



Minnesota HUMAN TRAFFICKING TASK FORCE

Human Trafficking & Homeless/Runaway Youth

ISSUE • RESPONSE • SOLUTION

UNDERSTANDING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking is a public health, public safety and human rights violation that occurs around the world and in communities throughout Minnesota. Human trafficking includes both labor and sex trafficking, and international and domestic victims. The Minnesota Human Trafficking Task Force (MNHTTF) is working to address and prevent human trafficking in Minnesota through a coordinated, multidisciplinary, statewide response.


THE ISSUE: THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF HOMELESS AND RUNAWAY YOUTH

Research has shown that if a youth runs away from home or is experiencing homelessness they are at increased risk for sexual exploitation. Studies have shown that one in five homeless youth are victims of sexual exploitation.ⁱ These youth are particularly vulnerable to predators looking to exploit them because they have no access to shelter or means to provide for their basic needs, they are alone in an unfamiliar environment, and have little to no financial resources. Pimps/traffickers understand these vulnerabilities and are adept at identifying and targeting youth for the purposes of recruiting them into prostitution.ⁱⁱ

Wilder Research Center estimates that there are 2,500 unaccompanied homeless youth under the age of 22 who are homeless on any given night in Minnesota.ⁱⁱⁱ Currently the state of Minnesota has a total of 108 emergency shelter beds state wide and 650 units of transitional and permanent supportive housing dedicated to youth (age 21 and younger).^{iv} This presents a large capacity issue. in our state which feeds into the issue of youth being sexually exploited in our state. The more youth we have without a safe and stable place to live-the more youth that are at risk for sexual exploitation in our state.

The U.S. Department of Justice reports that the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Youth (CSEC) is growing in popularity because it conveys greater financial gains with fewer risks than the drug trade and other illegal activities. The solicitation of minors for the purposes of prostitution has evolved, moving from “the streets” to online forums. In addition, pimps/traffickers also frequently move children between cities. These factors make it difficult for

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law enforcement to identify children victimized by CSEC, and even when children are identified they are more likely to be arrested for prostitution.

Pimps/traffickers have been known to actively target locations where homeless children and youth congregate, including on the streets, at foster care group homes, and at runaway and homeless shelter programs. Children are often introduced to CSEC by a “boyfriend” who initially provides love, attention, care, and emotional support before coercing them into prostitution.

Law enforcement has also reported an increase use of children to recruit other children into CSEC. Known as “peer recruitment,” youth who have previously been sexually exploited or who are connected to a pimp/trafficker recruit new victims from youth homeless shelters or drop-in centers.


Survival Sex: Another Form of Sexual Exploitation

Many unaccompanied (homeless or runaway) youth turn to prostitution for survival. This is known as “survival sex,” where a sex act is performed in exchange for money, shelter, food, or other necessities. Over one third of homeless youth report exchanging sex for food, shelter, or drugs,^v and 75 percent of youth who engaged in survival sex report only doing so while they are homeless.^{vi}

Survival sex is form of sexual exploitation, whether at the hands of a pimp/trafficker or a “patron.” For the same reasons youth are vulnerable to recruitment into prostitution by a pimp/trafficker, they are also susceptible to sexual abuse and exploitation predatory “customers” or “patrons.” In Minnesota, buying sex from a minor – whether the sex act is exchanged for money, shelter, food, or anything else of value - is a felony^{vii}, and a crime against children to which they can never consent.

THE RESPONSE: RESOURCES, PREVENTION AND AFTERCARE

Minnesota’s Safe Harbor for Sexually Exploited Youth Law, passed in July 2011, is designed to ensure that juveniles who are sexually exploited or at risk of exploitation are treated as victims under Minnesota law. Safe Harbor also directed the commissioner of public safety to work with stakeholders to create a victim-centered response. The resulting framework, known as “No Wrong Door: Implementing a Statewide Model for Meeting the Needs of Minnesota’s Sexually Exploited Youth,” was presented to the Minnesota State Legislature during the 2013 session.



In total, Minnesota has invested \$2.8 million dollars to implement the “No Wrong Door” framework, which:

- Secures funding for a statewide director of child sex trafficking prevention in the Minnesota Department of Health;
- Secures funding for six regional navigator positions to connect sexually exploited youth throughout the state with the shelter, support and services they need;
- Secures a \$700,000 training fund for law enforcement, prosecutors and others who encounter sexually exploited youth and an additional \$100,000 to compensate local law enforcement agencies for sending personnel to trainings;
- Secures \$1 million for Safe Harbor housing and shelter, and

Safe Harbor 2013 also extended Safe Harbor provisions to *all* sexually exploited youth by removing the age distinction in Safe Harbor 2011

THE SOLUTION

Minnesota is fortunate to have 27 agencies that have specific programming for runaway and homeless youth. These providers do an excellent job of offering a continuum of services, which include street outreach, family reunification, drop-in center services, emergency shelter, transitional housing and youth supportive housing.

Nevertheless, despite existing resources and the tremendous policy and legislative progress Minnesota has made to protect youth from CSEC and other forms of sexual exploitation, the youth homelessness system simply lacks the capacity to respond to all children at risk of CSEC who are on the streets.

THE SOLUTION

Looking ahead, Minnesota should follow the recommendations contained in The National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction, a report recently released by the Department of Justice⁽⁸⁾ This report sets forth an overarching goal of preventing CSEC from occurring in the first place. An agenda that minimizes youth homelessness, and thus the risk they will be victims of exploitation, should include the following priorities:

- **Prevent youth homelessness.** Youth homelessness should be prevented whenever possible through the provision of family preservation and reunification assistance, support to help youth safely exit unsafe homes without having to go to a shelter (including options provided by extended family, child welfare, host homes, etc.), and improved discharges from foster care and juvenile justice placements.
- **Minimize street homelessness.** An immediate crisis response should be available to all homeless children and youth so that they are never without a safe place to stay. Youth on the streets, including those in prostitution markets, should be actively targeted for street outreach, including outreach conducted on mass transit/public transportation, as well as mobile outreach campaigns.
- **Access to services and stable housing.** Many advocates and legal professionals argue that child welfare agencies should provide for the long-term care of children victimized by CSEC who cannot be restored to their families. Local child welfare agencies are reportedly often reluctant to absorb responsibility for these children, particularly those over the age of 15. As a result, children victimized by CSEC may fall through the cracks between local juvenile justice and child welfare systems, never receiving appropriate care. States should ensure that barriers to stable housing are removed so that youth are not denied access to services.
- **Facilitate long-term stability.** Youth should quickly be placed in settings that will provide long-term stability, safety, and access to needed services, including family reunification and other stable housing.

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

ⁱⁱ Greene, J.M.; Ennett, S.T. & Ringwait, C.L. (1999) *Prevalence and correlates of survival sex among runaway and homeless youth*. *American Journal of Public Health*, 89(9), 1406-1409.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wilder Research Center's 2009 Survey on Homelessness

^{iv} Minnesota Department of Human Services, Office of Economic Opportunity Figures from February 2013

^v Beech, B.M., Myers L., Beach D.J. & K. Ernack, N.S., 2003

^{vi} Robertson, M.J. and Toro, P.A. *Homeless Youth: Research, Intervention, and Policy*. 2007

^{vii} Minnesota Statute 609.324 subd. (1) (2012)