

Transitional-Age Youth and Human Trafficking

Human traffickers have made a business out of taking advantage of people in vulnerable positions. A \$150 billion per year business, the International Labour Organization estimates that, around the world, there are currently 20.9 million victims of human trafficking. While victims and survivors come from diverse backgrounds and have a wide range of educational and socio-economic origins, they have all been lured into modern-day slavery by someone who leverages their vulnerabilities and makes false promises of a better job, a loving relationship, or a stable place to live.

Transitional-age youth (youth between the ages of 16 and 24) represent a particularly at-risk population, and are very susceptible to being trafficked. For youth without a consistent network of family or friends, the combination of entering legal adulthood, and simultaneously losing supportive services (DCF, DMH, etc.), presents a unique set of challenges that leave them vulnerable to victimization. Human traffickers often prey on this group due to their transient and isolated nature. Traffickers know that these youth are not connected to family or friends who would be concerned for their safety if they were to disappear for an extended period of time.

According to a 2013 study by Covenant House, a NY agency that provides services to over 3,000 homeless youth annually, approximately one-quarter of all the youth that they served were victims of trafficking (both labor trafficking and sex trafficking), or had engaged in "survival sex" (exchanging sex acts for the basic necessities of life, such as food or shelter). Statistics and trends like this one led to "The Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act" in 2015. This legislation re-activated programs from the previously expired Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, including street outreach programs, temporary housing, transitional living services, and trauma treatment. By fulfilling the basic needs of runaway and homeless youth, these programs ensure that the youth will no longer be in the position of needing to trade sex just to survive.

There are several resources, both locally and nationally, for providers working with transitional age youth who they suspect are either in a trafficking situation or at risk of being trafficked. Nationally, the Polaris Project is a wealth of research and resources. They have developed an assessment tool tailored specifically for the homeless and runaway youth population to help providers identify when human trafficking might be taking place. They also have tools to help providers talk with clients about human trafficking during the course of treatment.

Locally, The Home for Little Wanderers (located in the Metro Boston area) offers several services for transitional age youth, including programs that provide support and care for young adults who are aging out of state programs. They have a variety of educational, case management, and peer support services as well, to help clients navigate the transition into independent adulthood. There are also several other agencies, groups, and services available in Massachusetts and the surrounding area, which you can find by visiting <https://traffickingresourcecenter.org/training-resources/referral-directory>.

If you know someone who you suspect is a victim of human trafficking, please call the National Human Trafficking Resource Center Hotline at 1-888-373-7888.