

## Commentary: Texas must address homelessness to end human trafficking

OPINION By Deborah Fowler and Christine Gendron - Special to the American-Statesman



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Homeless traveler Destiny tries to earn a few dollars on the street corner of Manchaca Road and Ben White Boulevard in January.

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Gov. Greg Abbott took another strong stand in his fight against human trafficking this month when he declared January Human Trafficking Prevention Month, calling on all Texans to learn more about what they can do to help end the problem.

For several years now, he and his Child Sex Trafficking Team have been leading a commendable statewide effort to determine how state agencies, faith leaders, businesses and advocates can work together to eliminate the threat of trafficking to children and young people in Texas. As our organizations learned during the research for our recently released report, "Young, Alone, and Homeless in the Lone Star State: Policy Solutions to End Youth Homelessness in Texas," one of the best ways to prevent trafficking is to address the issue of youth homelessness, which puts young people at high risk of being targeted by traffickers.

Many of the more than 100 youth we interviewed during our research for our report told us harrowing first-hand stories of how traffickers prey on youths made vulnerable by the loss of a permanent home. A study released by the University of Texas last year supports what we heard, revealing that youth who experience homelessness are 25 percent more likely to become victims of trafficking.

the UT study on trafficking drives home the enormity of the problem and gives us a picture of just how many of Texas' youth are being exposed to the threat of trafficking each year.

Many young people become homeless after running away from abusive homes or foster care placements, creating a strong link between foster care system involvement and homelessness. And according to the same UT study, experiencing abuse or neglect during childhood and becoming involved in the foster care system are both also factors that put youth at heightened risk of trafficking. What our research made clear is that all of these problems – homelessness and running away, foster care involvement, child abuse and neglect, and trafficking – are linked to and inform one another.

Preventing child sex trafficking must include – and perhaps begin with – preventing youth homelessness and meaningfully addressing why youth run away. It is not enough to prosecute the offenders and provide treatment to the victims of child sex trafficking – these responses, while crucial, come too late to prevent the lifetime of trauma that results from trafficking.

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Our report identifies strategies that work to prevent youth homelessness by strengthening families through interventions that address a crisis before a youth ends up on the streets. It also highlights systems and programs that are already working as protective factors – like schools and community-based services – and suggests enhancing these resources to ensure more youth are reached before it's too late. And we identify ways that systems can work together to combat some of these linked drivers of homelessness and trafficking, including recommending that the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs and the Department of Family and Protective Services join forces to identify and eliminate service gaps for youth experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness.

As part of its mission to prevent human trafficking, Texas must make it a priority to prevent youth homelessness. While the problem may seem daunting, our report found many strengths that state leaders can build upon. We have confidence that ending homelessness for Texas' young people is within our reach – and that in doing so, the state will prevent the atrocity of human trafficking before it ever occurs.

*Fowler is the executive director of Texas Appleseed. Gendron is the executive director of Texas Network of Youth Services.*

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