

Homelessness as a cause and a consequence of Human Trafficking

Introduction

Individuals and families who have experienced trafficking often face difficulties getting and maintaining safe and stable housing once their trafficking situation ends. People who are housing insecure, homeless, or experiencing houselessness are also at a much higher risk for being trafficked by way of labor or sex trafficking. This briefing will discuss Polaris's research and available data on the link between housing insecurity and human trafficking. This data comes from the U.S. [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#), which Polaris operates, and two studies conducted by Polaris - the [National Survivor Study](#) and [Intersections](#) survey.

Existing Research on Youth, Homelessness, and Trafficking

Homelessness and housing insecurity have profound impacts on an individual's wellbeing, ranging from educational attainment to physical and mental health to economic opportunity. Housing insecurity has especially pronounced negative effects on youth ranging from cognitive delays to poor school performance. These educational hurdles have cascading consequences that follow a young person into adulthood, such as lower incomes, lower levels of college attainment, and behavioral health issues.¹

One of the largest studies on the relationship between human trafficking and homelessness was conducted by Laura T. Murphy between 2014 and 2016.² Six hundred and forty one runaway and homeless youth served by Covenant House in the United States and Canada were interviewed. Nearly 1 in 5 participants (19 percent) reported being a victim of human trafficking - both sex and labor trafficking.

Of the 14 percent of youth who reported being trafficked for sex, engaging in survival sex, or generally trading sex for money, 68 percent reported doing so while they were homeless. Youth homelessness is one of the most commonly identified factors of engagement in survival sex.³ The study also found that securing housing was the primary concern for the vast majority of the youth who were interviewed.

Eight percent of the 641 youth were trafficked for labor at some point in their lives. The vast majority of the youth trafficked for labor (81 percent) were forced to sell drugs. Many participants explained that the drug trade was normalized early in life while their families were desperate to make ends meet. However, it means that many of these youths may have a criminal record due to their involvement in drugs and other crimes connected to their trafficking victimization. As we will discuss later, criminal records can make it more difficult for survivors to find housing and therefore more vulnerable to revictimization.

¹ Chetty, R., Hendren, N., & Katz, L. F. (2016). The effects of exposure to better neighborhoods on children: New evidence from the moving to Opportunity Experiment. *American Economic Review*, 106(4), 855–902. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20150572>.

² Murphy, L. T. (2017). Labor and sex trafficking among homeless youth: a ten-city study. Modern Slavery Research Project and UNO at Loyola. <https://oag.ca.gov/sites/all/files/agweb/pdfs/ht/murphy-labor-sex-trafficking-homeless-youth.pdf>.

³ Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. *Confronting Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States*. Washington, DC: 2013. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/18358>.

Polaris Data

Through the three sources described below, Polaris’s data contributes to the overall field on the connection between homelessness and human trafficking as applicable to all age demographics. Most research and attention on homelessness and trafficking has focused on the experiences of youth. While this is a particularly vulnerable group, our research shows that homelessness and housing insecurity is both a risk factor and a need after exiting exploitation across age groups. Polaris’s most recent research illustrates the role of housing in survivor’s ability to access basic resources and also to thrive and live their lives safely. Additionally, this research shows that other challenges survivors face like low income, lack of employment, criminal records, debt, trafficker’s use of a survivor’s financial accounts, and other factors also affect a survivor’s ability to access safe and stable housing. These compounding factors contribute to further housing instability, which is a risk factor for abuse and exploitation and can lead to survivors being revictimized and re-exploited.

Methodology:

The findings discussed in this briefing come from three sources:

1. Polaris’s most recent research, the National Survivor Study (NSS), was conducted in 2022 and included an online and phone survey with 457 sex and labor trafficking survivors. The NSS also employed a mixed-methods approach, using qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. The NSS was designed and implemented in partnership with survivors of trafficking, providing unique insights. **For more information on this study and results, read the full report [here](#).**
2. For this brief, we examined data from the Polaris-operated National Human Trafficking Hotline (“Trafficking Hotline”) from January 1, 2015 to October 31, 2021.⁴ There were 28,574 potential victims with a known risk factor or vulnerability. We examined the most highly reported risk factors or vulnerabilities which included unstable housing.
3. In 2017, Polaris conducted a survey with 127 survivor respondents on their experiences with a variety of systems, including the housing and homeless systems, published as the On-Ramps, Intersections, and Exit Routes report (“Intersections”). Fifty of the survivors (39 percent) reported interacting with the housing system. This means that they or their traffickers had an interaction or access to the housing system during their trafficking experience. **More information on this study can be found [here](#).**

⁴ Polaris received \$4.5 million for fiscal year 2022 through competitive funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant #90ZV013802. The project is currently financed with 36 percent of federal funds and 64 percent (\$8.1 million) by non-governmental sources. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACF/HHS, or the U.S. government. For more information, please visit the ACF website, Administrative and National Policy Requirements: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/administrative-and-national-policyrequirements#chapter-8>.

