide information about trafficking prevention among RHY.

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Technical Packages for Violence Prevention: Using Evidence-based Strategies in Your Violence Prevention Efforts" can be useful for thinking about how to plot a data-based change in anti-trafficking programs. https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pub/technical-packages.html

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Adolescent and School Health, "Why Schools?" may be useful for informing school-based interventions about trafficking. https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/about/why_schools.htm

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Understanding Sex Trafficking," provides information about sex trafficking including definitions, risk and impact, and what states and communities need to know. https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/trafficking.html

- Human Trafficking for Runaway and Homeless Youth Serving Programs: A Resource Guide is a comprehensive introduction about the intersection of RHY programs and HT. This resource discusses the role of RHY programs in preventing, identifying, and serving trafficked youth along with program models and fundamental information for RHY program staff. https://www.rhyttac.net/assets/docs/Resources/HumanTraffickingResourceGuide-508.pdf

- Human Trafficking in Youth-Serving Programs: A Blueprint for Organizations Working with Street Youth, Homeless Youth, and Youth at Risk serves as an introduction to important information for any youth-serving organization considering providing services to homeless youth who have been trafficked. https://www.rhyttac.net/assets/docs/Resources/HumanTraffickingBlueprint-508.pdf

- Let's Talk Curriculum: Runaway Prevention is a free, evidence-based, interactive, 14-module curriculum intended to educate young people about alternatives to running away as well as to build life skills so that youth can resolve problems without resorting to running away or unsafe behavior. This resource is available in both English and Spanish https://www.1800runaway.org/runaway-prevention-curriculum-sign-up/

- Online Recruitment of Youth via Social Media and Internet. This tip sheet discusses the recruitment of youth through social media platforms and highlights strategies to assist grantees in discussing this topic with youth. https://www.rhyttac.net/human-trafficking-resources-and-factsheets

- The infographic, Sex and Labor Trafficking Among Runaway and Homeless Youth, provides key statistics and findings from a study conducted by Covenant House and the

University of Loyola, New Orleans in 10 major cities in the U.S. and Canada on trafficking among RHY. This resource can be easily downloaded, shared, and used to discuss the impact of sex and labor trafficking on RHY.
https://www.rhyttac.net/assets/docs/Resources/Trafficking_Infograph_012418.pdf

- We Think Twice is a youth-centered social media campaign designed for U.S. teens ages 13–19. The campaign promotes healthy decisions and behaviors that help teens achieve optimal health and successfully transition to adulthood.
https://www.wethinktwice.acf.hhs.gov/

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