

# FACTSHEET: Human Trafficking among Runaway and Homeless Youth

## Background

Human trafficking among vulnerable youth is a significant national problem. Young people who experience homelessness face especially high risk for exploitation and trafficking. This places runaway and homeless youth (RHY) services, such as those funded by the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB), Administration on Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), on the front lines. To strengthen the capacity of RHY programs, FYSB conducted an assessment to learn about the field practices, experiences, challenges, and needs with respect to identifying and supporting RHY at risk or victims of human trafficking. Over 300 RHY programs responded to an online survey, and a small subset participated in focus groups. Their responses provide a snapshot of the impact of human trafficking among the youth served by FYSB RHY funded programs.

This factsheet highlights eight key findings from the analysis report to help increase awareness of issues surrounding youth homelessness and human trafficking.

## Key Findings

**Finding # 1: RHY program respondents commonly encounter trafficking among the diverse population of young people they serve; their responses suggest a need to tailor supports to subpopulations.**

Nine out of 10 online survey respondents reported serving youth who had been exploited for sex and/or labor trafficking. Respondents highlighted subpopulations of trafficked youth who need greater attention and tailored support. Service providers frequently reported encountering trafficking in the forms of trading sex, street-level trafficking, and trafficking through families.

**Finding #2: Most RHY programs use tools and strategies to screen and assess for human trafficking, often involving informal methods.**

Approximately seven out of 10 respondents use tools and strategies to assess risk of or experiences with sex and/or labor trafficking. Participants explained the importance of trust and rapport building as part of the identification and assessment process. In fact, the most cited challenge to effective response to RHY trafficking was building trust for victims to disclose experiences.

**Finding #3: Most respondents described providing tailored services to RHY victims of trafficking directly or through referral.**

Most RHY programs provide tailored services to RHY victims of human trafficking, either directly or through referrals. Providers identified a high prevalence of traumatic experiences, mental health, and substance use treatment needs among trafficked RHY.

**Finding #4: RHY providers identified a variety of elements to effectively respond and prevent human trafficking among RHY**

Participants reported using several prevention strategies, including harm reduction approaches, survivor engagement, and supporting positive healthy relationships, and connections. Prevention efforts also included tailored street outreach to identify RHY in trafficking hotspots. About half of survey respondents reported that their programs used the National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH) for multiple purposes, such as requesting materials or reporting a potential trafficking incident.

**Finding #5: Respondents use various methods and content to prepare and train staff for responding to RHY trafficking.**

Many respondents emphasized the importance of professional development on screening and assessment tools and strategies. Participants identified the need for additional training to enhance the capacity of RHY staff to address human trafficking issues. Frequently mentioned training topics included identification, prevention, and serving specific subpopulations.

**Finding #6: Most respondents play significant roles in community collaborations on human trafficking.**

Most respondents participate in human trafficking task forces, coalitions, or multidisciplinary teams. The majority of service providers believe collaboration is key to serving trafficked RHY. Some respondents reported that they needed technical assistance to improve collaboration strategies.

**Finding #7: Gaps in housing, shelter, and services are significant barriers to meeting the needs of RHY trafficking victims.**

Participants described lacking or insufficient services including services for youth transitioning out of systems (e.g., child welfare); inadequate access to healthcare services, including mental health and substance use treatment; RHY trafficking specific housing resources and shelter, especially low-barrier, long-term options; and tailored services for specific subpopulations.

**Finding #8: Human trafficking among RHY and its effects need to be addressed as a public health issue.**

Participants highlighted the need to address social determinants of health and socio-economic barriers that limit access to opportunities and economic stability, which make it more difficult for RHY to access quality education, jobs, housing, health care, and safety nets. These barriers are embedded in public welfare systems (e.g., child welfare and legal systems), and in the criminalization of homelessness and survival experiences of young people.

## **Conclusion**

The dynamics of human trafficking among runaway and homeless youth are complex and interrelated to multiple risk factors. These young people have experienced multiple traumas and instability through their lifetime, including having a history of family conflict and involvement with multiple systems such as the child welfare or juvenile justice system. Furthermore, youth from vulnerable populations are more likely to experience a disproportionate level of runaway incidents, homelessness, and unsafe or unstable housing, which puts them at higher risk for being recruited into trafficking situations or engage in survival activities while living on the streets.

The findings provide an opportunity to learn about the challenges faced by youth experiencing homelessness and identify ways to improve systems and build the capacity in responding effectively to the intersecting challenges of youth homelessness and human trafficking.