

Sex Trafficking and LGBTQ Youth

Every year, children and young adults are compelled into sex trafficking in the United States. While trafficking affects all demographics, traffickers frequently target individuals who lack strong support networks, are facing financial strains, have experienced violence in the past, or who are marginalized by society. Without adequate community support, youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ) may be at particular risk for sex trafficking. Service providers who work with LGBTQ youth may be in a position to identify, support, and assist LGBTQ youth who have been trafficked.

WHAT IS SEX TRAFFICKING?

Sex trafficking is a form of modern slavery that exists throughout the United States and around the world. Sex traffickers use violence, threats, lies, debt bondage, and other forms of coercion to compel individuals to engage in commercial sex acts against their will. Under U.S. federal law, any minor under the age of 18 years induced into commercial sex is a victim of sex trafficking—regardless of whether or not the trafficker used force, fraud, or coercion.¹

The situations that sex trafficking victims face vary dramatically. Some victims become romantically involved with someone who then forces or manipulates them into prostitution. Others are lured in with false promises of a job, such as modeling or dancing. Some are forced to sell sex by family members, while others are kicked out by their families, placing them in precarious financial situations in which they must trade sex to survive. Victims of sex trafficking may be involved in a trafficking situation for a few days or may remain in the same trafficking situation for years.

HOW DOES SEX TRAFFICKING AFFECT HOMELESS YOUTH?

Too many LGBTQ youth still face significant challenges during adolescence and early adulthood, fighting discrimination, misconceptions, and abuse by peers, family members, and others in their communities.

Up to 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ. Of these:

- 46%** ran away because of family rejection²
- 7.4x** more likely to experience acts of sexual violence than their heterosexual peers³
- 3-7x** more likely to engage in survival sex to meet basic needs,⁴ such as shelter, food, drugs, and toiletries⁵

SAFE HARBOR LAWS

Safe harbor laws are designed to protect minors who are exploited for commercial sex. Safe harbor laws have two main components: legal protection and provision of services.⁶

As of 2015, 34 states had safe harbor laws on the books. These state laws varied greatly, offering immunity, affirmative defense, or pretrial diversion to minors engaged in commercial sex.⁷

Safe harbor also allows a pathway into specialized services, including medical and mental health treatment, housing, education assistance, job training, and legal services.

HOW ARE LGBTQ YOUTH MORE VULNERABLE?

LGBTQ youth face higher rates of discrimination, violence, and economic instability than their non-LGBTQ peers.⁸ When faced with fewer resources, employment opportunities, or social supports, LGBTQ youth who are away from home must find ways to meet their basic needs and may therefore enter the street economy, engaging in commercial sex to meet these needs.

Others may then seek to exploit these vulnerabilities in order to compel youth into commercial sex. Traffickers may seek to meet the youth's needs as a way to build rapport and dependency. They may offer a sense of family, protection, or love to build a sense of relationship and loyalty. This bond may complicate the youth's understanding of their situation and prevent them from speaking out against their trafficker.

It is difficult for many individuals who have been trafficked to reach out for assistance, but this is especially true for individuals who fear that they will be mistreated or not believed because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Studies have found that LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in detention for prostitution-related offenses and report higher levels of police misconduct than their straight peers.²

Furthermore, gay and transgender youth may not have access to anti-trafficking services because they are unaware of services in their area, the community lacks resources (e.g. bed space, funding), or they are concerned that providers are not LGBTQ friendly.

LGBTQ youth service programs may be in a unique position to support at-risk youth, identify youth who have experienced trafficking, connect them to needed services, and advocate on their behalf.

HOW DO I KNOW IF A YOUTH HAS EXPERIENCED SEX TRAFFICKING?

It may not be readily apparent that a youth has been trafficked, and every survivor's experience is unique. The red flags listed here signify common features associated with youth who have been trafficked. If you find that several of these red flags are present for a youth with whom you are working, we recommend you engage them in an honest, safe, and non-judgmental dialogue about their potential involvement in commercial sex.

RED FLAGS FOR SEX TRAFFICKING

- Is under the age of 18 and engaged in commercial sex, regardless of force, fraud, or coercion
- Feels they must provide commercial sex in exchange for food, housing, hormones, or other necessities
- Photos of the youth have been placed online for advertising purposes
- Movement or communications are monitored
- Is hesitant to answer questions; scripted responses
- Has been threatened with harm to self or loved ones, arrest, or deportation
- Demonstrates mental health concerns like PTSD, anxiety, self-destructive behavior, or depression
- Suffers from untreated medical concerns, particularly in relation to sexual or reproductive health
- Shows signs of physical or sexual abuse, neglect, malnourishment, or poor hygiene
- Has a debt they cannot pay off
- Earnings are confiscated or held by others
- Frequently moves or travels to new cities with new acquaintances

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF ONE OF MY YOUTH HAS BEEN TRAFFICKED?

It can be difficult for victims of trafficking to disclose their situation and reach out for help. Many victims do not identify as victims of trafficking, fear the repercussions of reporting their situation, or simply do not know that help is available. It is important to continue to build trust and rapport, while giving them the tools to stay safe. Survivors may need specialized anti-trafficking services, such as criminal justice advocacy, assistance vacating prior convictions, or trauma-informed mental health services.

If you believe you are working with a young person who may be a victim of trafficking, you can reach out to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) for advice and referrals to local anti-trafficking services. The NHTRC is a national hotline serving survivors of human trafficking and the broader anti-trafficking community. The toll-free hotline is available to answer calls from anywhere in the country, 24/7, in over 200 languages.

The NHTRC and the Polaris BeFree Textline are confidential, non-judgmental places to seek assistance. Call 888-373-7888 or text 233733 to talk to a specially trained Hotline Advocate to get help, connect to local services, or get more information about human trafficking. For more information about these helplines, visit polarisproject.org/get-assistance.

**National Human Trafficking
Resource Center Hotline**

Call 1-888-373-7888

Polaris BeFree Textline

**Text HELP to BeFree
(233733)**

HOW CAN LGBTQ ORGANIZATIONS GET INVOLVED IN ANTI-TRAFFICKING EFFORTS?

- 1 Join your local human trafficking task force or coalition.** A strong anti-trafficking response requires the expertise and skills of all professions. You have an important role to play in supporting LGBTQ youth in your community.
- 2 Partner with local service providers and law enforcement on training efforts.** Peer-to-peer training not only provides an opportunity to build trust and relationships, but sharing expertise on LGBTQ cultural competency and human trafficking results in a stronger response network when youth do come forward.
- 3 Engage your youth on issues of trafficking and exploitation.** Provide youth with safety planning tips, resources about trafficking, and information on how to get help for themselves or others in abusive or exploitative situations.