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Anti-trafficking's Sensational Misinformation: The “72-hour Myth” and America's Homeless Youth

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ABSTRACT

Media representations of sex trafficking among homeless youth typically and needlessly contain sensationalized images and unsupported false statistics regarding the issue. One of those factoids: that runaway and homeless youth are likely to be trafficked for sex within 72 hours of leaving home is particularly pervasive despite being completely unfounded. This article tracks down the sources of this misinformation. Then, using a study of over 600 homeless youth conducted by Loyola University's Modern Slavery Research Project, the article provides a more nuanced and survivor-centered portrait of the human trafficking – both sex and labor – that affects the homeless youth population.

KEYWORDS

Runaway and homeless youth; human trafficking; sex trafficking; modern slavery; homelessness

What we read about sex trafficking today is alarming, sensationalized, and often perverse. Tracking down one of the most frequently reported statistics employed by today's anti-trafficking movement—that runaways are at high risk of sex trafficking within hours of leaving their homes—paints a very clear portrait of the unnecessarily exaggerated appeals that are widely-disseminated and oft-repeated.

What do we hear about the fate of runaways in the United States? A U.S. Department of Health and Human Services webpage reporting “The Numbers” relevant to runaway and homeless youth states, “Children, both boys and girls, are solicited for sex, on average, within 72 hours of being on the street” (Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). The National Center for Homeless Education shortens the time window and increases the risk by saying, “As many as one-third of teen runaway or thrown away youth will become involved in prostitution within 48 hours of leaving home” (National Center for Homeless Education, 2014). Fox News Milwaukee recently sensationalized the story for the audience by increasing the number of victims to say that “90% of runaways become part of the sex trade business—and most are coerced within 72 hours of running away” (Taylor, 2014).

So are runaways solicited for sex or are they recruited by pimps or are they forced into the sex trade? Does this happen to runaway children or all homeless youth? Is it a third of them or 90% of them? Does it take 48 or 72 hours for them to be made captives to sex traffickers?

I enlisted the students in my first-year seminar on 21st Century Slavery and Abolition at Loyola University New Orleans to search for the origin of this human trafficking factoid, and they easily discovered how tangled the web of misinformation is. A 2009 literature review indicates, “Experts have reported that within 48 hours of running away, an adolescent is likely to be approached to participate in prostitution or another form of commercial sexual exploitation; however, no definitive published research substantiates this claim” (Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Goldblatt Grace, 2009). They cite a 2001 report by Mia Spangenberg that suggests “after only an average of thirty-six to forty-eight hours on the streets, young people are solicited for sex in exchange for money, food or shelter” (Spangenberg, 2001). Spangenberg's source? A 1996 *Christian Science Monitor* article by Mark Clayton titled, “Sex Trade Lures Kids from Burbs,” in which we learn that “within 48 hours of

hitting the streets, a juvenile will be approached with an offer of money, food, or shelter in exchange for sex” (Clayton, 1996). And Clayton’s source? There is none. Clayton mentions the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), which has referred to the trafficking terror faced by runaways for years. As late as 2010, NCMEC’s president and CEO Ernie Allen could only vaguely attribute the factoid to estimates made by “some runaway groups,” and NCMEC has since stopped using the stat (Allen, 2010). It is impossible to find any credible source for this claim.

Even as these organizations, academics, and journalists are urgently trying to address the problem of sex trafficking among homeless youth, this rampant misinformation and fear mongering persistently threaten to undermine the credibility of the anti-trafficking movement.

The Modern Slavery Research Project at Loyola recently released a study, “Labor and Sex Trafficking Among Homeless Youth: A Ten-City Study” (Murphy, 2017). For this study, we interviewed 641 homeless residents of Covenant House International’s network of shelters, and we unsurprisingly found that there is indeed real reason to be concerned about both sex and labor trafficking among homeless youth, though there remains no evidence to substantiate any of these exaggerated claims.

