

BMJ Open Interventions for socioeconomic inclusion and post-traumatic growth in youth with histories of homelessness and sex trafficking: a scoping review protocol

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ABSTRACT

Introduction Although often treated as separate social issues, youth homelessness and sex trafficking overlap as homelessness can be both a cause and a consequence of being trafficked. The primary goal of this scoping review is to understand the existing evidence on interventions for youth who have experienced homelessness and/or sex trafficking. We will identify potential differences in intervention design based on gender and Indigeneity and for youth who identify as two-spirited, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer.

Methods We will use the scoping review framework originally developed by Arskey and O'Malley and later refined by Peters *et al*. Ongoing consultation will mainly occur through a Lived Experience Expert Committee, which consists of eight survivors of youth homelessness and sex trafficking, chaired by two survivors. This review was registered with the Open Science Framework and will follow the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews guidelines. We will search for articles published between 2015 and 2026 in MEDLINE (Ovid), PsycINFO (Ovid), Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (EBSCO), Social Work Abstracts (Ovid) and Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (Proquest). We will include both published and unpublished literature from high-income countries that report on interventions or programmes supporting social, economic or post-traumatic growth for young people aged 16–29 who have experienced homelessness or been involved in the sex industry. Data will be extracted using Covidence software and charted using a piloted data-charting table. Data will be analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Frequency counts will be produced for each data extraction category. We will apply basic qualitative content analysis to map the various types of interventions and identify characteristics of the articles, such as data on subpopulations.

Ethics and dissemination This scoping review does not involve human participants and therefore does not require approval from an institutional ethics board. However, we are dedicated to ongoing reflexivity, authentic partnerships

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

- ⇒ The review includes academic and grey literature on homelessness and sex trafficking.
- ⇒ The review is registered with Open Science Framework (OSF) and follows Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) reporting guidelines.
- ⇒ The review employs rigorous screening and charting methods.
- ⇒ The review uses participatory methods and consultation with lived-experience experts.
- ⇒ The review does not highlight the quality of research or the effectiveness of interventions.

with lived experience experts, fair compensation and efforts to reduce the risk of retraumatisation. The scoping review will inform the development of an intervention for youth who have experienced homelessness and sex trafficking and will be codesigned with lived experts. We will also disseminate our findings in peer-reviewed journals and through conference presentations.

INTRODUCTION

Youth homelessness and sex trafficking are urgent global social issues. Youth homelessness is defined as “young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of their parents or caregivers and do not have a stable or consistent residence”.¹ Sex trafficking is a form of human trafficking where individuals are coerced or forced to use their bodies for financial gain through sexual acts.² Although often treated as separate concerns, youth homelessness and sex trafficking intersect in many ways. For example, homelessness can be both a risk factor for being trafficked and a consequence of trafficking. The experience of homelessness is a well-established risk

factor for being lured into sex trafficking,^{3–5} with many youths who leave home turning to traffickers for basic needs such as food, shelter, safety, human connection and love.⁶ Additionally, many trafficking survivors face homelessness when they try to escape traffickers.⁷ As a result, many youths seek services at community agencies with histories of both sex trafficking and homelessness.

Research shows that homelessness and sex trafficking among youth share common risk factors, including family conflict, abuse, child welfare involvement, poverty, substance use, juvenile detention and poor mental health.^{4 5 8} Many youth who experience homelessness and/or trafficking have faced adverse childhood events, which are further worsened by the traumas linked to these experiences.⁹ Trafficking is especially traumatic, with survivors often enduring severe abuse and violence, along with a loss of freedom. Indigenous youth and those who identify as two-spirited, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer (2SLGBTQ+) face higher risks for both issues^{10–13} and women and girls make up around 94% of police-reported sex trafficking survivors in Canada.¹⁴ Facing youth homelessness or sex trafficking independently leads to numerous negative effects, such as poor mental and physical health, substance use, school disengagement, negative law enforcement encounters and poverty, with these impacts worsened for those experiencing both challenges.

