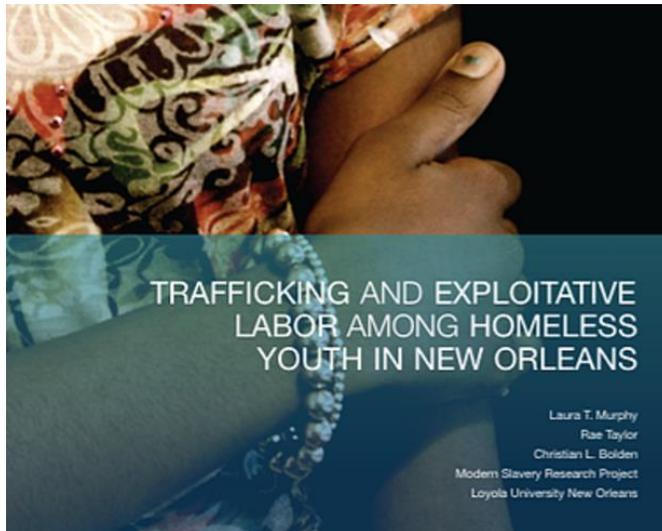


[http://www.nola.com/health/index.ssf/2015/03/loyola\\_human\\_trafficking\\_homel.html](http://www.nola.com/health/index.ssf/2015/03/loyola_human_trafficking_homel.html)

## Human trafficking victims among those seeking help at Covenant House, Loyola report says



A newly released Loyola University study of human trafficking among clients at Covenant House New Orleans indicates 86 homeless youth a year who walk through the shelter's doors has been a victim of human trafficking. (*Loyola University*)

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The girl was 10 the first time she was held captive in a hotel room and forced to have sex for money.

"In the beginning, it wasn't by choice," she said.

She had been plucked from the shelter where she had run to escape sexual abuse by her foster parents. Once there, a man took her and another girl, beat them, locked them in a hotel and then pimped them out for sex, the report said.

The girl's experience, documented in a [newly released Loyola University study of human trafficking](#) among clients at Covenant House New Orleans, is far from unheard of among homeless youth, according to the report.

Among 99 clients interviewed at the youth shelter, 14 percent reported to researchers that they had been the victims of some form of trafficking -- 11 percent said they were forced into sex and 5 percent were forced into labor. Two of the youth described being victims of both.

Human trafficking is defined by the [National Human Trafficking Resource Center](#) as a type of modern day slavery -- the use of force, fraud or coercion to control victims for the purpose of engaging in prostitution or labor against their will.

Jim Kelly, executive director of Covenant House, said he asked Laura Murphy, assistant professor of English at Loyola University and lead researcher for the university's Modern Slavery Research Project, to interview the center's clients about their experiences.

The study replicated work done at Covenant House New York by Fordham University, which in 2013 found that 14.9 percent of the clients there also experienced some kind of trafficking victimization prior to entering the shelter.

"We've got a serious problem in New Orleans," Kelly said. "It isn't like this is only a New York problem."

The report estimated that about 86 people age 16 to 23 who walk through the doors of Covenant House each year are likely to be victims of human trafficking. It also found that 25 percent had been involved in sexual labor -- either through trafficking or as commercial sex workers. The researchers stated they believe the numbers are likely underreported because of the sensitive nature of the research topics. But it isn't clear now what these figures reveal about the size of the problem in New Orleans as a whole.

"If 86 kids walk through our door every year, how many kids don't walk through our door?" Kelly said.

Murphy said that there isn't a great deal of hard data on human trafficking in the nation or the state. But the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services last year was awarded a [five-year federal grant](#) designed to prevent, identify and investigate human trafficking among children who are in the state's child welfare system.

"This report is really the beginning of trying to get our finger on what the prevalence in our city really is," Murphy said.

For the study, Murphy and Rae Taylor and Christian Bolden, assistant professors in Loyola's College of Social Sciences, interviewed 99 Covenant House clients over age 18 who volunteered to participate. They were interviewed using a screening tool called the Human Trafficking Interview and Assessment Measure (HTIAM-14). Murphy said the interviews generally lasted 20 minutes to one hour -- with one lasting two hours.

The clients were not asked their names. But counseling referrals were available for those who may have felt re-traumatized in the process of talking about their past.

The homeless youth described numerous experiences being preyed upon by people who wanted to exploit them in exchange for food and shelter. One girl said her pimp locked her in a cage at night. Another said her mother "gave me to this man so that way we could spend the night with him."

One client told researchers she was recruited into sex trafficking by a young woman who approached her within Covenant House. Several said they were approached in the area outside Covenant House, including in nearby Louis Armstrong Park and the French Quarter, and offered supposedly lucrative jobs modeling, selling magazines, performing sex work and dealing drugs.

Fifteen percent said they had engaged in "survival sex" as adults as a way to generate income.

And though 15 respondents said they had been forced to work in drugs, sex or factories, none of them had been identified by law enforcement or the legal system as having been victims of trafficking, the report said. And yet half of them had been arrested for offenses related to trading sex or selling drugs.

Kelly said he felt the data offered a sobering look at how homeless youth are actively preyed upon. He said he hopes to use the work to leverage expanding services to youth who need it. "When you get a report or a study like this," he said, "you have to handle it with gravitas."

The study, which Murphy said she expects to be replicated at other Covenant House shelters throughout the nation, was modeled after the Covenant House New York report.

The report made several recommendations for how the New Orleans community might begin to address the issue, including:

- Expanding beds, shelter services, job training and job opportunities available to homeless youth.
- Improving laws to better equip foster children to "age out" of the state's child welfare system once they turn 18. In 2013, the state eliminated a program that helped foster youth pay for transitional housing after they turned 18. "As a result, 18- and 19-year-olds are especially vulnerable to homelessness, informal and exploitative labor arrangements and predatory offers," the report says.
- Raise awareness of a 2013 Louisiana law that enables victims of trafficking to have charges for sex crimes removed from their criminal records. "As a result of being treated as criminals instead of victims, survivors of human trafficking often have extensive arrest records and even felony convictions," the report says.
- Improve and fund training for law enforcement so that they are better able to identify victims of trafficking.

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