



Suicidal Ideation and Behavior Among Youth Victims of Sex Trafficking in Kentuckiana

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Abstract. *Background:* Youth experiencing homelessness are at risk for sex trafficking and mental health concerns. *Aims:* More information is needed to elucidate the prevalence and characteristics of suicidal ideation and behavior among youth experiencing sex trafficking. *Method:* The present study examined suicidal ideation and behavior in a convenience sample of 128 youths experiencing homelessness aged 12–25 years in metropolitan Louisville, Kentucky, and southern Indiana. Participants were asked seven questions regarding suicidal ideation and attempts as part of an enhanced version of the 60-item Youth Experiences Survey (YES). *Results:* Approximately 53% of the sample reported experiencing suicidal ideation at some point in their lifetime and the odds of a youth experiencing homelessness who had experienced sex trafficking reporting suicidal ideation was 3.87 times higher than the odds of a youth experiencing homelessness who had not experienced sex trafficking. Additionally, of those who reported experiencing suicidal ideation, the majority (84.4%) reported they had attempted suicide in their lifetime. *Limitations:* This study relied on a convenience sample of youth receiving services in the Kentuckiana region and brief, self-report measures yielding categorical data. *Conclusion:* Programs servicing youth experiencing homelessness should require additional training and resources regarding the identification, screening, and assessment of youth who are at risk of or who have experienced sex trafficking in order to more quickly connect youth with much-needed, trauma-informed services.

Keywords: homelessness, human trafficking, sex trafficking, suicidal disclosure, suicide, youth

Recent reports suggest there are more than two million unaccompanied youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in the United States (Covenant House, 2017). Homelessness may be due to a variety of factors, such as running away from home, being kicked out of the house, poverty, a lack of affordable housing, or maturing out of foster care. These individuals are at high risk for a variety of mental health problems: depressive symptoms and substance use (Gattis, 2013; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Bao, 2000), self-cutting (Hawton, Roham, Evans, & Weatherall, 2002; Hintikka et al., 2009), and suicidality (Esposito & Clum, 2003; Gattis & Larson, 2016; Yoder, Longley, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2008). Additionally, homeless and runaway youth are more likely to experience additional trauma and abuse (Barr, Fulginiti, Rhoades, & Rice, 2017). For example, these individuals are more likely to experience sex trafficking in which they are forced or coerced into sexual behavior in exchange for food or shelter (Hudson & Nandy, 2012; World Health Organization, 2012).

Sex trafficking victimization has been documented in all 50 states in the United States, and the sex trafficking of a person is a criminal act in every state, according to state, federal, and international law (President's Interagency Taskforce to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons,

2014). According to federal antitrafficking laws, sex trafficking is defined as 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 (22 USC § 71020). Notably, force, fraud, or coercion is not a required element for persons trafficked under 18 years of age (US Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2013). Despite these laws and growing awareness of this issue in the United States, reports of sex trafficking are on the rise. In fact, the International Labour Organization (2014) recognizes sex trafficking as the fastest-growing business of organized crime and the third-largest criminal enterprise in the world.

Young people make up a majority of all reported sex trafficking cases. A report from the Human Trafficking Data Collection and Reporting Center found that 70% of all sex trafficking victims were under the age of 24 and 30% were under the age of 18 (Farrell, McDevitt, & Fahy, 2008). In general, at-risk youth – both those experiencing homelessness and youth who have run away from home – are more likely to fall victim to sex trafficking and are often forced or coerced to trade sex for their basic needs such as food or shelter (Bigelsen & Vuotto, 2013; Hudson & Nandy,

2012). Many of the youth engaging in this type of “survival sex” meet criteria established by the 2000 Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (US Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2000). This growing awareness about what was traditionally considered acts of desperation now being included in the definition of sex trafficking victimization has prompted researchers, service providers, and policy makers to reframe the context within which we conceptualize how at-risk youth experience survival sex and commercial sexual exploitation, including a significant shift in language (e.g., from *child prostitution* to *child sexual assault* or *child sex trafficking* and from *survival sex* to *commercial sexual exploitation*; Bigelsen & Vuotto, 2013).