Among the homeless and runaway youth aged 18–24 that we interviewed, 19% of them had been trafficked for either sex or labor in their lifetimes. Furthermore, 91% of them indicated that strangers had approached them while they were homeless or otherwise financially struggling, offering suspiciously lucrative job offers. They described being approached on the street, at bus stops and train stations, and on social media. They told stories of being approached in or directly outside homeless shelters and government-assistance offices. They were offered jobs selling stolen goods, distributing cell phones, working in landscaping, in magazine sales; others were offered jobs as models, in film, or in pornography. Many of those approached assumed or were told explicitly that they were being offered an opportunity to work in the sex trade; others suspected or came to learn that the offers were for other exploitative labor situations, some of which led to them being trafficked for labor.

One young woman said that she had been offered several escort jobs by strangers who “made it seem like it was something simple, legal.” A pimp encouraged a young woman by insisting, “Y’all are missing out on money. Y’all are young and don’t know no better. This is good money that y’all could be having.” Another young woman was approached at the shelter by a young man who wanted to take her out of town with him. She told us that the young man was trying to recruit women into the sex trade right under the noses of the shelter’s watchful staff. When asked what strangers offer her for engaging in the sex trade, another young woman said, “They say they will take care of me and my baby”—certainly a difficult offer to turn down. One young man reported that men would try to tempt him by offering him jobs in modeling or manual labor. He told us that he had been offered a warehouse job, but the offer turned out to be a pretense for a sexual hookup.

But youth were also offered opportunities to pass bad checks and take home part of the haul. They were recruited to sell lawn-care services door to door and then were never paid for their work. Some youth were taken in by pyramid schemes that promised promotion and even self-worth by selling magazines or nutritional supplements, and then had their wages stolen and were left homeless in a town they did not know. Other youth, some as young as 10- or 11 years old, were approached by friends and strangers who saw their homelessness as an opportunity to force them into working in the drug trade. For all of our attention to the vulnerability of homeless and runaway youth to the sex trade, we clearly ignore their vulnerability to many other forms of exploitation. As a result, we fail to train them to spot the signs of all kinds of traffickers who might take advantage of their homelessness to force them to work against their will.

Taking advantage of the vulnerabilities of young people who are down on their luck and are searching for work, recruiters do indeed try to lure homeless youth with lucrative opportunities to work in a variety of trades. And we know, from the reports of the youth themselves, that some young people are indeed accepting those offers. As a result of the persistent predatory behaviors they encountered while walking around alone, residents at Covenant House expressed a great deal of anxiety about the risks involved in sleeping outside.

However, the youth we talked to were unable to put a timeline on when they were approached, indicating that in fact, they were often approached before they were homeless, as well. Many of the youth refused these obscure offers of lucrative work, and so they were unable to confirm their suspicions of the people who approached them. Many of the youth who took the stranger up on the offer found out that the risks were more diverse than what our factoids would suggest—they were recruited into fraudulent commission-based sales jobs or into situations that led to wage theft, or they were tricked into working informally for less than minimum wage. What we learned was that homeless, disconnected, and impoverished youth are the targets of people who seek to exploit them in many different ways, regardless of their housing situation, the number of hours they've been on the streets, or the kind of work they are seeking. In our research, we were unable to confirm or deny the exaggerated claims regarding the 72-hour myth because youth felt like they were being approached constantly by people who were targeting their vulnerabilities.

What our research does tell us, however, is that to protect youth from these predatory behaviors, we need more youth programs that focus on self-empowerment, harm reduction, healthy sexuality/relationships, job skills, and safety planning that can bolster young people's resilience if they do find themselves on the streets or otherwise vulnerable to predatory offers.

And we also need to rely on valid research regarding the vulnerability of young and homeless people to traffickers. From that work, we can equip agencies and organizations, including media, with knowledge that will assist them in responding appropriately to the frightening realities that young people are experiencing. Scholarly research, mindful of the harmful, sensationalist approaches taken to this issue, is beginning to fill those gaps. If nothing else, we hope to suggest that the media and awareness campaigns now have access to the information they need to avoid using sensational headlines, based in exaggeration and misinformation, to promote a cause that needs no added drama to engage us.

Notes on contributor

Laura T. Murphy, PhD, is an associate professor at Loyola University New Orleans in Louisiana, and the director of the Modern Slavery Research Project there. Her research focuses on representations of historical and modern slavery globally, human trafficking in the United States, and postcolonial studies.

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