

# YOUTH EXPERIENCES SURVEY

EXPLORING THE HUMAN  
TRAFFICKING EXPERIENCES OF  
HOMELESS YOUNG ADULTS IN  
ARIZONA, YEAR 6

Arizona State University  
Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research

20  
19



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## 2019 YOUTH EXPERIENCES SURVEY YEAR SIX

### Authors

Dominique Roe-Sepowitz, MSW, Ph.D.

Kristen Bracy, MA, MSW

Kimberly Hogan, MA, MSW

Arizona State University

This study was funded by the McCain Institute for International Leadership at Arizona State University, Our Family Services, UMOM, and the Arizona State University School of Social Work, Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research.

Thank you to Our Family Services in Tucson, Arizona, Native American Connections and one·n·ten in Phoenix and the staff at UMOM for their assistance in collecting this research.



# EXECUTIVE

## SUMMARY

The Youth Experiences Survey (YES) is a study of the experiences of homeless young adults in Arizona that has been conducted for the past six years, from 2014 to 2019. The YES study focuses on how the life experiences of Arizona's homeless young adults (ages 18-25) increases their risk for experiencing human trafficking. The study was conducted in partnership with four agencies from Phoenix and Tucson that provide direct services to homeless persons: Native American Connections, UMOM, one.n.ten of Phoenix, and Our Family Services of Tucson. The findings from the YES study have consistently provided insight about the challenges and needs of Arizona's homeless young adults to better target needed services as well as the first of its kind knowledge of the scope of the sex and labor exploitation of this population in Arizona.

Identifying sex and labor trafficking among homeless young adults is confounded by access issues which make this population difficult to study- issues such as that they are transient, are difficult to find, and are involved in fewer social service and medical service agencies than other homeless youth due to their status as adults.

**The YES study focuses on how the life experiences of Arizona's homeless young adults (ages 18-25) increases their risk for experiencing human trafficking.**

This study targeted homeless young adults in multiple settings including transitional housing, drop-in centers, and on the streets of Tucson and Phoenix.

A seven-page paper survey was distributed to homeless young adults over two weeks in July 2019 by staff from the above mentioned homeless young adult serving partner agencies. This report includes the findings from all of the participants including details about their homelessness experiences, substance use, mental and medical health history, family challenges, as well as risk and protective factors. The sex trafficking and labor exploitation experiences of the participants are also discussed, and a comparison of the trafficked versus non-trafficked participants is provided. Finally, notable trends over the six-year YES data collection are highlighted. Finally, future research and targeted service provision recommendations are discussed.

# SUMMARY

## OF FINDINGS

### STATUS OF HOMELESS YOUNG ADULTS IN ARIZONA IN THE 2019 YOUTH EXPERIENCES SURVEY

#### PARTICIPANT PROFILE

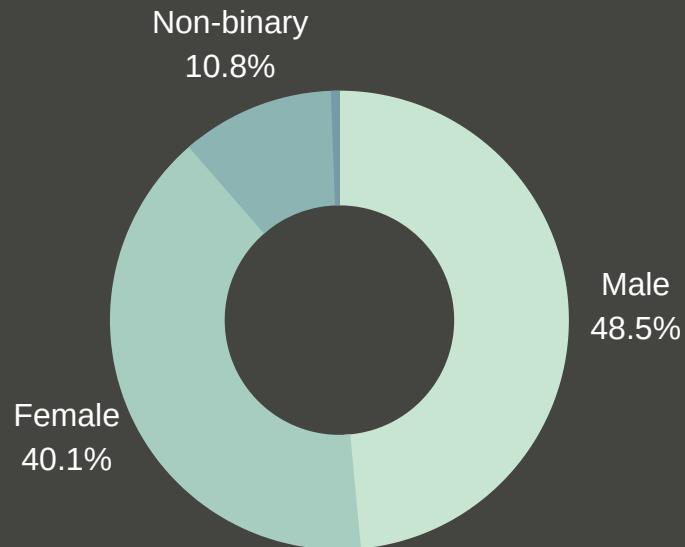
N = 167

- 167 participants responded to the Youth Experiences Survey in 2019.
- The average age of the 167 homeless young adult participants was 20.9 years old.
- Males represented 48.5% of the participants, followed by females at 40.1%, non-conforming at 4.2%, transgender at 3.6%, genderqueer at 1.2%, two-spirit at 1.2%, and other at 0.6%.
- Participants identified as heterosexual (43.1%) and LGBTQ (45.5%).
- 70.1% of the participants were raised in the state of Arizona, and the others were from 16 other states.