Sex Trafficking and Risk for Suicide

These exploitive and often coercive experiences put youth at additional risk for posttraumatic stress disorder and other mental-health-related concerns (Walker, 2013). It can be difficult to isolate the various causes of outcomes from sex trafficking: Survivors often experience myriad symptoms that can have compounding effects, such as sleep deprivation, drug and alcohol abuse, difficulty remembering, physical health problems (e.g., stomach or back pain, fatigue, headaches), and sexually transmitted diseases (West Coast Children’s Clinic, 2012; World Health Organization, 2012; Zimmerman et al., 2006). In addition, suicide risk has commonly been reported among victims of sex trafficking. Raymond and Hughes (2001) linked suicidality to the emotional toll that sex trafficking can have on an individual, along with depression, hopelessness, anger, and rage. Other researchers have described how sex trafficking can have a long-term effect on survivors, in which the “lasting mental and emotional as well as physical toll” causes continued trauma even after survivors have escaped trafficking situations (Lederer & Wetzel, 2014, p. 70). Suicide-related theories can also be used to explain the increased suicide risk. For example, Durkheim’s (1897/1951) concept of social integration – which represents the ways in which people feel they are contributing to and accepted by society – or the components in the interpersonal theory of suicide (Joiner, 2005) of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness can be used to explain what some survivors may feel when they have been exploited by those on whom they rely. These feelings coupled with hopelessness – or a feeling that the situation will not change or could happen again – may exacerbate one’s risk for suicide.

Experts commonly state that individuals who have experienced sex trafficking are more at risk for suicide; yet, the research to support this claim has mostly focused on

adults. In a small sample ($n = 25$) of adult women who survived sex trafficking, 64% of US women had experienced suicidal thoughts while 63% stated they had tried to hurt or kill themselves (Raymond & Hughes, 2001). Utilizing a larger sample ($n = 106$), another study found slightly lower rates: Surveys of adult female sex-trafficking survivors indicated 46% had experienced suicidal ideation, with 42% attempting suicide during the trafficking experience and 21% attempting after trafficking occurred (Lederer & Wetzel, 2014). Minors who have experienced sex trafficking are also susceptible to suicide risk (Flowers, 2001a, 2001b); however, research to support this claim is limited. Reports from directors and staff of residential facilities treating minor victims of sex trafficking indicated an increased risk of suicide ideation and behavior, although specific rates were not provided (Clawson & Goldblatt Grace, 2007).

Despite the expectation that minor and young adult victims of sex trafficking are at risk for suicide, previous studies have failed to provide rates of suicidal ideation or attempts based on a history of sex exploitation or trafficking for minors. There is limited information on the link between sex trafficking and suicide risk and how it changes a youth’s odds of experiencing ideation or behavior. This information could be an important component to urge public health approaches to combat sex trafficking and provide specialized training for clinicians to treat suicidal ideation and behavior within this population. Moreover, additional information about suicide-related disclosure and who has access to information about past suicidal behavior is needed to target prevention efforts to the appropriate populations. Therefore, this study aimed to determine the prevalence of suicidal ideation and behavior among youth victims of sex trafficking in Louisville, Kentucky, and southern Indiana, to determine the odds of youth victims of sex trafficking experiencing ideation and attempts, and to examine to whom in their social networks they communicated this information.

