



Opportunities for Prevention

Key Findings and Recommendations

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INTRODUCTION

Sex trafficking results in substantial physical and psychological harm for individuals who have been exploited, their families, and their communities. A study aimed at estimating the number of individuals who have experienced sex trafficking in Sacramento—and understanding the experiences of those who were exploited—identified opportunities for preventing individuals from being trafficked in the first place.

Although study participants were not directly asked about prevention, they were asked about their entry into the sex trade, and they shared stories about their childhoods and lives before entry. This action brief provides guidance from survivors about how vulnerabilities can be addressed to prevent individuals from being trafficked for sexual exploitation. These recommendations have been generated by the nine-person Survivor Advisory Council (SAC), who served as critical members of the research team and authors of this report.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

Understanding the scope and nature of sex trafficking in a community is an important first step toward mobilizing efforts to identify and provide services to trafficking survivors. Estimating the number of individuals who have experienced sex trafficking has been a major challenge with profound consequences. Without data, efforts to disrupt trafficking or meet the needs of its survivors are subject to public opinion—which often either dramatizes or ignores the issue—resulting in either too much intervention or too little. Furthermore, lack of data makes it more difficult for anti-trafficking efforts to guide any strategic public health or justice approach to effectively tackling this issue.

STUDY DESIGN

This study used a participatory action research approach and mixed-methods design. Multiple systems estimation was used to generate a prevalence estimate from nine sources of administrative data on identified sex trafficking victims and survivors. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 159 people with lived experience in commercial sex in Sacramento County, who were identified using a respondent-driven sampling design to gather contextual information about sex trafficking exploitation and the needs of victims and survivors.

THE SURVIVOR ADVISORY COUNCIL

This study was supported by the SAC, composed of nine members who provided expert guidance throughout the project, including guiding the overall research direction at the beginning, supporting the respondent-driven sampling for interview participation, conducting interviews, and helping with interpreting study findings. The SAC was convened monthly. The findings and recommendations in this brief have been compiled by the SAC with limited support from other members of the research team.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1) **Estimate the prevalence of sex trafficking among adults in Sacramento County,**
- 2) **Better understand the nature and scope of sex trafficking in Sacramento County, and**
- 3) **Provide data capable of informing a strategic, coordinated, multi-system response to prevent and respond to sex trafficking exploitation in Sacramento County.**

Interviewed

159
people with
lived experience



KEY FINDINGS

Traumatic and unstable childhoods

Study participants reported having childhoods characterized by trauma and instability. For example, many individuals grew up in foster care or group homes. Most of the individuals who started selling sex before age 18 were involved in foster care. Other types of traumatic childhood experiences included both physical and sexual abuse. Although not commonly reported by respondents, these forms of abuse were mentioned by some. Individuals who have experienced abuse are often at a higher risk of being sexualized. Their innocence is taken away from them, which can leave them feeling hopeless and isolated and can result in a vicious cycle in which they don't feel that they have control over their own bodies. Even among study participants who described having relatively stable childhoods, many grew up among individuals who were “in the life.” Among this group, more people reported following siblings, cousins, or friends (i.e., peers) into the life than following parents or members of an older generation.

Homelessness and substance use

Interviewees also described experiencing homelessness and substance use disorders, which frequently co-occurred. Among study participants, past homelessness and drug use were heavily correlated with trouble finding services, especially housing. One participant explained how lack of housing made her susceptible to recruitment: “I was homeless at the time, so it was kind of easy for her [the trafficker] to.... I would have a place to stay, you know, and food to eat and everything. So it was easy for her to recruit me at the time.”

Financial need

Some respondents reported engaging in commercial sex because they needed to earn money and joined up with a pimp or trafficker for protection. Some individuals described a specific need for money. For example, one woman described the need to feed her newborn baby; another lost her job and had a son in college to support. Although not common, a few interviewees also stated that their reasons for staying with a pimp or trafficker had to do with the lifestyle—luxury items and fashion—although one participant described how she no longer cares for luxury because it is too painful now.