**20.9**  
years

Average age of participants

### Gender



**45.5%**  
identified as LGBTQ

# YES 2019 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

- The average age of the participants' first homelessness experience was 15.8 years of age.
- The participants reported experiencing an average of four periods of homelessness during their lifetimes.

Participants reported currently living in:



Transitional housing program  
(n = 42, 25.1%)



Shelter  
(n = 37, 22.2%)



Streets  
(n = 31, 18.6%)



Couch-surfing  
(n = 22, 13.2%)



Hotel  
(n = 3, 1.8%)

## CHALLENGES AND RISK FACTORS



Drug use was reported by over half of the sample (n = 99, 59.3%), with the most frequently used drugs reported including marijuana (n = 60, 35.9%) and methamphetamines (n = 16, 9.6%).



Over half (n = 91, 54.5%) of the participants reported engaging in self-harm behaviors.



A suicide attempt was reported by over two out of every five (n = 70, 41.9%) participants.

Two out of every three (n = 107, 64.1%) participants reported a current mental health diagnosis, and over half (n = 90, 53.9%) reported having more than one mental health diagnosis.



The most common mental health diagnoses reported by participants included depression (n = 78, 46.7%) and anxiety (n = 75, 44.9%).

# YES 2019 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## CHALLENGES AND RISK FACTORS



Over half ( $n = 90$ , 53.9%) of the participants reported experiencing a current medical problem. The most common medical problems reported included poor vision ( $n = 42$ , 25.1%), asthma ( $n = 33$ , 19.8%), and dental problems ( $n = 33$ , 19.8%).



Fifty-six percent ( $n = 94$ ) of the participants reported being kicked out of their homes by their families.



Over half ( $n = 93$ , 55.7%) of participants reported running away from home.

## ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

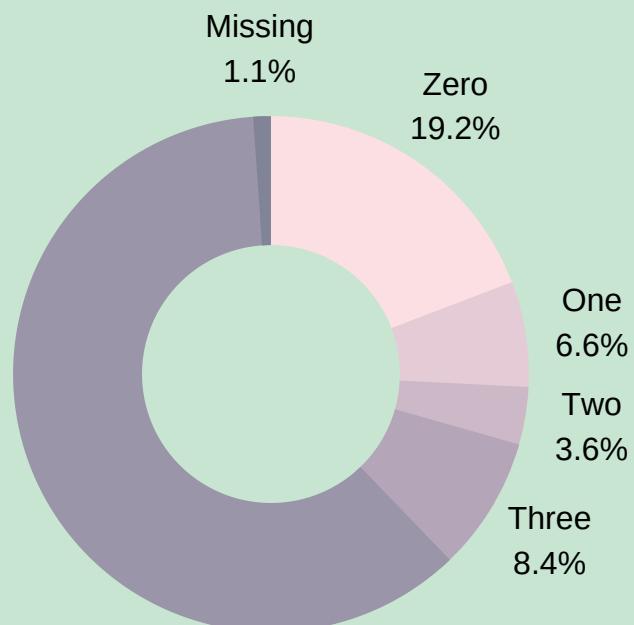
- Participants had an average of 4.5 ACEs.
- 37.7% ( $n = 63$ ) of participants had experienced between zero and three ACEs.
- Over half ( $n = 102$ , 61.1%) of participants had experienced four or more ACEs.



Almost half ( $n = 80$ , 47.9%) of participants reported experiencing emotional childhood abuse.