Method

Sample Characteristics and Sampling Plan

Respondents for this study were recruited from eight agencies providing services for youth experiencing homelessness within the Kentuckiana region, which consists of eight counties in Kentucky and five counties in Southern Indiana. Youth experiencing homelessness were asked to complete a survey about their life experiences with specific questions targeting whether they had experienced sex trafficking in their lifetime. The survey took approximately 15

Table 1. Respondent demographic information ($n = 128$)

Characteristic	%
Gender	
Girl/woman	49.2
Boy/man	47.7
Other	2.3
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	72.8
Bisexual	15.2
Gay	3.2
Asexual	3.2
Pansexual	3.2
Lesbian	0.8
Other	1.6
Race/ethnicity	
Black/African American	45.1
White/Caucasian	32.0
Biracial/Multiracial	9.0
African/Caribbean	6.6
Hispanic/Latino/Latina	3.3
Native American/American Indian	2.5
Arab	1.6
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.0
Indian/South Asian	0.0

min to complete, and youth received monetary compensation for their time. Respondents remained anonymous by depositing completed paper surveys into a locked box located at each site. The appropriate Institutional Review Board approved this study. These procedures resulted in 140 completed surveys. Ten were omitted owing to the participants' age (> 25), and two were omitted because of missing data on all suicide-related questions.

The final sample included 128 respondents with ages ranging from 12 to 25 years ($M = 19.62$, $SD = 3.70$). A full list of respondent demographic information is provided in Table 1. The sample was evenly split between female (49.2%) and male (47.7%) respondents, with 2.3% reporting another gender (e.g., transgender, nonconforming, or two-spirit). The sample was primarily heterosexual (72.8%) and of a racial or ethnic minority (69.1%). In all, 25% ($n = 32$) of the sample identified as a gender or sexual minority. Respondents' age at first experience of homelessness ranged from 3 to 25 years ($M = 16.58$, $SD = 4.07$), and number of times respondents had experienced homelessness ranged from 1 to 22 ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 4.32$). Nearly 41% (40.6%) reported that they had been victims of sex trafficking at some point in their lifetime.

Measures

Data were collected via the Youth Experiences Survey (YES), which is a 60-item survey developed by Arizona State University's Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research. The survey has been administered yearly from 2014 to 2016 with homeless young runaway adults ages 18–24 in Arizona (Roe-Sepowitz, Brockie, Bracy, & Hogan, 2016). It was administered with youth experiencing homelessness for the first time in 2016 in Kentucky. The YES asks questions about demographics, living situation, drug and alcohol use, mental and physical health and treatment, family experiences, and negative life experiences. A section of the survey addresses life experiences related to sex trafficking, including three questions that assess whether respondents had ever experienced sex trafficking (i.e., "Have you ever been compelled, forced, or coerced to perform a sexual act, including sexual intercourse, oral or anal contact for money, food, clothing, drugs, protection, or a place to stay?"; "Do you currently have a person who encourages/pressures/forces you to exchange sexual acts for money, drugs, food, a place to stay, clothing, or protection?"; and "In the past, has anyone encouraged/pressured/forced you to exchange sexual acts for money, drugs, food, place to stay, clothing, or protection?"). Respondents who reported a personal experience with sex trafficking were asked follow-up questions to determine characteristics of their sex-trafficking experience (e.g., age at first exposure, whether technology was used as a recruitment tool for sex trafficking).

To assess the prevalence and context of suicide risk among youth experiencing homelessness in Kentuckiana, seven questions related to personal history with suicidal ideation and behavior were added to the YES. First, participants were asked: "Have you ever wanted to die or thought about killing yourself?" Those who responded *yes* were asked to indicate whether they felt that way within the last *week, month, 6 months, year, or over 1 year*. Next, participants were asked whether they disclosed their ideation to anyone, and if so, whether it was to a *family member, friend, professional, or other*. Then, the same series of questions were asked about experiencing a suicide attempt, with one additional question regarding whether the participant sought medical attention.