Youth who experience homelessness and trafficking, therefore, have complex and multifaceted needs. They require a holistic approach to lay the foundation for long-term transitions from these experiences and to promote equity in various social and economic domains. Without services that address their unique needs and circumstances, youth may remain trapped in a cycle of homelessness and trafficking, experiencing high rates of recidivism in both. These traumatic experiences occur during adolescence and emerging adulthood, which are key periods for identity development and shaping future life paths. Despite this, a significant knowledge gap remains regarding the best ways to support youth with these intersecting experiences.

Existing research has primarily focused on interventions for either youth who have experienced homelessness or survivors of sex trafficking. Separate systematic reviews have examined interventions for youth and adult survivors of sex trafficking^{15–20} and for youth homelessness.^{21–23} Although these reviews highlight promising interventions, most emphasise the need for more evidence on effective strategies for both groups. To our knowledge, no reviews have examined interventions that could support transitions from the overlapping experiences of sex trafficking and youth homelessness. This gap in evidence-based options hampers the development of comprehensive approaches to better support these vulnerable populations. Although research on interventions for youth who have experienced both sex trafficking and homelessness is limited, intersecting risk factors and experiences suggest that reviewing both bodies of

literature may yield valuable insights necessary to support these young people. Moreover, because of the overlap between these experiences, youth may have encountered both situations yet participate in an intervention where one is the primary focus (such as homelessness). This underscores the need for a more integrated understanding of how intersecting vulnerabilities influence youth outcomes and highlights the importance of co-designing interventions that effectively address these overlapping needs.

The primary goal of this scoping review is to understand the current evidence on interventions for youth who have experienced homelessness and/or sex trafficking. This will be achieved through three specific objectives:

1. Map out similarities and differences in the interventions studied across the two literature streams. For example, are certain types of interventions more likely to be designed and tested for youth experiencing homelessness or trafficking? Is there any overlap between the interventions?
2. Research whether any interventions have been developed for individuals who have experienced or are currently experiencing both homelessness and sex trafficking.
3. Determine the extent to which youth who have experienced both are mentioned in the intervention literature but not explicitly. For example, homelessness or trafficking is listed as the primary experience, with the other as a secondary one. In these cases, we will explore whether the connections between experiences affect the interventions in any way or if there are differences among interventions depending on whether one experience is primary.

For all objectives, we will identify potential adaptations or differences in intervention design based on gender, Indigeneity and 2SLGBTQ+ identity.

This scoping review will answer the following questions:

1. What is the current state of knowledge on interventions that support youth transitioning from homelessness and/or sex trafficking, and where are the gaps?
2. What types of interventions have been developed for youth experiencing homelessness, and which ones have been created for youth who have been trafficked? What are the similarities between these interventions?
3. How do the characteristics of interventions differ depending on which experience is listed as primary and which are considered accompanying?
4. What are potential adaptations made to interventions to ensure they are culturally relevant and meet the needs of subpopulations of youth who disproportionately experience homelessness and trafficking?

METHODS

This scoping review is the first phase of a larger participatory action research project focused on co-designing a multicomponent intervention for youth with experiences of sex trafficking and homelessness (discussed further

below). A scoping review methodology was chosen for its suitability to the exploratory research questions and the need to assess the current evidence, identify gaps and map key concepts.²⁴ The approach is also sufficiently broad to incorporate knowledge from diverse evidence types, study designs and social concerns.²⁵