Over one in every three ( $n = 57$ , 34.1%) participants reported experiencing physical abuse by a parent/guardian before the age of 18.

About one in every three ( $n = 55$ , 32.9%) participants reported experiencing sexual abuse by a parent/guardian before the age of 18.



# STATUS OF HOMELESS YOUNG ADULT VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN ARIZONA

## SEX TRAFFICKING FINDINGS (N = 65)

Of the 167 homeless young adult participants, 65 (38.9%) reported experiencing sex trafficking exploitation, and 72 (43.1%) reported experiencing labor exploitation. At least one form of human trafficking (either sex or labor) was reported by 89 (53.3%) participants, and 47 (28.1%) participants reported experiencing both sex and labor exploitation.

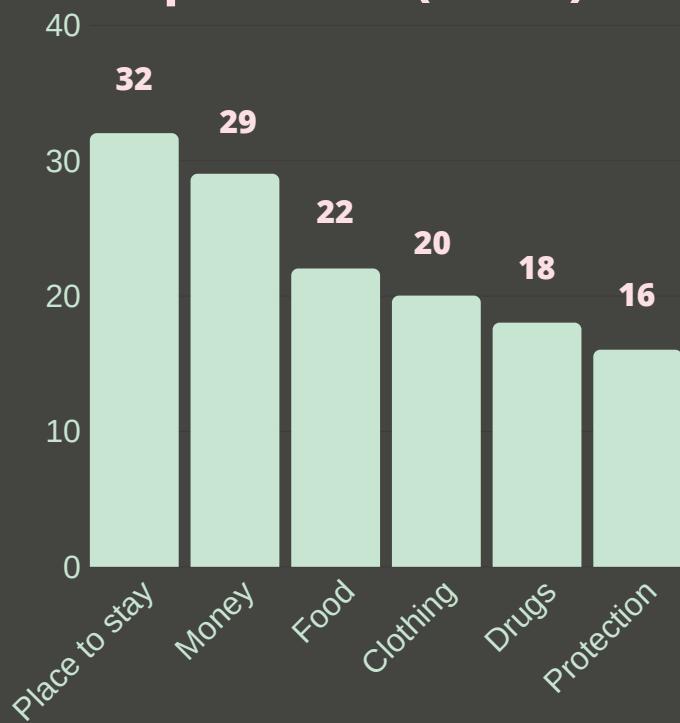
### SEX TRAFFICKING FINDINGS (N = 65)

- Thirty-two (47.8%) of the female participants self-reported that they had experienced sex trafficking.
- Twenty-one (25.9%) of the male participants self-reported that they had experienced sex trafficking.
- The average age of first sex trafficking experience was 14.2 years old, with 60% (n= 39) reporting that they were sex trafficked before the age of 18.
- Eighty-nine percent (n = 58) of the participants who reported being sex trafficked reported that they had at some point had a sex trafficker, with 3.1% (n = 2) of the participants reporting the current presence of a sex trafficker.
- The most common reasons identified by the 65 participants that reported sex trafficking victimization was for a place to stay (n = 32, 50%), for money (n = 29, 44.6%), and for food (n = 22, 33.8%).

**14.2**  
years

Average age of 1st sex trafficking victimization

### Sex Trafficking Experiences (n = 65)



**58.5%**  
identified as LGBTQ

# STATUS OF HOMELESS YOUNG ADULT VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN ARIZONA

## SEX TRAFFICKING FINDINGS (N = 65)

### Comparing Sex Trafficked and Non-Sex Trafficked Young Adults

When comparing the sex trafficked homeless young adult participants with the non-sex trafficked homeless young adult participants, the sex trafficked group was found to be significantly more likely to:

- Identify as LGBTQ.
- Engage in self-harming behaviors.
- Report mental health diagnoses and more than one mental health diagnosis, including Depression, PTSD, Schizophrenia, and Borderline Personality Disorder.
- Report history of suicide attempts.
- Report having a medical issue, specifically asthma.
- Witness domestic violence in the household, with both father hitting mother and mother hitting father.
- Experience abuse in a domestic violence relationship.
- Be the abuser in a domestic violence relationship.
- Experience each of the ten Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).
- Experience four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).
- Experience emotional childhood abuse by parent/guardian.
- Experience physical abuse by a parent/guardian.
- Experience sexual abuse by a parent/guardian as a child (12 and under).
- Experience sexual abuse by a parent/guardian as an adolescent (13-17).
- Experience bullying and harassment by school peers.