Data Analysis

Chi-square tests for independence were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics to assess whether ideation, suicide attempts, and related disclosure were different based on a history of sex trafficking, and the phi coefficient was used as a measure of association. Then, bivariate correlations

Table 2. Frequencies of respondent reports of ideation-related variables ($n = 128$)

Variable	Yes	No	Missing	Valid % yes
Ever experienced ideation	69	59	0	53.9
In past week ^a	14	–	5	21.9
In past month ^a	13	–	–	20.3
In past 6 months ^a	8	–	–	12.5
In past year ^a	7	–	–	10.9
Over 1 year ago ^a	22	–	–	34.4
Ever disclosed ideation ^a	44	21	4	67.7
To family ^b	20	23	1	46.5
To friend ^b	19	24	1	44.2
To professional ^b	16	27	1	37.2
To other ^b	5	38	1	11.6

Note. ^aOut of those who reported ideation ($n = 69$). Respondents were instructed to select only one option. ^bOut of those who disclosed ideation ($n = 44$). Respondents were able to select more than one individual.

Table 3. Number of respondents reporting suicide-related variable and chi-square results based on history of sex trafficking ($n = 128$)

Suicide variable	Sex trafficking		χ^2	p	ϕ	OR
	No	Yes				
Ideation	28 (36)	39 (13)	11.48	.001	.32	3.87
Ideation disclosure	17 (9)	26 (11)	0.17	.785	.05	–
To family	8 (8)	11 (15)	0.24	.753	–.08	–
To friend	5 (11)	14 (12)	2.04	.082	.22	2.57
To professional	4 (12)	12 (13)	2.17	.082	.23	2.77
Attempt	19 (20)	33 (7)	10.02	.002	.36	4.96
Attempt disclosure	11 (6)	24 (9)	0.34	.746	.08	–
To family	7 (4)	11 (13)	0.96	.471	–.17	–
To friend	2 (9)	14 (10)	4.90	.035	.37	6.30
To professional	2 (9)	9 (15)	1.31	.435	.19	–

Note. Numbers in parentheses are the number of respondents who did not report the suicide-related variable based on whether they reported a history of sex trafficking.

were used to explore the associations between these suicide-related variables and additional factors related to sex trafficking experience (i.e., age at first experience of sex-trafficking, whether they had experienced sex trafficking prior to age 18, how many individuals they knew who had experienced sex trafficking, whether they felt afraid to leave a sex trafficker, whether technology was used in the recruitment of sex trafficking, and whether a trafficker was currently present in their lives). Variables that elicited statistically significant correlations were further tested using chi-square tests for independence to determine differences in proportions. Throughout the study, values of $p < .05$ were used to determine statistical significance; sparingly, values of $p < .10$ were used when effect sizes (i.e., odds ratio, r) indicated a meaningful association within our sample, suggesting analyses would have been able to detect a statistically significant effect if our sample size had generated enough power to detect it. Effect sizes were considered meaningful if they were medium to large, which was at least 2.5 for odds ratios in chi-square analyses and at least .3 for r in bivariate correlations (Cohen, 1988).

Results

Ideation-Related Variables

Descriptive information related to ideation variables is presented in Table 2. Over half of the sample (53.9%) reported experiencing suicidal ideation at some point in the past. Roughly a third (34.4%) of respondents who reported ideation had experienced it over 1 year ago, 10.9% within the past year, 12.5% within the past 6 months, 20.3% within the past month, and 21.9% within the past week. Among those with a history of sex trafficking, 75.0% reported they had experienced ideation. Results from a chi-square test for independence (Table 3) indicated the odds of a youth experiencing homelessness who had experienced sex trafficking reporting ideation was 3.87 times higher than the odds of a youth experiencing homelessness who had not experienced sex trafficking.

Of the youth experiencing homelessness who reported ideation, there was no difference in the odds of disclosing ideation between those who had experienced sex trafficking compared with those who had not. However, after adopting a more generous p value of .10, there were observed differences within our sample based on whether they told specific individuals. Youth were 2.57 and 2.77 times more likely to disclose ideation to a friend and professional, respectively, if they had experienced sex trafficking compared with those who had not. No differences were observed in telling a family member. Fewer individuals told a professional compared

with family members or friends. The majority of respondents (71.4%) who reported both experiencing and disclosing ideation most commonly indicated telling only one of the people listed ($M = 1.40, SD = 0.74$), with the remaining 19.0% telling two confidants, 7.1% telling three confidants, and 2.4% telling four confidants.

