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## College-Aged but On the Streets: Young Adults Who Experience Homelessness and Sexual Violence

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### College Isn't a Reality for Everyone

The national attention on campus sexual assault has sparked conversations across the country about the needs of sexual assault survivors aged 18-24 who attend college. However, many people aged 18-24 do not attend college, but women in that age group still experience the highest rate of sexual assault than any other age group (Sinozich & Langton 2014). College enrollment is at the lowest it has been since 2003 (Norris, 2014), so a significant number of people from the age group most at risk for sexual violence do not benefit from the increased attention on campus sexual assault. Although campus sexual assault needs the attention it is receiving, a recent study from the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that between 1995 and 2013, young women aged 18-24 *not* enrolled in college were 1.2 times more likely to experience rape or sexual assault than were women in the same age group attending college (Sinozich & Langton 2014). There is not a comparable study of young men available and although services for young adults, specifically young women, on campus have increased, data and services for young adults in general are underdeveloped leading us to extrapolate data regarding young adults from the research on young women. The research available on young men indicate that 16% of men are sexually abused by age 18 (Dube, S.R. et al 2005) while most female victims experience sexual assault



before age 25 (Black, M.C. et al, 2011). With these statistics in mind, we must think about expanding and improving services for young adults who do not attend college since it isn't a reality for everyone.

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This series will explore different populations of young adults and potential strategies for reaching young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 who are not attending a college or university. This paper will explore young adults experiencing homelessness and sexual violence. Future papers will address topics such as addressing sexual violence in low wage jobs, vocational and unemployment training programs, and in community college environments.

## **Young Adults, Homelessness, and Sexual Violence**

Many young people, such as young adults experiencing homelessness, may not have the opportunity to attend college. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress in 2015 reported that there were over 36,000 homeless young adults on the streets nightly, 87% of whom were 18-24 (Henry, 2015). Young adults who are homeless are often fleeing their home due to abuse, sexual violence, or their family rejecting their sexual identity. 61% of girls and 16% of boys report sexual abuse at home as reason for running away (Estes & Weiner, 2001), and 46% of young adults reported running away due to rejection of their sexual identity (Durso & Gates 2012). Running away from abuse and living on the streets puts these young adults at an increased risk of additional assaults. In one study regarding homeless and marginally housed individuals, 32% of women, 27% of men, and 38% of transgendered persons reported either physical or sexual violence within the

past year (Kushel, 2003). Additionally, national data finds that 18% of women and 1% of men will be raped during their lifetime (Black, et al, 2011), while one study found that 56% of homeless women and 14% of homeless men will be raped during their lifetime (Jasinski, 2005). Clearly, homeless individuals are at far greater risk of sexual assault than the general population. Although some of the studies cited define young adults as 18 and younger, while others define young adults up to age 20 or 24, and yet others cite lifetime prevalence, all the data points to a population of young adults struggling to survive life on the streets.

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Living on the streets poses many risks and health consequences that can affect an individual for a lifetime. “Compared to their non-homeless peers, homeless youth are at increased risk of physical and sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, chemical and alcohol dependency, mental health problems, and early mortality” (Quintana, et al, 2010, p. 5). Higher rates of HIV, hypertension, and asthma also occur at higher rates among the homeless population (Zlotnick et al, 2013). Accessing health care and medication to address these health concerns is an added obstacle for homeless individuals, often leaving illnesses and even small health issues to become worse and progress faster. In addition to health challenges, we know that homeless young adults face numerous other challenges as they approach and live through traditional college age years.

Many homeless young adults may not have been able to graduate from high school or may have poor grades due to the trauma of living on the streets, both of which prevent them from attending college. If they slept on a park bench, sought refuge in a coffee shop, or traded sex for a place to sleep, they may be criminally charged. All of these issues coupled with the fact that homeless young adults have little access to job training impacts their potential to attain gainful employment and secure housing in the future.

Sexual violence occurs in various forms in the lives of homeless young adults. Young adults are often homeless due to escaping sexual abuse at home (Estes & Weiner, 2001) and the younger they are when they escape increases their likelihood of being sexually victimized while living on the streets (Tyler et al., 2004).