# STATUS OF HOMELESS YOUNG ADULT VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN ARIZONA

## LABOR EXPLOITATION FINDINGS (N = 72)

**16.4**  
years

Average age of 1st labor exploitation victimization

### Labor Exploitation Most Common Sectors (n = 72)



Drug selling  
n = 11, 15.3%



Domestic servitude  
n = 8, 11.1%



Petty theft  
n = 8, 11.1%

### LABOR EXPLOITATION FINDINGS (N = 72)

- Seventy-two (43.1%) of the participants (N = 167) reported experiencing labor exploitation.
- Twenty-eight (41.8%) female participants reported experiencing labor exploitation.
- Thirty-five (43.2%) male participants reported experiencing labor exploitation.
- The average age of first labor exploitation experience was 16.4 years old, with 40.3% (n = 29) reporting that they were exploited for labor before the age of 18.
- Eighty-one percent (n= 58) of the participants who reported being exploited for labor reported that they had at some point had a labor exploiter, with 8.3% (n = 6) of the participants reporting the current presence of a labor exploiter.
- The most common sectors that participants reported experiencing labor exploitation included: drug selling (n = 11, 15.3%), domestic servitude (n = 8, 11.1%), and petty theft (n = 8, 11.1%).

# STATUS OF HOMELESS YOUNG ADULT VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN ARIZONA

## LABOR EXPLOITATION FINDINGS (N = 72)

### Comparing Labor Exploited and Non-Labor Exploited Young Adults

When comparing the labor exploited homeless young adult participants with the non-labor exploited homeless young adult participants, the labor exploited group was found to be significantly more likely to:

- Engage in self-harming behavior.
- Report mental health diagnoses and more than one mental health diagnosis, including Depression, ADD/ADHD, PTSD, and Schizophrenia.
- Report history of suicide attempts.
- Report having a medical issue, specifically asthma, dental problems, and chronic pain.
- Witness domestic violence in their household.
- Experience abuse in a domestic violence relationship and be the abuser in a domestic violence relationship.
- Experience sex trafficking victimization.
- Experience nine out of the ten Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).
- Experience four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).
- Experience bullying and harassment by peers.
- Be expelled from school.
- Be affiliated with a gang.
- Experience sexual abuse by a parent/guardian as a child (12 and under).
- Experience sexual abuse by a parent/guardian as an adolescent (13-17).
- Experience physical abuse by a parent/guardian.

# KEY FINDINGS



The 2019 Youth Experiences Survey (YES) Study marks six years of collecting data on homeless young adults in the state of Arizona. From year to year, the YES study continues to demonstrate the incredible challenges that homeless young adults, ages 18 to 25, face in the state of Arizona. This is a unique population, just aging out of childhood and no longer having access to the same protections and supports afforded to minors, but perhaps not aware of the array of resources available to them. Coupled with the challenging life histories, this population has many needs, including rehabilitation from substance abuse, mental health and medical support, housing, and therapeutic services.

Significant findings from the 2019 YES Study include the record number of participants that reported being raised in the state of Arizona, signifying that this is a critical issue to tackle in this state. Family disconnection was of particular significance this year, with one in four participants reporting feeling unsafe in their home environment, and over half of participants reporting being kicked out of their homes by family members or guardians. The violence that participants witnessed and experienced was great, including witnessing domestic violence in the home, and experiencing physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. These experiences seem to contribute to important negative outcomes for participants.

**From year to year, the Youth Experiences Survey continues to demonstrate the incredible challenges that homeless young adults, ages 18 to 25, face in the state of Arizona.**

Participants who witnessed domestic violence in their homes were significantly more likely to experience domestic violence in a romantic relationship of their own. Similarly, participants who experienced sexual abuse under the age of 18 years old were significantly more likely to report sex trafficking victimization.

