

Pretesting a Human Trafficking Screening Tool in the Child Welfare and Runaway and Homeless Youth Systems

Executive Summary

Despite the fact that youth involved in the child welfare (CW) and runaway and homeless youth (RHY) systems are particularly vulnerable to being trafficked, there is no consensus screening tool to identify trafficking experiences among such youth. In order to better serve youth trafficking victims, this study developed a Human Trafficking Screening Tool (HTST) and pretested it with 617 RHY- and CW-involved youth. This research established that the screening tool is accessible to youth and easy to administer, and that both the full-length tool and a shorter version were effective in identifying youth who are trafficking victims in RHY and CW systems, though additional research with more youth is needed.

Methodology

The tool was pretested with 617 youth, ages 12 to 24, across 14 RHY and CW settings in New York, Texas, and Wisconsin from March to November 2016. The survey captured their trafficking experiences as well as demographic characteristics and other life experiences related to trafficking (e.g., running away, drug abuse). The 19-item HTST was embedded in a longer *Life Experiences Survey*, along with a 6-item short-form version called the HTST-SF. The full HTST took approximately two minutes to complete, while the HTST-SF took less than a minute. Most youth completed the survey in an anonymous self-administered electronic form. A random 25 percent were administered the survey by a practitioner, who also recorded their own perspective on the youth's trafficking status.

Key Findings

Overall, the HTST (which measures both lifetime and past-year experiences) and the HTST-SF performed equally well at capturing trafficking experiences for most youth. Sampled youth were mostly 18 to 24 years old and in RHY-system settings.

- **HTST covered the key dimensions of youth’s trafficking experiences**, according to Urban Institute researchers, members of the HHS study team, and RHY and CW youth helping on the study’s youth advisory council.
- **HTST could be implemented and understood in RHY and CW settings.** Practitioners assessed the tool as easy to administer and youth’s responses as truthful and understanding HTST questions. Further, youth’s inclination to respond was not affected by whether the tool was self- or practitioner administered.
- **Responses to the HTST were correlated to known trafficking risk factors and outcomes**, including running away from home, being kicked out of one’s home, abusing prescription or over-the-counter drugs, trading sex for something of value on their own (i.e., without the presence of a third-party exploiter), being arrested, and seeking help.
- **The HTST correctly predicted trafficking victimization.** For approximately 6 in 10 youth, the HTST correctly predicted youth to be trafficking victims according to administering practitioners’ beliefs and observations. Additionally, the HTST correctly predicted 8 in 10 times which youth were not trafficking victims, according to practitioners’ beliefs and observations.
- **The short form of HTST performed equally well as the full version**, with regard to all measures of validity. Since the HTST-SF took less than a minute to administer, it would appear preferable when time is an issue, unless practitioners are interested in capturing more specific dimensions of youth’s trafficking experiences. Below are the long and short forms of the tool.

Conclusion

Responses to the 19-item HTST and 6-item HTST-SF were correlated with several known risk factors and outcomes associated with trafficking victimization, including running away from home, being kicked out by parents/guardians, exchanging sex on their own for something of value, abusing over-the-counter drugs, and seeking help. Further, both tools correctly identified trafficking victims 6 in 10 times and nonvictims 8 in 10 times, based on practitioners’ assessments of youth’s trafficking experiences. Given that practitioners also provided positive feedback on the tools, which took two minutes or less to administer, this study concludes that both the HTST and HTST-SF are accessible, effective tools for screening youth for human trafficking in CW and RHY settings. Given limited samples of certain subpopulations, we recommend additional testing of youth under age 18 and youth in CW settings, in addition to further validation work with a nationally representative sample of youth.

Human Trafficking Screening Tool Questions – Long Form

#	Did someone you work for...
1	Physically force you to do something you didn't feel comfortable doing
2	Lock you up, restrain you, or prevent you from leaving
3	Physically harm you in any way (beat, slap, hit, kick, punch, burn)
4	Trick you into doing different work than was promised
5	Make you sign a document without understanding what it stated, like a work contract
6	Refuse to pay you or pay less than they promised
7	Restrict or control where you went or who you talked to
8	Deprive you of sleep, food, water, or medical care
9	Not let you contact family or friends, even when you weren't working
10	Keep all or most of your money or pay
11	Keep your ID documents (e.g., ID card, license, passport, social security card, birth certificate) from you
12	Threaten to get you deported
13	Threaten to harm you or your family or pet
14	Physically harm or threaten a coworker or friend
15	Force you to do something sexually that you didn't feel comfortable doing
16	Put your photo on the Internet to find clients to trade sex with
17	Force you to engage in sexual acts with family, friends, or business associates for money or favors
18	Encourage or pressure you to do sexual acts or have sex, including taking sexual photos or videos
19	Force you to trade sex for money, shelter, food, or anything else through online websites, escort services, street prostitution, informal arrangements, brothels, fake massage businesses, or strip clubs

Source: Urban Institute, Human Trafficking Screening Tool pretest validation study (2017).

Notes: Response choices were "yes," "no," or "skip." Respondents were asked whether each item had ever occurred and whether it had occurred in the past year.

Human Trafficking Screening Tool Questions – Short Form

- 1 Did someone you work for ever refuse to pay what they promised and keep all or most of the money you made?
 - 2 Did you ever trade sexual acts for food, clothing, shelter, favors, or other necessities for survival before you reached the age of 18?
 - 3 Were you ever physically beaten, slapped, hit, kicked, punched, burned or harmed in any way by someone you worked for?
 - 4 Have you ever been unable to leave a place you worked or talk to people you wanted to talk to, even when you weren't working, because the person you worked for threatened or controlled you?
 - 5 Did someone you work for ever ask, pressure, or force you to do something sexually that you did not feel comfortable doing?
 - 6 Were you ever forced to engage in sexual acts with family, friends, clients or business associates for money or favors, by someone you work for?
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Source: Urban Institute, Human Trafficking Screening Tool pretest validation study (2017).

Note: Response choices were “yes” or “no”, and youth were allowed to skip individual items.