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Trying to survive in homeless shelters and on the streets is extremely stressful and dangerous, as it carries the threat of being a victim of a variety of crimes, including sexual violence. Shelters can be especially dangerous for LGBTQ individuals. One study found that over half of the homeless transgender individuals accessing shelters faced harassment from other shelter residents or staff and 22% were sexually assaulted by residents or shelter staff (Grant, 2011). This study unfortunately illustrates that perpetrators of sexual violence could be professionals who should be helping homeless youth. Other perpetrators include intimate partners, friends and acquaintances living in shelters or on the streets together, and pimps and sex traffickers who sexually exploit up to 300,000 homeless young adults annually (Estes & Weiner, 2001). Additionally, “protectors” who may have been trusted partners when engaging in “couch surfing” or survival sex (Dank, 2015) could potentially turn into perpetrators.

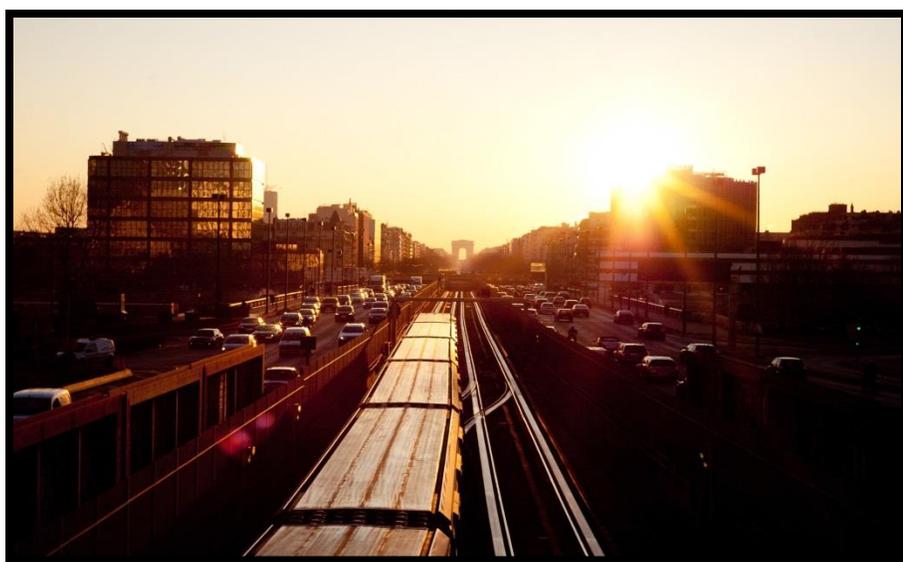
## **Survival Sex for Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness Is Often Coercive in Nature**

A major aspect in the lives of homeless young adults is the reality of survival sex. Survival sex is exchanging sex for shelter, food, money, clothes, protection, or other

necessities to meet basic needs to survive (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009). Survival sex is often coercive in nature, though young adults might not initially identify it as coercive or abusive. Homeless young adults may feel like they are making a choice to offer sexual acts to meet their basic needs. Even if they have few options left for a place to sleep or money for a meal, they may feel some control over their bodies if they are able to have power in the negotiation. What may begin as a choice to engage in survival sex often escalates to being forced into sex, as perpetrators take advantage of the desperation of surviving homelessness.

More than one in three young adults engage in survival sex, and LGBTQ young adults are three times more likely to engage in it (Cray, Miller, & Durso 2013). Of the young adults that reported they engaged in survival sex, 48% said they were trading sex for food or shelter (National Network for Youth, n.d.). As one survivor described, “I was turning tricks for a place to stay, a shower, a hot meal” (Sharp, 2015). These statistics and survivor experiences demonstrate that homeless young adults are being further traumatized by being coerced into sexual acts to survive living on the streets.

LGBTQ homeless young adults are even more at risk for this coercion, as they are more likely to be approached to exchange sex for shelter or money (Van Leeuwen, 2006).