“

I was a foster kid for 10 years or whatever. I turned 18 in the system. When I turned 18, they told me that funding for me had stopped. I was in a group home. Funding for me had stopped, and then [they] asked me where I wanted to go. What?

(Female, 33)

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“

So basically I had to... prostitute myself in order to be able to make money, to have a place, to stay in food and stuff like that, because I didn't have enough money.

(Female, 54)

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Protect youth in foster care

- **Provide prevention education** to all youth entering the foster care system. Placements and caregivers should also be required to undergo prevention education.
- **Make financial literacy resources available** to teenagers with allowances and employment.
- **Ensure all needs, including cultural needs, are met** when youth are placed in new homes.
- **Involve a nonclinical, trusted person with lived experience to support youth** while they are in foster care.

Address individual trauma

- **Provide immediate support services**, such as therapy, a safe environment, peer mentoring, and education, to prevent future harm to young people who have experienced abuse.
- **Educate the family** of individuals who have been abused about vulnerabilities that may be present and what steps they can take to ensure the safety of the youths.

Address intergenerational trauma

- **Identify and promptly address any underlying needs that could keep a family from participating in services.** Timely intervention is critical for families who have experienced trauma.
- **Give families the opportunity to choose their therapist and receive both individual and family therapy.** Encouraging children to participate in various activities and experiences can help them build resilience and improve their development.
- **Work together to create a supportive environment for families to help them heal and grow.** Education can play a pivotal role in breaking the cycle of abuse and ensuring that future generations do not experience the same trauma.

Provide nonjudgmental support and basic needs

- **Adopt a harm reduction approach** when working with people with substance use disorders. It is crucial to minimize the potential for further abuse and connect them to services related to their current situation.
- **Inform family and friends of individuals who are experiencing substance use disorders about the resources available in the community.** This will empower them to establish clear boundaries while also providing their loved ones with the necessary resources for their outstanding needs and support.
- **Meet a person's basic needs**, such as food, hygiene, and housing, to significantly reduce their risk of being targeted by traffickers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Hold constructive conversations with youth

- **Discuss the difference between needs and wants.** Young people who find themselves attracted to illegal activities to earn money often lack the necessary understanding of the risks and dangers that come with those activities. It is important to have constructive conversations about the difference between needs and wants.
- **Encourage youth to focus on legitimate ways to earn a living and the satisfaction that comes with it.** Providing support and interventions to those who have fallen on hard times can go a long way in helping them avoid the risks of attempting to earn money illegally.
- **Make educational materials about human trafficking accessible to all youth.** We should aim to provide information in a positive and constructive manner. This would include highlighting warning signs, possible consequences, and the true dangers of sex work, all with the goal of helping people make informed decisions and avoid harm.

“

Getting away, food,... just having a spot to be by myself for a little bit. You know, someone to talk to, just to be in a different setting, to make you really think and analyze about what's going on, and what your options are, because, I mean, if you did have somebody to talk to, or there was other ways for people like me who didn't know about these things, then you would've gotten out of it a long time ago. If you had the choice to choose.

(Female, 28)

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FOR MORE INFORMATION ON PREVENTION, VISIT:

https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/otip/nac_report_2020.pdf (Section 9: Prevention)
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/otip/blog/2023/11/prevent-trafficking-build-healthy-relationships-young-people?utm_content=bufferc0ad0&utm_medium=social&utm_source=linkedin.com&utm_campaign=buffer
<https://polarisproject.org/on-ramps-intersections-and-exit-routes/>
<https://polarisproject.org/resources/action-guide-trafficking-prevention-for-lgbtq-communities-in-san-diego/>
<https://polarisproject.org/resources/action-guide-trafficking-prevention-for-youth-in-philadelphia/>

FOR DETAILED FINDINGS AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THIS STUDY, VISIT:

<https://www.rti.org/impact/estimating-sex-trafficking-in-sacramento-county>