

Study compares youth detained for sex trafficking with more serious offenders

August 8 2023



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Every year in the United States, about 1.7 million youth run away from home, which places them at risk for sex trafficking and prostitution. Sadly, most youth tend to fall victim to sex trafficking between the ages

of 12 to 14.

While federal and [state laws](#) have been enacted to protect these runaway youth, they continue to be arrested, charged and detained for prostitution. Detaining youth who should not legally be considered offenders and who have extensive histories of victimization and [mental health](#) issues only exacerbates their underlying vulnerabilities that may have led them to run away or be sexually exploited in the first place.

There is limited knowledge about the characteristics and risk factors of youth who are incarcerated for running away or sex [trafficking](#) compared to youth incarcerated for more serious offenses such as murder, robbery or assault.

A Florida Atlantic University study is the first to use a nationally representative sample to compare youth whose most serious offense is running away or "prostitution" to the characteristics of youth detained for more serious offenses.

Results of the study, published in the *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, identified significant differences in many of the characteristics among detained runaway/sex trafficking youth compared to youth incarcerated for more serious offenses.

Youth detained for running away/sex trafficking had significantly higher rates of every type of abuse and polyvictimization compared to youth detained for more serious offenses, except for witnessing serious violence. About 45 percent of runaway/sex trafficking youth reported experiencing physical abuse as a child compared to 34 percent of youth serious offenders.

"Understanding the characteristics of detained youth whose major offense is running away or being exploited for prostitution and sex

trafficking is imperative in order to offer alternatives to detention to meet the needs of these vulnerable children, who by law, shouldn't even be detained," said Calli Cain, Ph.D., senior author and an assistant professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice within FAU's College of Social Work and Criminal Justice.

"Knowing their risk factors may improve early intervention efforts and lead to a collaborative [criminal justice](#) response and more responsive policy to reduce harm and improve outcomes."

Among the study findings:

- One fifth (18.8 percent) of runaway/sex trafficking youth were molested as a child, which was almost double reported in the youth serious [offender](#) group.
- About 11 percent of runaway/sex trafficking youth were raped and 43 percent were emotionally abused as a child, compared to 7.5 percent of youth serious offenders who were raped and 28 percent who were emotionally abused.
- Twenty-nine percent of runaway/sex trafficking youth reported three or more victimization types compared to 20 percent of youth serious offenders.
- Runaway/sex trafficking youth reported higher rates of all the suicide ideation indicators, with almost 35 percent having any recent suicide ideation, compared to 30 percent of youth serious offenders. Significantly more runaway/sex trafficking youth (31 percent) reported they had tried to kill themselves (ever), compared to 22.4 percent of youth serious offenders.
- Youth serious offenders were most likely to report using both alcohol and drugs (23.4 percent), followed by using drugs only (20 percent), compared to 13.2 percent of runaway/sex

trafficking youth using both substances, and 6.6 percent using drugs only.

- Significantly more runaway/sex trafficking youth reported prior probation (92.1 percent) than youth serious offenders (82.9 percent), yet there were no group differences on prior convictions, as 85 percent of both groups reported a prior conviction.
- An alarming rate of youth reported above average depression symptoms, and although youth serious offenders had higher rates (47.9 percent) compared to runaway/sex trafficking youth (45 percent), these differences, however, were insignificant.
- Before their arrest, runaway/sex trafficking youth were more likely to report living in a foster/group home (11 percent), with friends (16 percent), or living on their own or homeless (11 percent) compared to youth serious offenders, of which 5.5 percent lived in a foster/group home, 10 percent with friends, and 6 percent on their own or homeless. Twenty-six percent of runaway/sex trafficking youth reported prior foster/group home living (ever) compared to 15 percent of youth serious offenders.
- Youth serious offenders had higher rates of school suspensions (60 percent) and expulsions (30 percent) in the year before custody; one-third (31 percent) had an expert-diagnosed learning disability, and half were below their modal grade. In comparison, in runaway/sex trafficking youth, 45 percent reported being suspended and 20 percent expelled in the year before custody; 27 percent were diagnosed with a learning disability and 44 percent were below their modal grade.

"When prevention is too late, it's important for intervention and [treatment programs](#) to be available and fully funded in order help youth who have experienced victimization," said Cain. "Although both prevention and intervention programs may be costly, these programs

likely cost less than dealing with the effects of victimization on children and adolescents in terms of health care, child welfare and justice-system costs for victims who become delinquent."

The study used a nationally representative sample of 84,328 youth from the Survey of Youth in Residential Placement sponsored by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to examine the risk factors and characteristics of [youth](#) who are detained for running away or [sex trafficking](#) victimization. The average age of respondents was 16.1 years.

More information: Calli M. Cain, Comparing the Risk Factors of Youth Detained for Running Away or Commercial Sexual Exploitation to more Serious Youth Offenders, *American Journal of Criminal Justice* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s12103-023-09735-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-023-09735-7)

Provided by Florida Atlantic University

Citation: Study compares youth detained for sex trafficking with more serious offenders (2023, August 8) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-08-youth-detained-sex-trafficking.html>

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