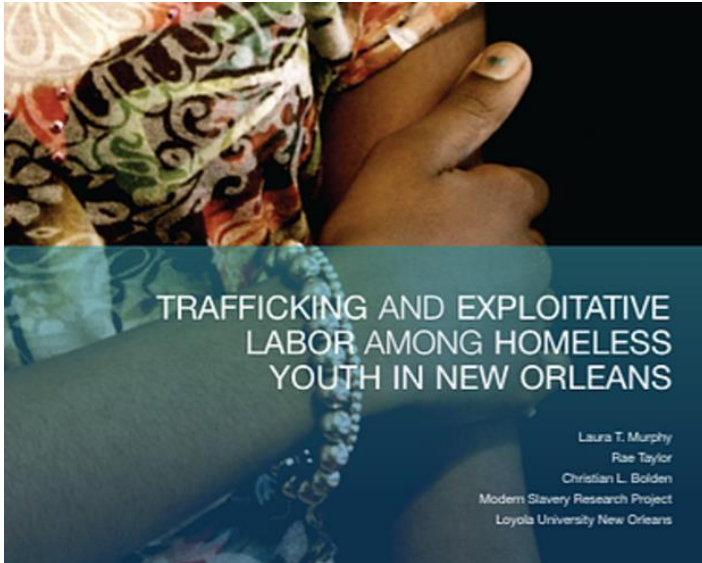


Homeless teens trapped by human traffickers in New Orleans: Laura Murphy



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*)



By [Contributing Op-Ed columnist](#)

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News reports often suggest that human trafficking is rampant in our area. We are told that New Orleans is in the top 20 cities for human trafficking and that Baton Rouge is a hub for it. But what do we actually know about the prevalence of trafficking in our region?

As our Louisiana Human Trafficking Report noted last year, there is very little data being kept on how human trafficking affects us in Louisiana. And we're not alone - most cities in the United States have no way to determine the extent of the problem and how it is affecting their citizens.

Recently, the Modern Slavery Research Project at Loyola University New Orleans [partnered with Covenant House](#) New Orleans to better understand one corner of this complicated issue in our area.

We [asked 99 homeless youth](#) about their work experiences to determine how many of them had been victims of trafficking - that is, forced laborers - whether that was in the sex trade, in the drug trade, or in other labor situations.

We found that 14 percent of these young people had work experiences that met the federal and state [definition of trafficking](#). They had been compelled to labor through force, fraud or coercion or they had been commercially sexually exploited as children.

Eleven percent had been victims of sex trafficking; 5 percent were victims of labor trafficking. Two percent of them had experienced both.

One young woman explained that she was psychologically unable to walk away from a man who was selling her for sex when she was between the ages of 17 and 19. She told us, ""It was a mind control thing. He called it free will. But it wasn't free will. You can leave. He made you think you wanted to stay. You know that you don't want to do that type of work."

Others discussed the brutal violence that made it impossible for them to escape their work situations. One woman was held captive by a stranger she had just met who forced her to sell sex. She told us, "He threatened me and said I had to do it. It was either do it or he was going to sell me to someone else or kill me." She tried to refuse, but "he drugged me, put his hands on me, kicked me, slapped me around."

Four of our respondents reported being forced to sell drugs. One young woman who reported being forced to do so spoke of the risk of trying to quit dealing: "People I worked with told me to sell them. They had me sell for them. I was the in-between person. I had to do it to survive." When asked what happened to her when she tried to stop, she said, "That is how I got raped the first time. Because I wanted to stop."

A young man reported that he was forced to join a gang at the age of 12. He was forced to sell drugs, and he told us, "They said if I stopped working for them, they'd find me and kill me."

These young people had been kidnapped, beaten, drugged, threatened and caged so that other people could profit from them.

We might wonder how this can happen, and the answer is frighteningly simple - young people in our city are desperate to find ways to earn a sustainable living. An alarming 31 percent of the people we interviewed said they had been approached by strangers offering them suspicious work opportunities. They suspected these were attempts to lure them into work in the sex trade or some other illicit labor.

This suggests that homeless youth in our city are targeted specifically because of their vulnerability and that people try to trick them through offering them precisely what they seek most - a well-paying job.

That's why in addition to recommending that we need more shelter beds and specialized services for victims of human trafficking, our report finds that the most important things we can do for our citizens is to create more work opportunities and job skills training. That must happen if we want to make escape possible for victims of human trafficking. We must get to the root of the problems young people face if we want to ensure they are resilient against people who would exploit them.

Laura Murphy is assistant professor of English at Loyola University in New Orleans and lead researcher for the university's Modern Slavery Research Project.