



# Milwaukee Youth in Crisis

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

## **MILWAUKEE YOUTH IN CRISIS: SEX TRAFFICKING AND THE IMPACT ON OUR YOUTH**

### **Overview**

For nearly 50 years, Pathfinders has brought safety, hope and healing to youth ages 11-25 facing homelessness, sex trafficking, sexual abuse, 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.

Pathfinders has a long history of serving runaway and homeless youth in Milwaukee, many of whom have been sexually abused or exploited. We have seen youth come to us experiencing generations of trauma in Milwaukee caused by pervasive poverty, job loss, unequal access to health care, segregation and experience with systems (youth justice, law enforcement, foster care, etc.). Milwaukee has extremely high youth poverty rates and hundreds of youth are homeless on our streets each night; **as many as 15,000 youth age 25 and under experience homelessness each year.**

**Milwaukee is recognized as a top 5 hub city for sex trafficking in the United States.** Sex trafficking and youth homelessness/housing instability are directly linked; environments where youth homelessness is high, trafficking rates are also high. Why is this?

**“There is a clear connection between youth homelessness and sex trafficking. This is why Pathfinders has made addressing sexual exploitation a top strategic priority.”**  
-Tim Baack, President & CEO of Pathfinders

### **What is Sex Trafficking?**

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/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.

The program data in this report represent youth who have been seen in Pathfinders' sexual exploitation and trafficking program. Youth in the program have experienced sex trafficking, and a few have experienced sexual or dating violence and are at high risk for sex trafficking.

**What Makes 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.

Ultimately, youth also need to cross paths with someone who is willing to take advantage of their vulnerability. 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.

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

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+).

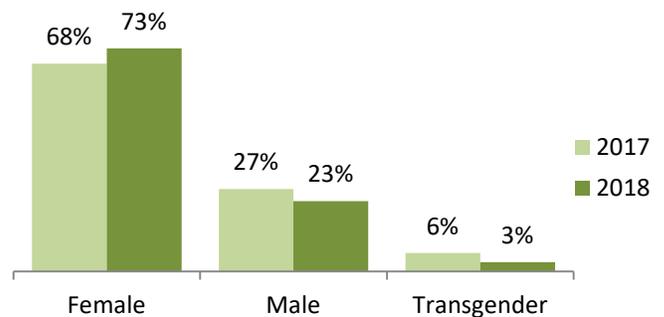
**Pathfinders' Sex Trafficking Program Data**

Over the past two years, Pathfinders has **observed all of these risk factors to hold true in our program data**. We also see some different trends than traditional data sources like law enforcement.

**Pathfinders served about 200 youth ages 11-25 in our sex trafficking program between October 2016 and September 2018.**

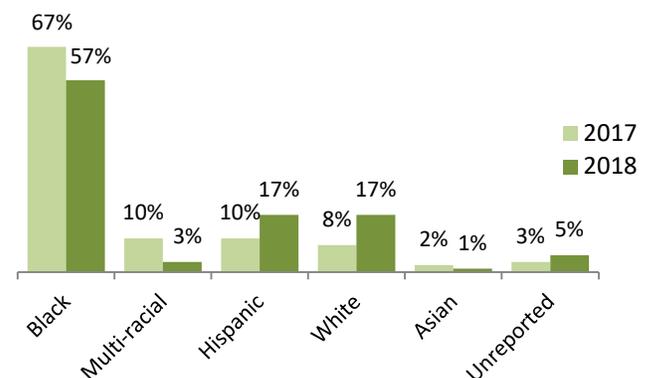
**Gender Identity**

While the majority of youth in this program are female, Pathfinders sees **significantly more males and transgender youth than are reported in systems like police departments**. We attribute this trend to the relationship we build with youth and the nature of the support we offer them through their journey.



