

‘Invisible’ unsheltered young adults vulnerable to exploitation

Annual study’s indicators continue to demonstrate that 18- to 24-year-olds who are homeless need more dedicated support

By Ayrel Clark-Proffitt, ASU News
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Arizona State University social work Professor [Dominique Roe-Sepowitz](#) has a clear takeaway message from a recent survey on youth experiences: “Don’t forget these kids.”

The newly released report, “[2025 Youth Experiences Survey: Exploring the Human Trafficking Experiences of Unsheltered Young Adults in Arizona](#),” reflects the dire conditions and continuous threats faced by 18- to 24-year-olds who are homeless.

Last August, service providers distributed surveys on behalf of the [ASU Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research](#), or ASU STIR, to young adults in this demographic to better understand their history of trauma, exploitation and medical concerns.

Partner organizations

Arizona Youth Partnership,
Mohave County

Homeless Youth Connections,
Maricopa County

Homeless Youth Connections,
Phoenix

One-N-Ten, Phoenix

Our Family Services, Tucson

Native American Connections,
Phoenix and Surprise

Nine agencies that provide direct services to homeless people partnered on the study, which has been conducted annually since 2014.

Phoenix Dream Center, Phoenix
Southern Arizona AIDS
Foundation, Tucson

This year, 163 young adults completed the survey. The results, which have remained largely consistent for more than a decade, tell a story of physical, emotional and sexual abuse, as well as mental health challenges.

Thirty-four percent of the respondents reported being victims of sex trafficking, most frequently by either a family member or boyfriend, and nearly a quarter of respondents reported experiencing labor exploitation. Sixty-three percent report a current mental health diagnosis, and 58% reported using drugs.

“It can feel like we’re blaming the young person when issues like substance abuse, mental health and being kicked out are listed together,” said Roe-Sepowitz, director of ASU STIR. “I always try to say these concerns are not because of who they are and what they are. It is because of how our society treats them.”

Two-thirds of the respondents were kicked out of their home, more than half before the age of 18. The survey takers also reported high rates of adverse childhood experiences, including emotional abuse (61%), physical abuse (37%), physical neglect (34%) and sexual abuse (23%). These traumas, coupled with lack of basic needs, put young people experiencing homelessness in vulnerable situations.

“When you are either kicked out of your house or shown the door, you don’t leave with a lot of belongings. When you run out of things to trade or to labor, you end up with your body,” she said.

Roe-Sepowitz hopes the report will bring greater awareness to this “invisible” population, who are less likely to be on a street corner asking for money. Instead, they couch surf or use mobile apps to meet their needs. Intervening now can prevent further harm, as well as reduce incarceration and needs for social services in the future.

“Eighteen to 24 years old is a really critical time in a person's life. If we can house, support and provide opportunities for kids in that space, the rest of their life has a really high probability of success,” she said.

[Our Family Services](#) in Tucson, Arizona, has participated in the Youth Experiences Survey since its inception. The organization manages Reunion House, the only emergency youth shelter in Southern Arizona.

Colleen McDonald, chief program officer at Our Family Services, said the study has changed the organization’s outreach focus, as well as how it tailors responses based on the barriers young people face in accessing services.

Participating in the survey has also provided the organization with locally grounded data that helps demonstrate to funders and policymakers that “the needs we see every day are real, measurable and urgent,” McDonald said.

“The study has given us a shared language with researchers, systems partners and the public. When we can anchor our program narratives and grant applications in findings from ASU STIR, it elevates the conversation from anecdote to evidence,” she added.

There has been little change year to year since ASU STIR started conducting the survey more than 10 years ago.

Roe-Sepowitz points to helping high schoolers complete their degrees or obtain GEDs, and opening walk-in clinics for mental health as policy interventions that can help prevent the exploitation experienced by these young adults. There are currently no walk-in clinics for young people and only limited programs for GED support, she said.

ASU STIR is building out two prevention programs targeting teenagers. The first is Athletes Against Trafficking, which uses energetic high school athletes to spread the word about the dangers of trafficking to their friends and classmates. A second concept includes bringing law enforcement and probation officers into school to speak directly to students.

“We see the harm and the vulnerability of young people being in gangs, running away or not having the support they need. At some point, those kids are in our schools,” she said.

The [School of Social Work](#) is part of the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions.

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Main image



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