Homeless and Housing Insecurity as a CAUSE of Human Trafficking

Examining vulnerabilities data from Trafficking Hotline:

- Unstable housing was the **4th most common risk factor** reported to the Trafficking Hotline as 2,438⁵ potential victims reported this as a risk factor or vulnerability.

From the National Survivor Study:

- A majority of survivors in the National Survivor Study (N=457) reported facing poverty (83 percent), homelessness, houselessness or some type of housing insecurity (64 percent), or running away from home or the place they were living (69 percent) before they were 18 years of age. Survivors also interacted with systems like juvenile justice (22 percent of survivors) and the child welfare system (34 percent).

“I was a number in the system. The signs were there and yet no one could get to me.” - Survivor Respondent in NSS

Experienced at some point during childhood...	Percent of respondents	N ⁶
Poverty	83%	450
Homelessness, houselessness, or housing insecurity	64%	442
Ran away from home or the place I was living in	69%	439
Juvenile Justice	22%	437
Child Welfare System	34%	413

From Intersections:

- 64 percent of survivor respondents (N=50) reported being homeless or experiencing unstable housing at the time they were recruited into their trafficking situation.

Homeless and Housing Insecurity as a CONSEQUENCE of Human Trafficking

From the National Survivor Study:

- 70 percent of survivors reported that one of their top needs when they left their trafficking situation was finding a safe place to stay. Other top needs identified include a stable living wage job (69 percent) and education (60 percent), which may impact survivors’ access to safe and stable housing. Conversely, a permanent address may be a requirement for some job applications while a temporary address, like a shelter, may not work for some employers.

⁵ This data was pulled on March 31, 2023. This data is dynamic and as a result, may vary from time to time.

⁶ Number of respondents who answered each question.

Some needs survivors reported they needed when exiting trafficking (N=457)	Percent of respondents
Finding a safe place to stay	70%
Getting a stable, living wage job	69%
Getting education	60%

- Nearly one-third (31 percent) of survivors reported needing help establishing or repairing credit. Good, established credit is critical for home ownership and, in some cases, renting a home.

From Intersections:

- 64 percent of responding survivors (N=50) reported losing their housing due to their trafficking or related abuse.

BARRIERS Trafficking Survivors Face to Access Housing

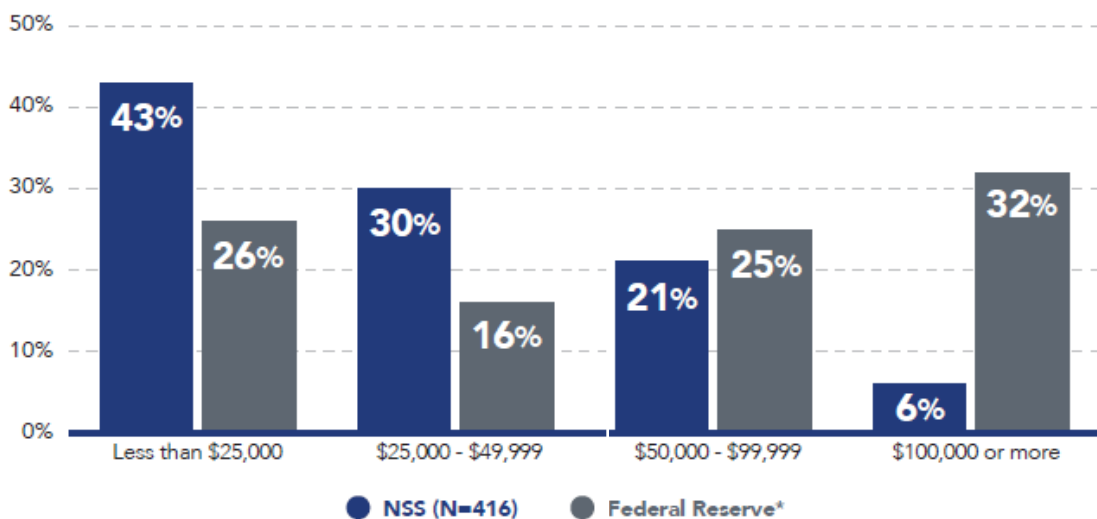
From the National Survivor Study:

Income and Employment:

- Many survivor households (43 percent) are making under \$25,000 a year. This amount of income makes it difficult for survivors to afford any housing let alone safe and stable housing.
- Furthermore, most landlords require multiple pay stubs as proof of regular income. One-third of NSS respondents reported they either only have temporary work or no work at all. Unable to find well-paying jobs with regular income, many survivors of trafficking face difficulties accessing stable housing.