**Race/Ethnicity**

**Nearly all youth who Pathfinders serves are youth of color.** Intersections between racial/ethnic identity and poverty, housing affordability, segregation, inadequate social services such as the foster care system, and other socioeconomic factors all influence youth of color's vulnerability to sex trafficking.



## Poverty

**Nearly all youth** who seek out services at Pathfinders live below the poverty line. Poverty is a primary risk factor for sex trafficking.

The Wisconsin Poverty Measure established the poverty line at approximately **\$26,500 for a family of four** in 2016. Those with incomes below this line are considered to be “poor.” In the same timeframe, the **black poverty rate was more than 2.5 times the overall Wisconsin poverty rate**. In Milwaukee, 30% of blacks, 20% of Hispanics and others and 10% of whites live in poverty.

**Virtually all youth in Pathfinders' sex trafficking program report living below the poverty line.**

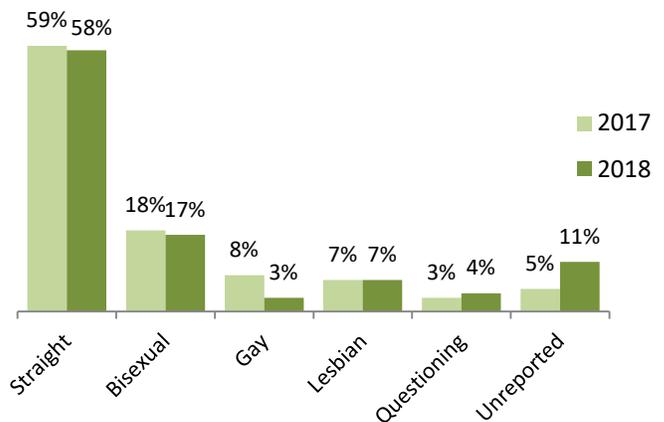
Wisconsin's current **minimum wage is \$7.25**, which hasn't been raised since 2009. Approximately **75% of Wisconsin's minimum wage workers are women**.

Child poverty rates in Milwaukee County in 2016 were at 21%, compared to 12% for the overall state of Wisconsin. In the City of Milwaukee, the **poverty rate for black children climbs to 40%**.

## Sexual Orientation

Pathfinders serves a disproportionate amount of LGBTQ+ youth across all of our programs and services. In our sex trafficking program, **35% of the youth we served identified as LGBTQ+**. A 2017 Gallup poll concluded that 4.5% of adult Americans identified as LGBT.

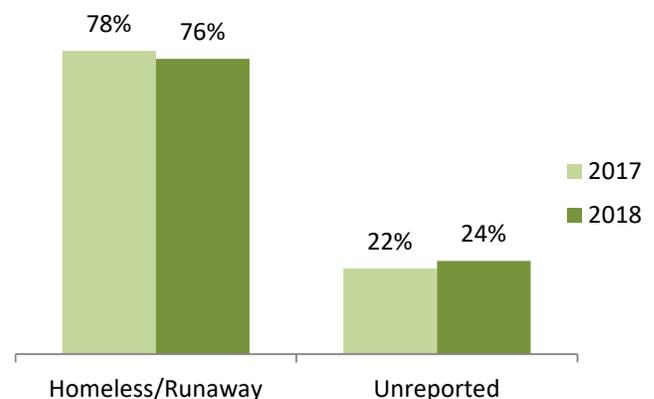
According to Covenant House International's Labor and Sex Trafficking Among Homeless Youth Study, LGBTQ+ youth experience trafficking at higher rates than other youth experiencing homelessness.



## Housing Status

We know that housing stability is directly linked to vulnerability to sex trafficking, especially for youth. An average of **77% of youth in our sex trafficking program identified as homeless/runaway in the past two years**.

Housing stability and safe, affordable housing are problems throughout Milwaukee. American Community Survey data indicate that the homeownership rate in the City of Milwaukee is 41%, much less than the national average of 63%. Of individuals who are renting, 53% pay more than the recommended 30% of household income on rent.