# The Intersection of Multiple Oppressions Put Young People of Color and LGBTQ Young Adults at Greater Risk

Young adults from the LGBTQ community who are homeless face multiple oppressions, as described in *Surviving the Streets of New York: Experiences of LGBTQ Youth, YMSM, and YWSW Engaged in Survival Sex (2015)*:

Regardless of the exact number, the limited literature on LGBTQ youth engagement in survival sex reveals that such youth are likely to share several common experiences before exchanging sex for money and/or material goods. These experiences may include racism, family poverty, homelessness and its associated stigma, lack of adequate or safe housing options, lack of access to gender-affirming medical care, and rejection and discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity by families, communities, and employers (Bigelsen and Vuotto 2013; Gwadz et al. 2009; Lankenau et al. 2005; NYCAHSIYO 2012; Rees 2010; Wilson et al. 2009). Additionally, LGBTQ youth experience homophobic and transphobic harassment, discrimination, and physical violence within the child welfare and foster care systems, emergency, short-, and long-term shelters, and from health care providers, social services, law enforcement, and other government institutions (NYCAHSIYO 2012; Ray 2006; YWEP 2012).

The most marginalized young adults experience a disproportionate amount of sexual violence. Perpetrators of sexual violence target the most vulnerable individuals and individuals who are less likely to be believed if the assault is reported. Young people of color are also more likely to be engaged in survival sex than white young adults (Edwards, Iritani, and Hallfors 2006; Grant et al. 2011; Tyler 2009; Walls and Bell 2011; Wilson et al. 2009; YWEP 2009). A young person of color engaging in survival sex is not likely to be believed if they report being raped, and perpetrators know that and use this manifestation of oppressions to their advantage.

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The multiple oppressions faced by these populations manifest in different ways. It may manifest as a transgender young adult facing discrimination while trying to procure a bed at a homeless shelter or police not believing their report of sexual assault because they have been arrested for prostitution while engaging in survival sex. Many cities criminalize homelessness by passing and enforcing laws and codes for sleeping on benches, in cars, or tents, pushing them further into the margins and putting them more at risk for sexual violence. In fact, LGBTQ young adults are incarcerated at higher rates due to these laws and codes criminalizing the homeless population (Quintana, et al, 2010). Sexual assault service providers must address these multiple forms of oppression and trauma including advocating for survivors when they are defendants in criminal cases in order to help young adults escape homelessness and begin to heal from sexual violence.

## Strategies for Advocacy

Advocacy is at its strongest when we combine individual support with systems change. There are several ways advocates can enhance their direct services to young adults who are homeless *and* work with community partners to improve the systems' responses. These strategies must acknowledge that traditional service delivery such as hotlines or support group may not be effective for young adults who are homeless.

### Provide Early Intervention

There is a relationship between child sexual abuse and homelessness, as homeless young adults report experiencing child sexual abuse five times more often than children living in secure environments (Ray, 2006). Intervening early is key. Sexual assault advocacy programs can:

- Strengthen their capacity to respond to children who are sexually abused.
- Connect the occurrence of child sexual abuse to homelessness and the risk of further victimization to advocate for funding for homeless outreach and affordable housing.
- Collaborate with programs serving homeless young adults and/or families to offer trauma informed services for child and young adult survivors of sexual abuse.
- Partner with foster care programs to advocate for after-care and transitional services for young adults aging out of the system.

### **Partner with Homeless Shelters & Homeless Health Clinics**

Homeless shelters and clinics are often not equipped to screen for sexual assault or provide sexual assault services. Sexual assault programs can partner with homeless shelters and health clinics to:

- Educate staff on how to screen and refer survivors.
- Educate staff about trauma informed services.
- Offer support groups, advocacy, and/or counseling on site.
- Advocate together for funding for affordable housing and prioritizing rapid rehousing options for young adults.
- Advocate together for the decriminalization of homeless individuals while also providing advocacy for homeless survivors who have faced criminal charges.

