



Sexual Abuse is the Norm for the Homeless

By Dearra Schumichen

A three-year study conducted by Covenant House revealed statistics of how common trafficking of the homeless is between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five. 911 individuals across multiple states that participated in an interview revealed that between 2014 and 2017 nearly one in five young homeless people were victims of human trafficking. Many of these young adults were coerced, manipulated, or threatened to stay in the business. The face of trafficking isn't obvious, like the common misconception of the masked kidnapper with his getaway van. 91% of those trafficked said they were lured in by false propositions of employment.

A trafficking awareness organization, End Slavery Tennessee, says that the most common picks for trafficking are those in vulnerable situations, typically the homeless or runaway youth. Teenagers and young adults are especially vulnerable to being preyed on by traffickers, most likely due to their lack of experience on the streets. The NSVRC reports that one-third of runaway teens will be recruited by a pimp within 48 hours and the typical age of entry into the industry is twelve for girls and thirteen for boys. Interestingly, sexual abuse is also the biggest cause for homelessness among girls (61%) who would rather live on the streets than face their abuser at home.

Homeless individuals willingly participating in the sex trade aren't more safe than trafficked ones. The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) reports that anywhere from 32% to 46% of women involved in prostitution experienced forced sex or sexual acts. Some homeless also engage in what is termed survival sex; the exchange of sex for food, housing, drugs, or other needs instead of money. However, it is arguable that for any homeless person, prostitution is a form of survival sex given the high risk of violence within the profession.

Those who are mentally ill or identify as LGBTQ are also at-risk individuals for sexual violence. An astounding 97% of mentally ill homeless women will be a victim of some form of violence in their lifetime. In Covenant House's trafficking data, 29% of LGBT youth were victims versus the 17% reported by heterosexual youth. Due to the negative stigma surrounding homosexuality and nonconforming gender identity many of those who identify as LGBT suffer from mental illness as well, and the combination of the two may increase an individual's likelihood to experience sexual violence.

Given the numerous studies and high percentages of sexual abuse, it is safe to say that sexual assault, rape, and trafficking is a rampant problem homeless communities face. Part of the tragedy comes from the fact that many homeless individuals, namely women and LGBT people, can return home but don't because abuse is what pushed them out onto the streets in the first place. As for the frequency of sexual violence in the homeless community, many can't or won't find justice for themselves because the abuser is often the one supplying the victim with basic needs or is a stranger the victim may never meet again.

If you would like to combat sexual abuse within homeless communities, the organizations listed in this article accept donations.

References

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