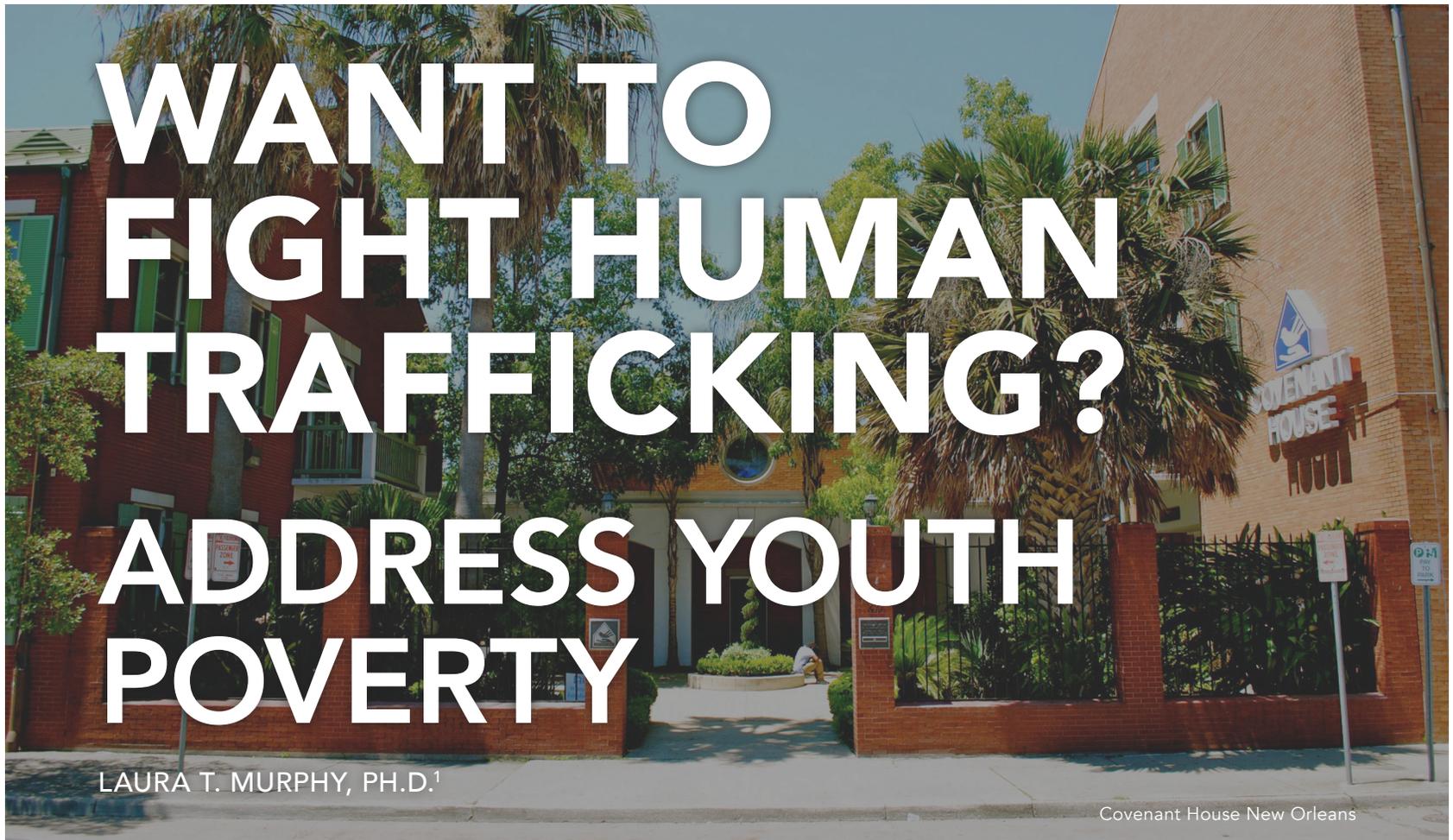


# JustSouth QUARTERLY



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# WANT TO FIGHT HUMAN TRAFFICKING? ADDRESS YOUTH POVERTY

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In this time of increasing partisanship and discord in the United States, there is one thing that people on the left and right seem to agree on, and that is the need to reduce human trafficking. The crime of trafficking is committed when someone compels a person to work through force, fraud, or coercion, or when someone engages a minor in a commercial sex act. Both sex and labor trafficking happen in every single state in the union, and it happens in a wide swath of industries—not only in the illicit sex and drug trades, but also in agriculture, door-to-door sales, construction, restaurants, and even teaching.

