

“Predators know they can target young people because they need a place to stay.”

— JERI, SURVIVOR

Whether she was coaxed away, ran away or thrown away, she is a prime target for exploiters. It might start with sex in exchange for shelter and continue with a trafficker who uses housing as control.

The majority of girls arrested for running away are trying to escape abuse.

When a girl leaves home or foster care, she is usually running away from something with hopes for a better life. When they are on the streets without food or shelter, homeless girls have a high risk of entering the Life.

As the challenge of living on the streets intensifies, girls become increasingly vulnerable.

A woman's need for shelter, food, clothing and protection is easily exploited by traffickers. Women with children are even more vulnerable. She may start to feel her exploiter is offering everything she needs: stability, shelter, food and even a loving relationship.

For girls and women in the Life, it's easy to feel trapped in a housing paradox.

If lack of housing drove her into prostitution, those same housing systems deny her shelter as a result of her criminal record. Yet she needs safe housing to just imagine getting out of the Life. She also needs services to help her along the way including mental health counseling, addiction services, job training, life skills, and access to education or legal services.

At higher risk.

LGBTQ kids, who may have left an abusive home or one where they weren't accepted, face greater job discrimination and even fewer safety nets from their home communities. Girls of color who run away are at particular risk. A recent study shows that adults see black girls as less childlike and innocent.¹

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The greatest challenge I have when working with runaway girls is that I can't replicate everything that a pimp provides—at least not right away. The money, the stuff, the sense of belonging, the affection. How can I create that bond quickly?

— MEL, RUNAWAY SHELTER DIRECTOR

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70%

Approximately 70% of homeless youth engage in prostitution in order to meet their daily needs, according to one study.²

The Life Story

MOMENTS OF CHANGE.

Sharing the voices of survivors of sexual exploitation. Revealing the opportunities we all have to create a better world for girls and women.

RUNAWAY & HOUSING

STEPS TOWARD CHANGE

How can already burdened organizations devoted to addressing housing and serving homeless girls and women serve the additional needs of those experiencing sexual exploitation?

● Create protective relationships.

A runaway seeking help will intersect with many service providers. Adults in foster care, group homes, shelters and neighborhoods can build nurturing relationships with homeless children that are truly supportive. She needs to hear a consistent message from all who support her: she is valued, she is in control, and she won't be hurt or locked up.

● Encircle her with connected resources.

Whether they focus on education, youth services or sexual assault, service agencies are often competing for the same scarce resources. New policy and budgeting approaches, as well as task forces that cross siloes, can empower and incentivize collaboration to figure out the best way to link services and build a better safety net.

● Create specialized shelters and safe houses.

Similar to victims of domestic violence, women who are trying to leave the Life need more than a bed to sleep in. They need long-term services provided by trauma-informed practitioners who understand the unique needs of sexual exploitation victims.

● Change policies that keep housing out of reach.

Programs and policies that discriminate against women who have prostitution charges, or other charges related to their trafficking experiences, effectively keep women from escaping their situation. A scarcity of affordable and public housing means women have few options.

WHO CAN SHIFT THE SYSTEM?

Whether she's abused at home, disproportionately punished at school, experiencing homelessness, or under the control of a pimp, a girl or woman encounters many people who could make a difference.

TEACHERS

CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES
(CPS)

SHELTER STAFF & SURVIVOR
MENTORS

HOTEL AND MOTEL STAFF

MASS TRANSIT DRIVERS AND
OPERATORS

LAW ENFORCEMENT

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY
DEVELOPMENT FUNDERS

LANDLORDS



We desperately need housing options specific to this population. We need transitional housing, short-term and long-term, supportive and subsidized housing so women can be self-sufficient.

— ROBIN, SURVIVOR LEADER AND CASE MANAGER

1. Epstein, R., Blake, J. J., & González, T. (2017). *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*. Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality.

2. Estes, R. J., & Weiner, N. A. (2001). *The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada and Mexico: Final report (of the U.S. national study)*. University of Pennsylvania, School of Social Work.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The Life Story: Moments of Change shines a light on the realities of women in the sex trade, elevates their voices and experiences and highlights opportunity for change. This material is meant to inform and inspire those who work across the intersections of education, housing, public health, mental health and addiction services, economic and racial justice, and many other areas. **Learn more at:**