We will use the scoping review framework originally developed by Arskey and O'Malley²⁶ and later refined by Peters *et al.*²⁷ Arskey and O'Malley²⁶ outlined five steps, including identifying the research question, locating relevant studies, selecting studies, charting the data, and collating and summarising the data. The authors list a sixth step of consultation as optional. Subsequent work by Levac *et al.*²⁸ and Pollock *et al.*²⁹ deemed this step necessary, arguing that consultation should be conducted at every stage of the research whenever possible. We agree with this position since our research approach is grounded in a participatory method that emphasises the importance of knowledge gained through lived experience. Ongoing consultation will primarily occur through a Lived Experience Expert Committee (LEEC), which consists of eight survivors of youth homelessness and sex trafficking. Two survivors also co-chair the LEEC. Members of the LEEC were engaged via snowball sampling methods led by the co-chairs of the LEEC. The LEEC will meet monthly, sharing research progress with members to gather feedback and generate new ideas. Their consultation efforts will focus on five key tasks: (1) developing the consultation process itself; (2) providing feedback on the protocol, including research questions and inclusion and exclusion criteria; (3) validating and contributing to the analysis, findings and implications of the scoping review; (4) aiding the knowledge mobilisation process and (5) contributing to the development of research methodology and implementation in phase 2.^{28 30} Information from consultations will be narratively reported in the scoping review.³⁰

In 2020, Peters *et al.*²⁷ expanded on Arskey and O'Malley's²⁶ framework for conducting scoping reviews by including additional steps such as presenting the findings, summarising conclusions and outlining the implications of the results. We will review the current state of evidence in both the academic and grey literature. Since a scoping review methodology is used, we will not assess the quality of evidence or develop specific practice recommendations.²⁷ The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) extension for Scoping Reviews guidelines for reporting scoping reviews will be followed.³¹

The findings from the scoping review will be shared in the second phase through a series of workshops with lived experts, who will reflect on and build upon the literature findings to codesign an intervention that combines housing with other services survivors consider essential for healing and advancing socioeconomic inclusion. We are dedicated to decolonising this research, which will include an Indigenous-led and operated component. This encompasses the workshop, analysis and dissemination of

findings for Indigenous survivors who wish to contribute to developing an intervention specifically for them.

Identification of relevant literature

Search strategy

An initial search strategy was developed using the Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System (MEDLINE) (Ovid), focused on the concepts of homeless youth, sex trafficking and interventions by a librarian (YL) (see online supplemental file 1) for Medline search strategy). Given the complex and overlapping definitions of sex trafficking and coercion, members of the LEEC felt it was important to include broader definitions of sex work in the search terms. The search will cover publications from 2015 to 2026. The strategy was refined collaboratively with the research team through discussions. Further revisions were made after the strategy was peer-reviewed by a health science librarian following the Peer Review of Electronic Search Strategies guidelines.³²

The finalised search strategy will be applied across the following databases: MEDLINE (Ovid), the Psychological Information Database (PsycINFO) (Ovid), the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (EBSCO), Social Work Abstracts (Ovid), and Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (Proquest). Reference lists of included articles will also be screened to identify additional relevant literature.

We will review grey literature using a modified version of the process outlined by Godin *et al.*,³³ which includes four strategies. First, we will search grey literature databases, including the Canadian Research Index, Canadian Public Document Collection, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, OpenGrey and Social Care Online. Several of the academic databases, such as ProQuest, also index grey literature sources. Second, we will conduct customised Google searches using keyword combinations from the academic database searches. The team will rely on Google's relevance-based document sorting, as it will likely not be possible to review all the content in each search result.³³ The team will stop reviewing search results once 10 consecutive websites are deemed irrelevant. Potentially relevant sources will be bookmarked for screening, and the team will track which keywords led to each resource in a spreadsheet. Third, we will consult content experts in the youth homelessness and/or anti-sex trafficking sectors to identify recommended information sources and websites. Experts will be identified through our networks and Google searches. This consultation will also inform the fourth strategy: browsing relevant websites.

Study selection

Article titles and abstracts will be reviewed by three research assistants (RAs) (AR, KC, MP), who will classify each title as 'include', 'exclude', or 'uncertain'. To ensure consistency, the RAs will review a sample of 40 identical articles to assess their level of agreement on inclusion. Any disagreements will be discussed among the RAs and

the broader research team until a consensus is reached. Full texts of articles marked as 'include' or 'uncertain' will be reviewed. A PRISMA flowchart will be created to depict the decision-making process.