Attempt-Related Variables

Table 4 displays descriptive information for attempt-related variables. Of those who reported experiencing suicidal ideation, the majority (84.4%) reported they had attempt-

Table 4. Frequencies of respondent reports of attempt-related variables ($n = 69$)

Variable	Yes	No	Missing	Valid % yes
Ever attempted suicide ^a	54	10	5	84.4
In past week ^b	3	–	6	6.3
In past month ^b	5	–	–	10.4
In past 6 months ^b	5	–	–	10.4
In past year ^b	8	–	–	16.7
Over 1 year ago ^b	27	–	–	56.3
Received medical attention ^b	41	10	3	75.9
Ever disclosed attempt ^b	36	16	2	69.2
To family ^c	19	17	0	52.8
To friend ^c	17	19	0	47.2
To professional ^c	12	24	0	33.3
To other ^c	4	32	0	11.1

Note. ^aOut of those who reported ideation ($n = 69$). ^bOut of those who reported attempt ($n = 54$). Respondents were instructed to select only one option. ^cOut of those who disclosed attempt ($n = 36$). Respondents were able to select more than one individual.

ed suicide in their lifetime, and almost 80% of attempt survivors had received medical attention for an attempt. Over half (56.3%) of those who reported an attempt had attempted over 1 year ago, with the remaining 10.4% within the past 6 months, 10.4% within the past month, and 6.3% within the past week. Among those with a history of sex trafficking, 82.5% had attempted suicide. A chi-square test for independence indicated the odds of a youth experiencing homelessness with a history of sex trafficking attempting suicide was 4.96 times higher than the odds of a youth experiencing homelessness who had not experienced sex trafficking.

Among those who attempted suicide, there was no statistical difference between the odds of disclosing an attempt based on whether there was a history of sex trafficking. Yet, similar to ideation disclosure, there were differences based on the recipient of disclosure. Youth were 6.30 times more likely to disclose a suicide attempt to a friend if they had experienced sex trafficking compared with those who had not been a victim of sex trafficking. No statistically significant differences were observed in disclosing an attempt to a family member or professional. Over half of the sample told a family member, with fewer telling friends. Only a third of the sample had disclosed their attempt to a professional. Respondents who reported attempting suicide and telling someone most commonly (68.6%) indicated telling only one of the people listed ($M = 1.46, SD = 0.78$), while 20% told two people, 8.6% told three people, and 2.9% told four people.

Exploratory Analyses With Common Correlates

Bivariate correlations were used to explore the relationships between ideation, attempt, and disclosure variables

Table 5. Bivariate correlations between suicide-related variables and common correlates ($n = 52$)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Ideation	–								
2. Ideation disclosure	.47**	–							
3. Attempt	.72***	.29 ^a	–						
4. Attempt disclosure	.40*	.69***	.43**	–					
5. Age at first ST experience	–.01	.08	–.38 ^a	–.11	–				
6. ST before age 18	–.07	–.32 ^a	.08	–.11	–.86***	–			
7. ST exposure	.03	–.60**	–.26	–.40	–.16	.32	–		
8. Fear of leaving	.17	–.23	.24	–.14	–.46*	.41*	.16	–	
9. Technology in ST	.35*	–.06	.16	–.02	–.07	.06	.24	.33*	–
10. Trafficker currently present	.09	–.10	.20	.22	–.47**	.52**	.15	.43**	.12

Note. ST = sex trafficking.
^a $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

