



Milwaukee Youth in Crisis

A series of talks about issues facing Milwaukee's most vulnerable youth

MILWAUKEE'S SEX TRAFFICKING EPIDEMIC AND THE IMPACT OF RE-VICTIMIZATION ON OUR YOUTH

Overview

Milwaukee continues to be one of the nation's top sex trafficking hubs. The commonalities we see in youth experiencing sexual exploitation include Milwaukee's pervasive central city poverty, segregation, lack of housing that is affordable, low wage-earning potential, violence and generational trauma. But **what impact does how we talk about sex trafficking make on those who've experienced it?**

Whose job is it to care for those who've been exploited to make sure they aren't victimized further as they exit unsafe situations? It's everyone's job. And there are ways that individuals and systems can support those who've been exploited.

"There is a clear connection between youth homelessness and sex trafficking, which is why Pathfinders has made addressing sexual exploitation a top strategic priority."

**-Tim Baack
President & CEO
Pathfinders**

What is Sex Trafficking?

The legal definition of sex trafficking is: the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing or soliciting of a person for the purposes of a commercial sex act, in which the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age.

In reality, sex trafficking looks different to young people. It often looks like love, affection, attention and someone who finally makes them feel special, heard and seen. For many youth, the only resource or form of "payment" they have is the exchange of sex or sexual favors in exchange for a safe place to stay, food, transportation or a means to securing other basic needs.

What Factors Make Youth At-Risk for Sex Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation?

Homelessness, poverty, family dysfunction, childhood sexual abuse or other trauma history, and a lack of social supports are challenges youth in Milwaukee face that increase their risk of becoming sexually exploited or trafficked.

Plenty of youth in our community come up against the above challenges. Environments high in these risk factors are environments where traffickers can exploit youth's basic need for safety. Ultimately, youth also need to encounter someone willing to take advantage of their vulnerability.

Within Milwaukee's vulnerable populations, there are **personal characteristics that may make a young person even more susceptible to sex trafficking**, like being a youth of color, or being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or genderqueer/gender non-conforming (LGBTQ+).

Within 72 hours of experiencing homelessness, 1 in 3 youth will trade sex to meet their basic needs (food, shelter, etc.).

How Laws Impact Those Experiencing Trafficking

Wisconsin is one of about 15 states in the U.S. that has not passed a Safe Harbor Law. Currently **police can prosecute children for prostitution**, even when the minor experiences sex trafficking. It's important to note that no one under 18 can consent to sex or legally sell themselves for sex and that the average age a U.S. teen enters the sex trade is 12-14.

Assembly Bill 41 and Senate Bill 49 **would end the prosecution of minors as prostitutes** and provide them with specialized support services. The bill failed to pass in the 2015 and 2017 biennium legislative sessions and is currently under consideration again.

The Safe Harbor bill is an important first step in protecting youth from the additional trauma that too often accompanies how youth being exploited and trafficked are treated by the justice system and it helps prevent youth who are the victims of crime from being treated as criminals themselves.

The Importance of Decreasing Criminal Charges Youth Face When Trafficked

Along with prostitution, Pathfinders often sees youth experiencing exploitation and trafficking charged with crimes ranging from loitering and obstruction of justice to soliciting or working as an unlicensed escort. Again, a minor cannot consent to offer themselves for sale making the charge of being an "unlicensed escort" even more confounding.

Youth we serve explain that these ancillary charges often result from them not feeling comfortable sharing their name with police and physically reacting to law enforcement and their property when their trauma is triggered. **"We often hear the perspective that charging youth with offenses other than prostitution is a means to get them 'out of the life' and connected with mandatory services, which is ineffective long term and decreases their readiness to change,"** said Tricia Lewis, Director of Anti-Violence Services at Pathfinders.

"It is essential that the justice system understand the context of how trafficked and exploited youth are being further marginalized and traumatized when they are charged with offenses directly related to their exploitation by a trafficker," said Tim Baack, President & CEO of Pathfinders. Encounters with law enforcement can be an important opportunity that, when handled with a trauma-informed lens, could connect youth with the advocacy, support and services they need and deserve.

We also see a trend of youth who are 17 years old being charged as adults, which creates criminal records and doesn't automatically connect them with additional support.

In addition to adding to their trauma, **being charged with offenses like these makes it harder for those who've been exploited to work toward educational, employment and housing goals.** Decriminalization helps to mitigate the cycle of exploitation, homelessness and recidivism.

The Power of Words

The language we use represents our respect for youth as human beings and for their experiences. At Pathfinders, how we talk about sexual exploitation has a significant impact on our relationships with youth, how open they are to accessing services and the overall perspective of how to approach this issue.

It is important not to dehumanize youth or place a label on an experience that they do not identify with. Because of this, we create an open space for dialogue with youth, using language that they are comfortable with in order not to trigger a trauma response to negative experiences they have had in the past with systems like law enforcement, emergency medical services, foster care, etc.

Tim goes on to say, **“When we fail as a community to honor how youth themselves see the complex issues of housing instability, trauma, exploitation and trafficking, and the fact that they may or may not identify as someone being exploited, we often lose the opportunity to effectively engage and assist these youth.”**

Pathfinders recommends that everyone – the community at large, systems like health care, health and social service, law enforcement, media, etc. – be aware that any language that further victimizes and traumatizes youth needs to be addressed and changed.

“Building the necessary trust, rapport and relationship with youth who have had such profoundly negative experiences with adults takes time, consistency and a willingness to understand youth from their own unique perspective.”