We will include both published and unpublished literature that reports on the following inclusion criteria: (1) describes an intervention or programme that facilitates social, economic or post-traumatic growth, such as housing, mental health, employment or improving family and social connections; (2) is for young people aged 16–29 (this age range aligns with child welfare mandates and federal definitions of youth in Ontario, Canada, where the programme will be piloted^{34 35}); (3) is designed for youth who have experienced homelessness or have participated in the sex industry; (4) is based in a high-income country; and (5) was published between 2015 and 2026 (this timeframe was chosen to ensure interventions reflect the current context). Given the potential scarcity of information about interventions for youth who have experienced both sex trafficking and homelessness, this inclusion criterion may be broadened.

The exclusion criteria for this review are as follows: (1) articles not published in English, (2) interventions lacking a sample of youth aged 16–29, (3) articles published before 2015 and (4) interventions that are policy-based rather than programmatic.

Data extraction

Covidence software will be used to screen articles and extract relevant data. Data will be extracted and charted using a piloted data charting table. The charting table will be piloted by having the RAs review two to three of the same articles from each type of source. The team will meet and discuss whether the charting table is sufficient or if additional categories should be added. The initial table will include information based on the following categories:

1. Descriptive information, including authors, title, publication source, year of publication and country of intervention.
2. Target populations, such as youth experiencing homelessness, individuals involved in the sex industry (with specified mention of trafficking and general sex industry) or both. Any specific subpopulations will also be charted.
3. For relevant articles, the connection between sex industry involvement and youth homelessness.
4. Information about the intervention, including the type (housing, mental health, employment, etc.) and other relevant details such as duration.
5. Key findings from articles and results, where relevant.

The research team will meet every 2 weeks to review consistency in the extraction process.

Synthesis and presentation of results

Data will be synthesised both quantitatively and qualitatively. Frequency counts for each data extraction category (eg, number of articles listing housing interventions) will

be provided. We will use basic qualitative content analysis to map out the different types of interventions²⁹ and identify various characteristics of the articles, such as data on subpopulations. A deductive approach to content analysis will be used initially to identify content based on the main categories from the data extraction table. Notes will also be taken on any themes that emerge inductively. The team will decide whether to incorporate new themes.

Findings will be presented in two tables: one detailing the types of interventions from the separate literature streams of homelessness and sex trafficking and the other focusing on the literature where youth have both experiences. Further visual tools will be considered in the analysis phase to determine which one is the best fit given the findings.³⁶

Ethics and dissemination

Since this scoping review does not involve human participants, it does not require approval from an institutional ethics board. However, our commitment to a participatory approach calls for a strong emphasis on ethical practices, including ongoing reflexivity, genuine partnership rather than tokenism, and fair compensation for all individuals with lived experience. We also aim to minimise the risk of retraumatisation by ensuring discussions focus on creating solutions instead of traumatic experiences, and by establishing support structures and debriefing processes.

The scoping review will inform the development of an intervention for youth who have experienced homelessness and sex trafficking, and it will be codesigned with lived experts. This intervention will be piloted and evaluated for feasibility and effectiveness. We also plan to disseminate the review findings through a peer-reviewed journal and conference presentations. This will help improve services for youth with these experiences, as well as various subpopulations, ideally enabling service providers to tailor interventions to address their specific needs. Given the participatory and anti-colonial approaches to this research, we will also share lessons learnt from these approaches to guide other researchers interested in adopting more equitable methods.

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Contributors Conceptualisation of the review was done by AN, JC and KMcD. All team members met weekly to discuss and agree upon the various components

of the protocol, with AN creating the draft. YL created the search strategy. JR and JV led the consultations with the LEEC. All team members reviewed, edited and approved the protocol. Guarantor author: AN, amanda.noble@utoronto.ca.

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