As attention to this issue increases, so does the desire to find a way to address it. Many states have significantly increased penalties imposed on convicted traffickers in the hopes that it would deter future predators. Legislators in the state of

Utah, where the use of firing squad was legalized in 2015, have gone so far as to attempt to make the death penalty available as a punishment for child sex traffickers.

While there is no doubt that trafficking in any form is a heinous crime, we cannot punish our way out of the fact that people are made vulnerable to forced labor because they are impoverished, lack a social support network, and are cut off from the services they need to access well-being and independence. While activists and legislators focus on intensely penalizing those caught for trafficking, they are doing little to provide potential, current, and former victims of trafficking what they need—a route out of poverty.

Researchers with Loyola University New Orleans' Modern Slavery Research Project interviewed over 640 homeless

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*Ms. Archie, a Covenant House Staffer, welcomes a young person*

youth in Covenant House shelters around the United States and Canada, including Ft. Lauderdale, St. Louis, and our own hometown of New Orleans. We found that, of the homeless youth we interviewed, nearly 1 in 5 had been trafficked either for sex or some other form of labor. Many people in those communities were surprised to learn that 8 percent of the youth we interviewed had been trafficked for labor in the drug trade, factories, domestic service, or agriculture. Because we tend to think of trafficking simply in terms of young women forced into the sex trade, it was also notable that we found that 11% of the young men we interviewed had been trafficked for sex in their lifetimes as well. What we learned is that regardless of sex, gender, race, religion, or nationality, homeless youth were extremely vulnerable to trafficking precisely because they were homeless.

Youth reported that their fear of sleeping on the streets left them vulnerable to sex and labor traffickers and to survival sex. Eighty-four percent of youth who reported engaging in the sex trade without a third-party controller (colloquially called a “pimp”) did so because of economic need. Securing housing was a primary concern for the vast majority of the youth we interviewed. Sixty-eight percent of the youth who had either been trafficked or engaged in survival sex or commercial sex had done so while homeless. Nineteen percent of all youth interviewed had engaged in survival sex solely so that they could access housing or food. This problem is even starker among those who were not sheltered. The incidence of trafficking among drop-in youth—sometimes called “street youth”—was high relative to the sheltered cohort: 24 percent were trafficked for sex, 13 percent for labor.

We asked the young people who had been trafficked what could have been done to prevent them from being trafficked and what young people with similar experiences need in order

to escape their traffickers. The young people we talked to were surprised that we asked them their opinions at all. Indeed, few people had ever asked them for their own thoughts on what they needed or what programs might work to help other youth who had been trafficked. As far as we know, few if any of the legislators deciding the fates of trafficked people and their exploiters have interacted extensively with survivors of trafficking to learn what we as a society should prioritize in our efforts to address this problem.

When asked what exploited and trafficked youth need, not one respondent in our study said they needed to see their traffickers punished—and certainly none of them mentioned increasing sentencing. While certainly justice is critical to some survivors’ recovery processes, the sort of prevention through punishment plan that legislators focus on was not at the front of the minds of the survivors with whom we spoke.

Instead, what young adult survivors of human trafficking told us was that they needed jobs and a living wage. The majority of those who were trafficked were seeking work opportunities when they were approached by their traffickers. In fact, 91 percent of the youth we interviewed had been approached by someone offering them a job opportunity that sounded (or turned out to be) too good to be true. Some of the young people were resilient against such offers. But too many others were so desperate for a reasonable wage or a place to stay that they were willing to take the risk of accepting a job, even when the offer seemed suspicious, dangerous, or even illegal. Others felt forced to turn to trading sex because they could not find legitimate work.

Indeed, the vast majority of the youth we interviewed indicated that they encountered people who took advantage of them when they were searching for work and housing. A lack of job opportunities converged with a lack of computer literacy and job skills and a lack of affordable housing to lead to vulnerability.

What did young trafficked people need to avoid and escape traffickers? They needed jobs and job skills. They sought training on how to identify a safe job and additional job skills training programs to help them avoid labor traffickers, sex traffickers, and other exploitative labor situations. They needed a living wage, so that when they did find work, they were able to afford rent and food. They needed a support system that could help them identify fraudulent offers and places to stay when they ran into trouble.

## ENDNOTE

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