



Integrating Effective Practices to Identify Youth Victims of Human Trafficking

To provide effective services to youth, especially to youth experiencing homelessness, service providers need to understand young people's individual context, needs, and lived experiences.

Screening and assessment tools used to identify youth's needs must include questions to assess for potential human trafficking situations. Building rapport is key to successfully assess and identify if a youth is at high-risk or has been trafficked with the goal of expanding access to services or making an appropriate referral. Understanding the full context of a youth's situation and experiences will prepare an organization to provide trauma-informed interventions. Youth service professionals can recognize when a quick screen or in-depth assessment is appropriate and possible.



This fact sheet provides organizations serving vulnerable youth, especially youth experiencing housing instability or homelessness, with strategies for integrating effective approaches for conducting a human trafficking assessment. If the initial screening

indicates a need for further assessment, consider the following to facilitate that assessment opportunity. Importantly, human trafficking or assessments should not delay the delivery of the following services:

- Basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, medical attention, and emergency services.
- Access to youth community groups, job training, and other cultural or educational offerings.
- Safety concerns and emotional support.

When deciding the right time to assess for human trafficking, ask yourself:

- Is the youth currently in crisis?
- Are you somewhere the youth feels safe and you can maintain some level of confidentiality?
- Have you built a rapport with the youth so that you can ask sensitive questions?
- Do you know enough information about the youth to frame your questions while being sensitive to their individual experiences and/or histories of trauma and adverse experiences?

The key for effectively screening or assessing a youth is to find the right time, use effective non-communication strategies, and identify the most appropriate screening tool. Programs should ensure any tools they consider adopting can assess for both sex trafficking and labor trafficking.

For more information regarding trauma-informed approaches to human trafficking screening and assessment for youth experiencing homelessness consider visiting the following resource:

- [*Pretesting a Human Trafficking Screening Tool in the Child Welfare and Runaway and Homeless Youth Systems*](#)

When preparing to conduct a human trafficking assessment, your program can establish some ground rules that could help to build a trusting environment:

- Be flexible about the needs and responses of youth.
- Recognize and mirror young people's body language.
- Meet youth where they are.
- Show respect for their process and avoid judgment.
- Remember that disclosure is not the final goal when conducting a screening or assessment with a youth
- Be honest about your intentions.



Consider the following as you start your assessment:

- Youth can choose to answer or not answer questions based on their comfort level.
- The conversation can continue at any point in the future. Communicate to the youth that you are always available to them and open to continuing the conversation when they are ready.
- If the youth do not want to talk right now, offer to talk another time or refer them to other service providers. Consider providing youth with local and national hotline numbers and services (e.g., [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#), [National Runaway Safeline](#), and [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#)).
- Whether or not a youth has been trafficked, the questions you ask can be frightening, emotionally draining, or triggering. Phrasing is key to conducting an assessment that garners accurate responses while protecting the mental health and safety of youth. Questions can be phrased to close or open dialogue, make or avoid assumptions, and build or destroy trust.
- If a youth cannot be safely assessed for human trafficking, remember that your priority is not to place the youth in danger. Consider providing national and local hotline numbers to the youth only if you can do so safely. While it is recommended that you conduct assessments at your agency, the National Human Trafficking Hotline can also assess for trafficking by telephone or text. For more information on how the National Human Trafficking Hotline can provide support, you can visit <https://humantraffickinghotline.org>, or call 1-800-373-7888. The National Runaway Safeline can also assist organizations and youth seeking assistance, visit www.1800runaway.org/ or call 1-800-786-2929.
- There are published human trafficking assessment tools that can be tailored to meet your organization's needs. In determining which assessment tool to adopt, consider the following:
 - Are questions youth-oriented in the assessment tool?
 - Is the trafficking assessment tool culturally appropriate for your population (consider geographic, racial, gender, identify, culture and other differences)?
 - Are the questions phrased in a non-judgmental way?
 - Does your assessment include trauma-informed and strength-based questions?
 - Do the questions address all forms of sex trafficking as well as labor trafficking?

The table below provides some suggestions on how questions might be asked by service providers in a human trafficking assessment. It also explains how specific phrasing may be harmful to the youth and to the mission of the assessment and provides recommended ways to rephrase the questions. Please remember that by using a strengths-based, trauma-informed, and youth empowerment model, you will be able to communicate in a way that empowers youth to identify and apply their own strengths. It is also important to remember that staff who are untrained in counseling should not conduct in-depth conversations with youth about their experiences of exploitation or trafficking, but they can engage in conversations to learn more about the youth experiences and determine whether further assessment is needed and whether the youth can receive supportive services (i.e., shelter, long-term housing, food, medical care, case management).

| How Not to Ask | Considerations | How to Ask |
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| Do you share your passwords with other people? | <p>Be specific, and ask about force, fraud, or coercion in your questions. While youth may freely make the choice to share their passwords, they may also be coerced to do so.</p> <p>Avoid victim-blaming. Ask if things have been done to them, not what they have done to themselves.</p> | Are your communications (calls, emails, texts, chats, conversations, etc.) ever restricted or monitored? |
| Are you punished if you work fewer hours or take breaks? | <p>Avoid leading questions. This question creates some expectation of a punishment that the respondent is asked to address.</p> <p>Avoid yes/no questions when possible. Open-ended questions produce more detail.</p> | What happens if you work fewer hours or take breaks? |
| Have you ever been paid for sex? | <p>Phrase and ask questions without judgment, especially if the questions have to do with sexual, stigmatized, or illicit activity.</p> <p>Do not make room for assumptions. While commercial sex is illegal in most states, it does not mean a youth is a victim of trafficking (unless they are a minor). This question may inaccurately lead you to believe that an individual has been trafficked.</p> | <p>How do you get by day-to-day while living on the streets? or Has anyone offered you something like food or a place to sleep in exchange for sex?</p> |
| Have you ever used illicit drugs? | <p>Do not ask for excessive information. Using drugs can increase risk of exploitation, but it does not necessarily indicate that a youth is being trafficked. Asking for excessive information can erode trust and cause youth to be suspicious of you.</p> <p>If you know that a youth uses drugs, you may ask about their own sense of whether others are manipulating their drug use.</p> | [If you know that a youth uses drugs] How much control do you have over your access to drugs? |
| How were you abused or exploited by this person? | <p>You do not need to know the details of abuse or exploitation to recognize abuse and exploitation. Asking for excessively detailed information can be traumatizing or triggering. Knowing that abuse or exploitation occurred is enough.</p> | How are you treated by your employer/house supervisor/manager, family member, friend, or significant other? |



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