Annual Household Income

Survivors v. General U.S. Population (N=457)



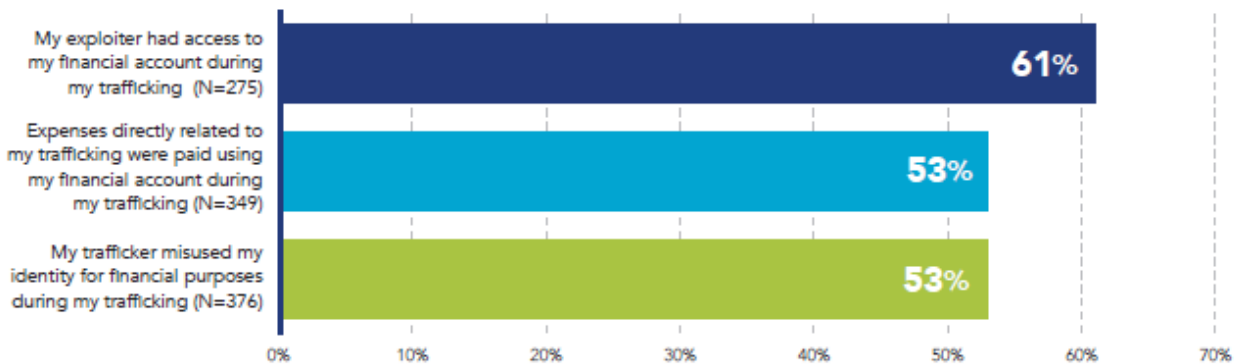
Current Employment Status (N=437)



Regular Work Only 36%
Temporary Work Only 16%
Regular and Temporary Work 30%
No Work 17%

Traffickers' Abuse of Financial Accounts:

- The majority (61 percent) of survivors in the National Survivor Study reported that traffickers abused their financial accounts which may make it difficult for survivors to open bank accounts, get loans, apply for credit cards, and other key activities necessary for employment and housing.



Criminal Records:

- The majority (62 percent) of survivors reported being arrested, detained, or cited by law enforcement. Of these, 71 percent had a criminal record as a result.
- Overall, 42 percent of all survivors reported having a criminal record.

	Percent of Respondents	N
Have been cited, arrested, or detained by law enforcement at least once	62%	439
Among those who were cited, arrested, or detained, had/has a criminal record	71%	244
Of all survey respondents, had/has a criminal record	42%	413

- Of the 174 survivors who reported having a criminal record:
 - 59 percent said their record affected their ability to obtain safe housing.
 - Although impermissible in some jurisdictions⁷, denial of housing applications on the basis of criminal records is still commonplace; a community study across 14 states found that 79 percent of the over 1,000 survey respondents were ineligible or denied housing due to their or their family members' criminal records.⁸ People who have been incarcerated are also nearly ten times more likely to experience homelessness.⁹
 - 69 percent of survivors with a criminal record reported that it prevented them from getting or keeping a job and 63 percent reported their record affected their ability to access education, training, or a professional license all of which can impact housing access.

Reported challenges as a result of criminal records (N = 174):	Percent of respondents
Getting or keeping a job	69%
Getting training, education, or a professional license	63%
Getting good housing	59%

Recommendations

Victims and survivors of and communities vulnerable to human trafficking need access to housing and other basic necessities to prevent trafficking and revictimization. Findings from the National Survivor Study underscore the need to invest in long-term housing solutions that guarantee stable living spaces as a preventative measure in the efforts against trafficking. Eliminating the barriers faced when trying to access and maintain housing creates a necessary foundation for victims and survivors to safely exit their trafficking situations and rebuild their lives. Increased funding for affordable housing for trafficking survivors and vulnerable populations, including long term and transitional housing; credit forgiveness and financial assistance programs; employment programs with opportunities for growth and mentorship; and support to clear criminal records are all necessary interventions to improve the availability of safe, stable, and affordable housing for survivors of human trafficking.

⁷ Illinois Legal Aid Online (2020, May 24). Housing rights for people with a criminal record in Cook County. Retrieved from <https://www.illinoislegalaid.org/legal-information/housing-rights-people-criminal-record-cook-county>.

⁸ deVuono-powell S., Schweidler, C., Walters, A., & Zohrabi, A. (2015). Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families. Retrieved from <https://www.whopaysreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Who-Pays-FINAL.pdf>.

⁹ Couloute, L. (2018). Nowhere to go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people. Prison Policy Initiative. Retrieved from <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html>.