### **Address Oppression**

To address sexual violence against homeless young adults, sexual assault programs must address multiple oppressions within institutions such as:

- Practices within social service agencies that bar individuals who may have been convicted of crimes like prostitution, loitering, sleeping in public spaces, etc. from their services,

- Attitudes within law enforcement that blame victims or don't take sexual assault reports from people of color, LGBTQ youth, or homeless young adults seriously,
- Homeless shelter policies that decide what gender a person is and assign them to the sex-segregated shelter rather than allowing the survivor to self-identify, and
- Systemic racial discrimination in hiring practices, housing application processes, and social services that increases the risk of people of color becoming homeless.

### **Engage in Systems Advocacy on Survival Sex**

One of the important areas of systems advocacy is changing the criminal legal response to young adults who engage in survival sex. Sexual assault programs can:

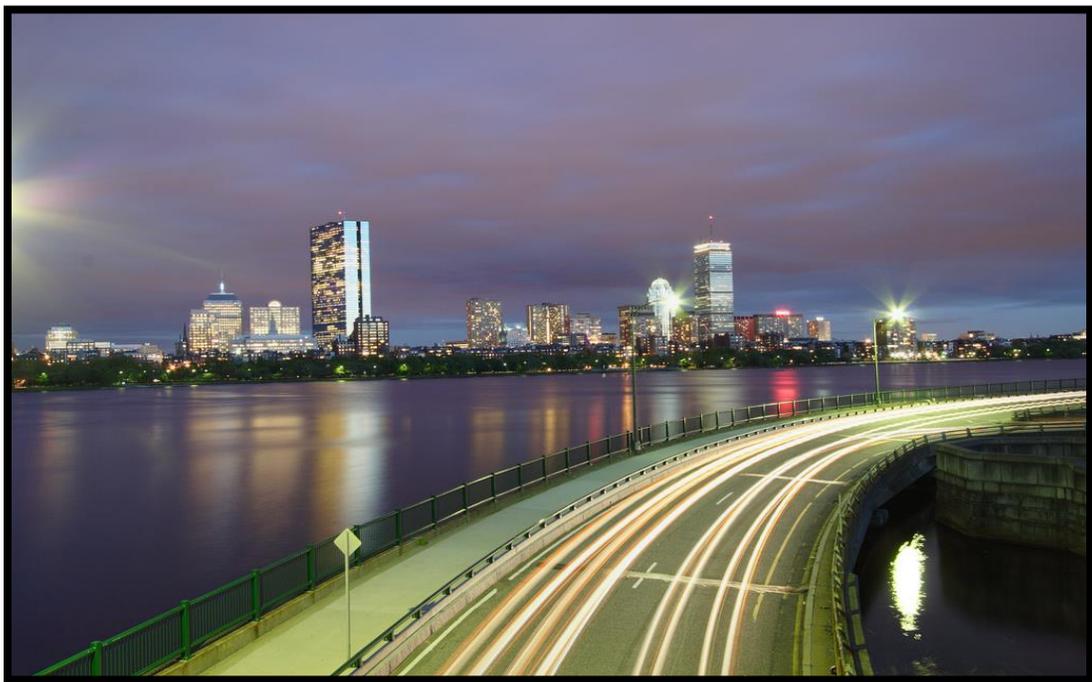
- Educate their staff about the dynamics of survival sex,
- Educate law enforcement and other service providers about the dynamics of survival sex,
- Advocate for services as an alternative to arrest for young adults engaged in survival sex, and
- Partner with trafficking organizations to address sexual exploitation of young adults.

## **There is Hope for Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness and Sexual Violence**

Sexual assault service providers across the country are uniquely positioned to provide support and hope to homeless young adults experiencing sexual violence. Although there is a lot of attention regarding campus sexual assault, survivors on and off campus ought to benefit from the supportive services provided by sexual assault programs. Advocates have an obligation to reach and respond to young adults wherever they may be living their lives. Young adults experiencing homelessness and sexual violence face barriers like a lack of access to safe shelter, not being believed by law enforcement, and

discrimination based on their gender identity or race. Combined with these barriers, carrying the trauma of childhood sexual abuse, and the toll surviving the streets takes on their mental, emotional, and physical health, it is evident that as a field, we must do more to reach this population.