According to the Brookings Institute, Milwaukee is also one of the most segregated metropolitan areas in the United States. The “index of dissimilarity” measures racial residential segregation and is an indicator of many socioeconomic factors, including housing affordability. All of these factors create a landscape in Milwaukee where stable housing is difficult to access.

### **Presented with Other Traumas**

When youth voluntarily disclose their trauma histories, our Advocates note factors that increase a youth’s risk to being sexually exploited. We do not explicitly ask about these areas – therefore, these data likely represent a significant under-reporting of trauma histories. Pathfinders observes high rates of **child abuse/neglect, domestic/family violence, sexual abuse/assault, and bullying.**

According to the Covenant House study, youth who have experienced sex trafficking and homelessness are more likely to have experienced physical and emotional abuse by parents or guardians and to have a history of sexual abuse. They are also more likely to have mental health and substance abuse issues. In another study (Field Center/Covenant House), **95% of those experiencing sex trafficking had been sexually or physically abused as children.**

**Youth in our sex trafficking program often report histories of:**

- **Child abuse/neglect**
- **Domestic/family violence**
- **Sexual abuse/assault**
- **Bullying**

### **What is Pathfinders Doing?**

Pathfinders provides programs that represent some of the most comprehensive youth services available in Wisconsin. Our sex trafficking work has expanded significantly in recent years; while Pathfinders has served sexually abused youth for nearly 50 years, we have seen the need increase to a point where it was imperative to add specialized services around sex trafficking.

Our work supports youth who have experienced commercial sexual exploitation and informs community awareness about sex trafficking. Our youth’s stories are as important as data:

“M

ia” ran away from an abusive home environment and met an older man who gave her a place to stay. He became her boyfriend and convinced her to have sex for money. Mia came to Pathfinders on her doctor’s recommendation and our staff provided “Mia” non-judgmental, unconditional support as she developed a safety plan, went through medical exams and testified in court against him. We helped her replace identification documents that were taken from her, apply for jobs and find housing so she no longer had to have sex to have a safe place to sleep. “Mia” has demonstrated incredible strength. She is not only a strong advocate for herself, but she continues to demonstrate her kindness and support for other youth in similar situations.

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 every day 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.

In the past two years, we have reached 238 youth like “Mia” and worked alongside them to:

- Offer advocacy and support services including **safety planning, crisis intervention and stabilization**;
- Provide youth with **legal advocacy** during court proceedings, **medical advocacy** in health care systems and **personal advocacy** accessing social service benefits;
- **Counsel** youth in crisis;
- **Conduct 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;
- Connect youth with **housing, employment and educational resources** through case management.

#### What Pathfinders Hears From Youth:

- *“You keep me positive. Without you and Pathfinders, I don’t know where I would be.”*
- *“Because of you, I feel stronger.”*
- *“Thank you for making me not have to be alone through everything.”*

#### **What Else Can Be Done?**

As we continue to progress through our second full year of strategic programming and community advocacy on this issue, Pathfinders will continue to:

- Build relationships within systems (law enforcement, judicial, etc.) to encourage more trauma-informed, youth-focused approaches to working with those who’ve been exploited;
- Raise awareness of the intersection that exists between homelessness and sex trafficking and the lack of affordable housing that makes youth more vulnerable to exploitation;
- Expand Pathfinders’ capacity to provide youth with an Advocate to attend more legal, law enforcement and medical proceedings and conduct more direct street outreach.

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 would support opportunities to earn a living wage, and provide healthcare, affordable housing 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.



For more information and resources, visit [PathfindersMKE.org](http://PathfindersMKE.org), [wisconsintalks.org](http://wisconsintalks.org) or [nn4youth.org](http://nn4youth.org)

*Want to learn more about Pathfinders’ sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking services?  
Contact Pathfinders’ Development Team at [development@pathfindersmke.org](mailto:development@pathfindersmke.org).*