\$[protocol]://content.hogrefe.com/doi/pdf/10.1027/0227-5910/a000557 - Laura Frey <laura.frey@louisville.edu> - Tuesday, October 30, 2018 6:42:02 AM - IP Address: 104.191.17.42

and various experiences related to sex trafficking (see Table 5). Among those who reported they had experienced sex trafficking, ideation was positively linked to the use of technology in recruitment. Within our sample ($p < .10$), experiencing a suicide attempt was negatively linked to the age at which individuals first experienced being coerced to engage in sexual activity. Although no variables were statistically correlated with attempt disclosure, ideation disclosure was negatively linked to the number of individuals a youth knew who had also experienced sex trafficking. There was also a possible trend ($p < .10$) negatively linking ideation disclosure to being sex trafficked before the age of 18.

Based on the results from bivariate correlations, a chi-square test for independence was conducted to determine the proportions of those who reported suicidal ideation and the use of technology in the recruitment for sex trafficking compared with those who did not. The involvement of technology was associated with 7.25 higher odds of experiencing ideation, $\chi^2(1, 43) = 5.21, p = .042, \phi = .35$. A binary logistic regression analysis was planned to test whether knowing more victims of sex trafficking predicted the odds of ideation disclosure, but the sample did not provide enough power.

Discussion

The present study surveyed youth experiencing homelessness in Kentuckiana to examine suicidal ideation and behavior among youth victims of sex trafficking. Findings indicated high rates of suicidal ideation (75%) and attempts by those with ideation (84%) among youth who had experienced sex trafficking. These individuals were over 3 and 4 times more likely to experience ideation and an attempt, respectively, compared with youth experiencing homelessness who had not experienced sex trafficking. For both groups, ideation and attempt disclosure more frequently occurred with family members. However, victims of sex trafficking were more likely to disclose ideation to friends or professionals and to disclose an attempt to friends compared with those who had not experienced sex trafficking.

The high rates of ideation and attempts among youth who have experienced sex trafficking are alarming. These rates are higher than those reported in previous samples of adults (cf. Lederer & Wetzel, 2014; Raymond & Hughes, 2001). Moreover, our study indicated that experiencing sex trafficking increased the likelihood of reporting both ideation and attempts, which is especially concerning in comparison with research showing sex trafficking increases youth's risk for adverse physical, psychological, and social issues (Deshpande & Nour, 2013). What remains un-

clear is whether the ideation and attempts occurred before or after sex trafficking, as our data collection instruments did not allow us to delineate between that information. It is possible to hypothesize that experiencing previous ideation or an attempt could put someone at risk for experiencing sex trafficking. Previous research has indicated that experiencing an attempt can lead to distress, shame, isolation, and stigmatization (Segal-Engelchin, Kfir-Levin, Neustaedter, & Mirsky, 2015; Wiklander, Samuelsson, & Åsberg, 2003), which might lead some youth to turn away from their families in a way that could, in turn, increase youth's exposure to unsafe environments outside of the family. More likely, the experience of sex trafficking is a risk factor for developing suicidal ideation and behavior. Either way, the findings from this study highlight the need for suicide prevention and intervention approaches tailored to address the unique needs of sex-trafficking victims and for increased efforts to deliver those services to populations of youth experiencing homelessness.

Another interesting finding from this study was that the targets of disclosure differed among the two groups. For ideation and attempts, more youth overall disclosed to family than to friends or professionals; however, youth with a history of sex trafficking were more likely to disclose to friends and professionals compared with youth without a sex trafficking history. These findings point to the need for interventions that provide suicide gatekeeper training to youth experiencing homelessness (Fulginiti, Rice, Hsu, Rhoades, & Winetrobe, 2016) as well as to the professionals who provide services to them. Gatekeeper trainings are specifically targeted to people (e.g., teachers, parents, faith-based leaders) in a position to recognize signs of suicide risk and to direct at-risk individuals to trained professionals (US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General and National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, 2012). These trainings do not require previous experience and are designed to teach lay people how to recognize risk and direct people toward appropriate resources. However, these trainings miss a large portion of the population: the youth who are on the front lines hearing stories of peers' suicidal ideations or attempts. These individuals need the training that allows them to recognize suicidal crises and direct their peers to support services that are safe and nonstigmatizing. Although providing care to youth experiencing homelessness who do not access services can be difficult, homeless shelters and other agencies providing services could also offer information on responding to suicide to the youth they serve. This information could include both the signs of risk and information combatting negative myths about help-seeking.