Sexual assault programs can do more by working to build formal collaborative partnerships with homeless organizations and youth organizations to better reach this population. Sexual assault programs can do more by working to dismantle institutional barriers homeless young adult survivors face, especially ones that disproportionately affect survivors from the LGBTQ community and survivors from communities of color. In addressing these institutional barriers faced by young adults experiencing homelessness and sexual violence, sexual assault programs are also addressing barriers that perpetuate sexual violence, which leads to hope for all survivors.



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## Resources

Colorlines Article: Homeless Youth in Focus

<http://www.colorlines.com/articles/homeless-youth-focus>

Housing, Homelessness, and Sexual Violence Statistics

[www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/NSAC11\\_Handouts/NSAC11\\_Handout\\_With\\_Statistics.pdf](http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/NSAC11_Handouts/NSAC11_Handout_With_Statistics.pdf)

Housing and Sexual Violence Research Brief

[www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications\\_NSVRC\\_ResearchBrief\\_housing-and-sexual-violence\\_0.pdf](http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_NSVRC_ResearchBrief_housing-and-sexual-violence_0.pdf)

Identifying and Preventing Gender Bias in Law Enforcement Response to Sexual Assault Domestic Violence

<https://www.justice.gov/opa/file/799366/download>

Linking the Roads: Working with Youth Who Experience Homelessness and Sexual Violence

[www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications\\_nsvrc-publications-guides-linking-roads-working-youth-who-experience-homelessness\\_0.pdf](http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc-publications-guides-linking-roads-working-youth-who-experience-homelessness_0.pdf)

National Alliance to End Homelessness

[www.endhomelessness.org/](http://www.endhomelessness.org/)

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force: An Epidemic of Homeless Youth

[http://www.thetaskforce.org/static\\_html/downloads/HomelessYouth.pdf](http://www.thetaskforce.org/static_html/downloads/HomelessYouth.pdf)

National Health Care for the Homeless Council  
[www.nhchc.org](http://www.nhchc.org)

No Safe Place: Sexual Assault in the Lives of Homeless Women  
[www.vawnet.org/applied-research-papers/print-document.php?doc\\_id=558](http://www.vawnet.org/applied-research-papers/print-document.php?doc_id=558)

Resource Sharing Project White Paper: Coalitions' Role in Ending Sex Trafficking  
<http://www.resourcesharingproject.org/coalitions-role-ending-human-trafficking>

Resource Sharing Project White Paper: Strong Foundation for Healing: Shelter and Sexual Violence  
[www.resourcesharingproject.org/content/white-paper-shelter-and-sexual-violence](http://www.resourcesharingproject.org/content/white-paper-shelter-and-sexual-violence)

Surviving Sexual Violence on the Streets  
[www.victimrights.org/surviving-sexual-violence](http://www.victimrights.org/surviving-sexual-violence)

Surviving the Streets of New York: Experiences of LGBTQ Youth, YMSM, and YWSW Engaged in Survival Sex  
[www.urban.org/sites/default/files/alfresco/publication-pdfs/2000119-Surviving-the-Streets-of-New-York.pdf](http://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/alfresco/publication-pdfs/2000119-Surviving-the-Streets-of-New-York.pdf)

**The Sexual Assault Services Program (SASP) Technical Assistance Project**, a program of the Resource Sharing Project, provides comprehensive technical assistance including tailored resources and assistance to support state administrators, state sexual assault coalitions, and sexual assault centers in their Sexual Assault Services Formula Grant Program implementation work. The SASP TA Project helps improve the capacity of OVV grantees and partners to ensure high quality services for sexual assault survivors across the lifespan by providing assistance in a variety of formats including consultations, site visits, webinars, newsletters, white papers, and a national meeting. For more information and resources, visit <http://www.resourcesharingproject.org/sexual-assault-services-program>

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