Of the overall sample of 167 homeless young adult participants, 65 (38.9%) reported experiencing sex trafficking exploitation, and 72 (43.1%) reported experiencing labor exploitation. At least one form of human trafficking (either sex or labor) was reported by 89 (53.3%) participants, and 37 (28.1%) participants reported experiencing both sex trafficking and labor exploitation. These represent the highest numbers of reported human trafficking victimization in the history of the YES Study.

# YES 2019 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## SEX TRAFFICKING AGE 12 AND UNDER

An interesting finding from the 2019 YES study that is different from years past is the number of participants that reported experiencing their first sex trafficking victimization at the age 12 years old or younger. Almost one in four ( $n = 16$ , 24.6%) of the 65 participants who reported experiencing sex trafficking also reported that they experienced their first sex trafficking victimization at or below the age of 12 years old. Although there were not enough in the sample to conduct statistical analyses to compare the experiences of these victims with those who experienced first sex trafficking victimization at age thirteen or older, the life experiences and outcomes of this group are startling, including:

- The average age of first drug use at 11.8 years old
- 93.8% ( $n = 15$ ) reporting a history of suicide attempts
- 100% ( $n = 16$ ) reporting at least one mental health diagnosis
- 93.8% ( $n = 15$ ) reporting more than one mental health diagnosis
- 87.5% ( $n = 14$ ) reporting four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

## LABOR EXPLOITATION

The labor exploited participants reported experiencing exploitation in various labor sectors, but the most common included drug related jobs, domestic servitude, and petty theft. These forms of labor exploitation are challenging to detect and interdict, because these forms of “work” often include labor for an individual rather than a company and may entail working within the confines of the exploiter’s place of residence.

For jobs such as drug-related jobs and petty theft, exploiters are involving victims in forced criminality, defined as “the enticing, forcing, or coercing a victim to commit other crimes. These crimes can include any crime but have most often been identified by victims as including shoplifting, theft, robbing sex buying customers, recruiting and trafficking other victims, transporting or dealing illegal drugs, pick-pocketing, and selling of stolen items” (Roe-Sepowitz, 2019). Forced criminality often keeps a victim from trying to leave or seek help because the victim has become complicit in a crime, and the exploiter is now able to use this as further means to control and exploit the victim.

# YES 2019 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the 2019 YES Study continue to highlight the significant challenges that homeless young adults face in the state of Arizona face. Traumatic life histories that include violence, exploitation, and lack of critical supports may be contributing to the participant's current housing instability. Resources, such as mental health and medical interventions, are a critical need for this population, as well as supportive housing opportunities. The significant number of homeless young adults that reported experiencing sex or labor exploitation demands the implementation of a screening tool in all points of contact for this population. To meet this demand, it is recommended that homeless serving programs implement specific services or referral protocols to best serve identified trafficking victims.

The findings of this study are obtained from a sample of the population that is already seeking services, and obtaining access to homeless young adults that are not connected to social service agencies is a challenge. Homeless young adults may interact with many businesses, organizations, or systems, whether they are seeking social services or not. This highlights the need for continued training of the community to spot warning signs of human trafficking, and the implementation of a screening tool to assess for trafficking that can be used across disciplines. Arizona should continue to identify the greatest gaps in services, such as housing for males and non-binary individuals, LGBTQ specific shelter services, treating trauma symptoms and experiences, and the ability to identify of labor trafficking situations.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

[www.socialwork.asu.edu/stir](http://www.socialwork.asu.edu/stir)  
[www.sextraffickinghelp.com](http://www.sextraffickinghelp.com)



### DOMINIQUE ROE SEPOWITZ

Dominique Roe-Sepowitz | Director  
602-496-0093  
[dominique.roe@asu.edu](mailto:dominique.roe@asu.edu)



**Office of  
Sex Trafficking  
Intervention  
Research**  
**Arizona State  
University**