Finally, exploratory analyses indicated that ideation was also higher among those whose sex trafficking experiences

involved technology. The link between these two experiences is not clear. One explanation could be that individuals who already feel isolated and alone rely on technology as a way to connect with other individuals outside of their direct family or peer networks who can provide support and empathy. If these individuals use technology (e.g., social media) to feel connected, and technology then results in a traumatic experience such as sex trafficking, it could increase the feelings of hopelessness and isolation even further. In fact, thwarted belongingness – the feeling that occurs when one’s interpersonal need to belong is not met (Joiner, 2005) – has been linked to suicidal desire (Van Orden, Witte, Gordon, Bender, & Joiner, 2008). An alternative explanation could be that sex trafficking experiences that involve technology may be, by nature, more traumatic. For example, technology used to promote or market the young person could lead to an increased frequency of sex-trafficking experiences. Similarly, technology may allow for increased permanence of the experience, such as when photos or videos are shared online and can be viewed repeatedly by others. Both of these experiences could elicit more trauma symptoms and shame, thus increasing one’s risk for developing suicidal ideation or behavior. More research is needed to determine if either of these explanations are valid, and future studies should include more complex measures of technology use to elucidate the complexity of sex trafficking, technology use, and suicide risk.

Implications for Practice

Young victims of sex trafficking often experience an increased risk for adverse physical, psychological, and social issues (Deshpande & Nour, 2013). In addition, young people experiencing homelessness are at greater risk for sex trafficking. This information coupled with results from the present study suggest that programs servicing youth experiencing homelessness should require additional training and resources regarding the identification, screening, and assessment of youth who are at-risk of or who have experienced sex trafficking in order to more quickly connect these young people with much-needed, trauma-informed services. These sex-trafficking screening and assessment protocols should also include suicide assessment measures. One option could be the Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale – Triage Version for Primary Care Settings (Columbia Lighthouse Project, 2016), which is a brief, 6-question assessment of past and current ideation and behavior with guidelines regarding how professionals can direct individuals to various levels of care based on their responses. In addition, the findings from this study highlight the need for suicide prevention and intervention approaches tailored to address the needs of sex-trafficking

victims and for increased efforts to deliver those services to populations of youth experiencing homelessness.

Limitations

The findings from the present study should be considered along with their limitations. The study relied on a convenience sample of youth experiencing homelessness in the Kentuckiana region. Therefore, similar prevalence rates may not occur among samples from other regions of the United States. Similarly, recruitment methods targeted young people receiving services, and rates of risk and victimization may differ among young people who chose not to access or who cannot receive services. Data collection for this study also relied on brief, self-report measures that generated categorical data. This type of information limits the ability to conduct more sophisticated data analyses. The data also did not allow for mediation and moderation analyses. Given the increased risk for suicide among those with posttraumatic stress disorder (Krysinska & Lester, 2010), substance use issues (Pompili et al., 2012), and family distress or isolation (Frey & Cerel, 2015), it is likely that youth who have experienced sex trafficking have additional factors that increase their risk for suicidal ideation or behavior. Future research needs to examine the role of additional risk factors to understand the relationship between sex trafficking and suicide risk more clearly. The data collected in the survey were also dependent on the respondents’ willingness to be honest about their experiences. Therefore, there may be some experiences that were not captured by this study. Finally, some statistics were reported using a more generous p value ($p < .10$). This level was used to assess for meaningful effects within our sample; however, we cannot confidently generalize these findings to the larger population of youth experiencing homelessness and sex trafficking.

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