**-Tim Baack
President & CEO of
Pathfinders**

It’s important to remember that “sex trafficking” is a legal term that describes a wide spectrum of experiences. Media often drive a community narrative around sex trafficking and that narrative often focuses on one perspective of a “typical victim” or a particular pathway that someone entered into the life, which does not represent everyone’s experiences.

Youth who have experienced sex trafficking often come in contact with multiple systems and **the language used in those systems impacts the level of motivation youth will have in engaging.** Most youth do not identify with being “victims of sex trafficking,” and we have heard from both youth and systems that youth will shut down if they feel like they are labeled and do not feel respected or heard.

It is essential that when providing services to a particular population or demographic that you engage them in the work and secure their input. Pathfinders believes in “youth voice and youth choice” when it makes programmatic, operational and staffing decisions that directly impacts them.

How does Pathfinders Help?

Pathfinders provides programs that represent some of the most comprehensive youth services available in Wisconsin. The foundation of our work with youth is the positive youth development framework, which sees **youth as partners and decision-makers in their own service delivery.**

Our youth tell us how impactful it is to have their voices heard and to be treated with dignity and respect. We know that our youth have experienced systems of oppression that depend on their disempowerment. That’s why Pathfinders’ work is grounded in empowering youth, honoring their

resilience and bravery, and advocating alongside them as they build a path to a safe and optimistic future.

“When I first came here, I needed Pathfinders to literally stand right next to me or in front of me. Fighting for me. Helping pull me up. But now I just need to know that you’re standing behind me. I don’t always need help, but the knowledge that you’re there helps me feel safer as I’m climbing.”

-Pathfinders Youth

On behalf of the youth we serve, Pathfinders will continue to advocate for an improved understanding of trauma and re-traumatization, increased focus on best practice standards including youth-directed services and informed decision making and increased support resources for youth who’ve experienced trafficking.

Here are some of the ways we work alongside youth who’ve experienced sexual exploitation and trafficking. Pathfinders:

- Offers advocacy and support services including **safety planning, crisis intervention and stabilization**;
- Provides youth with **legal advocacy** during court proceedings, **medical advocacy** in health care systems and **personal advocacy** accessing social service benefits;
- **Counsels** youth in crisis;
- **Conducts street outreach**, which identifies and screens exploited youth on the street and offers them **basic needs services** and **ongoing resources** through our Drop-In Center;
- Connects youth with **housing, employment and educational resources** through case management.

What Can You Do?

Everyone can do something. Whether you’re coming to the issue as an individual community member, a systems partner or as someone who has the power to make employment, housing or benefits decisions, you can impact positive change for youth who’ve experience exploitation.

- **Use person-first language:** Speaking about someone ***who has experienced sexual exploitation or trafficking*** is preferred over *exploited or trafficked youth*, which labels a young person in ways that are re-traumatizing and stigmatizing.
- **Educate yourself on the issue** – read reports like this and attend community conversations on topics like homelessness and housing instability, sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking, and racism.
- **Share your knowledge** on the connectivity between sex trafficking, systematic racism, unemployment and housing with others.
- **Volunteer** with organizations providing high-quality, critical services to vulnerable community members, like Pathfinders.
- **Give financial support and resources** to organizations that provide sexual exploitation and trafficking or housing services. The intersection between homelessness/housing instability and exploitation/trafficking cannot be underestimated.

- **Participate** in campaigns like Dressemer that support anti-trafficking globally and here in Milwaukee through their support of Pathfinders. Pledge to wear a dress or tie every day in December to raise funds and awareness. Become an advocate at dressemer2019.org.
- **Contact your elected officials** to voice your concerns about these issues and ask for more funding for support services.
 - State: <https://legis.wisconsin.gov/>
 - County: <https://county.milwaukee.gov>
 - Select the “Our County” tab
 - City: <https://city.milwaukee.gov>
 - Search “contact elected official”
- **Take a personal inventory** of your own biases. YWCA Southeast Wisconsin offers a variety of valuable events, trainings and learning opportunities.
- **Evaluate** your workplace policies, benefits and practices related to child care, parental leave and wages.

As a community, we need to continue the intentional efforts to coordinate system and community-based protocols and support for youth who have experienced sex trafficking. Youth benefit from having access to a comprehensive, coordinated team of confidential, community-based advocates and systems-based support.

Systems can improve the process for youth by increasing the variety of options offered to youth, which will empower them with choices. **Youth deserve to have more ownership over what happens to them after they have already had control taken away from them by a trafficker.**

As a community, we must **advocate for laws** and social programs that provide poverty relief as one of many comprehensive solutions to sex trafficking. That includes laws **that support opportunities to earn a living wage, and provide healthcare, housing that is affordable and quality schools.**

We must also consider policies that would provide equity with regard to wages, offer solutions to child care needs, provide more widespread parental leave and change the punitive nature of the welfare system, which all contribute to a positive living wage and limit the vulnerability of our community’s youth being sexually exploited.

About Pathfinders

*For nearly 50 years, Pathfinders has brought safety, hope and healing to youth ages 11-25 facing homelessness and housing instability, sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking, trauma and crisis. Our mission is **Empowering Youth – Changing Lives**. Our vision is to provide a more meaningful voice for youth in crisis and ensure that all youth are safe, healthy, independent, successful and valued.*



For more information and resources, visit PathfindersMKE.org.

*Want to learn more about Pathfinders’ sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking services?
Contact Pathfinders’ Development Team at development@PathfindersMKE.org.*