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An Exploratory Study of Adolescent Pimping Relationships

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Abstract

In the last decade, public attention to the problem of commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC) has grown. This exploratory qualitative study examines adolescent pimping relationships, including how urban youth perceive these types of relationships. Study data stem from interviews with three young adult informants with first-hand knowledge of adolescent pimping, as well as three gender-specific focus group discussions with a convenience sample of 26 urban high school students who have first- or second-hand knowledge of adolescent pimping. Findings indicate that respondents believe teen pimping exists in their schools and communities, and that those exploited typically do not self-identify as victims. Respondents also believed that younger pimps are more likely to use violence to induce compliance among the girls they exploit, whereas older pimps are more likely to emotionally manipulate young women into exploitation. Further, respondents indicated that some young people agreed to exchange or sell sex for money as a favor to their boyfriends or girlfriends, and some young people believed that selling sex is acceptable under certain circumstances. The growing attention to CSEC provides an important opportunity to expand prevention efforts to reach those most affected and at risk for exploitation. The findings highlight critical areas for augmenting traditional content in school-based HIV/STI and sexuality education classes.

In the last decade, public attention to the problem of commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC) has grown. Each year, approximately 244,000-325,000 youth are at risk of becoming victims of sexual exploitation in the U.S. (Estes & Weiner, 2001); however, the true scope of the issue is not fully understood, given the exceptional challenges associated with identifying victims, gaining access to key informants, and imprecise data collection methodologies (Melrose, 2002; U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). From the limited studies that do exist, data reveal that pimps target girls between the ages of 12-14 with particular vulnerabilities to recruit them into the commercial sex industry (Reid & Jones, 2011), using

a number of recruitment strategies (e.g., violence, expressions of love) (Kennedy, Klein, Bristowe, Cooper, & Yuille, 2007; Norton-Hawk, 2004). Many of these young people are runaways, come from abusive homes, and/or have low self-esteem (Williamson & Cluse-Tolar, 2002).

While working with urban alternative high schools in a large metropolitan city, we learned about adolescent boys who serve as pimps for girls from the same school. These girls, who view the pimps as their boyfriends, are asked to provide sexual favors to other males as a way to help the young men get money. The purpose of this paper is to fill a gap in the existing literature by providing some insight into how adolescents in, or familiar with, pimp-controlled relationships perceive them. Understanding how young people view these types of relationships is critical for developing and implementing effective prevention efforts that extend across multiple levels of adolescents' ecological contexts.

Method

Participants

We conducted this study in two phases during 2007-2008. The first of these consisted of interviews with young adult informants (two females, one male, mean age = 24) with first-hand knowledge of adolescent pimping (i.e., they provided direct services to sexually exploited youth and/or had previous direct experience with these types of relationships). We recruited and consented informants by means of a word-of-mouth approach that was part of a different intervention study.

Phase two included gender-specific focus group discussions (2 female groups; 1 male group) with a convenience sample of 26 students (21 female, 5 male, and majority African-American) to gauge how much the youth knew about pimping relationships, and to learn more about the adolescents involved in these relationships. Youth ages 14-18 were recruited from several classes within the school in which we first learned about this phenomenon. Most participants knew someone (e.g., a friend or relative) who had been involved in these types of relationships and several disclosed they had direct experience (e.g., had either been pimped or had served as a pimp). Initially we sought to recruit only youth directly involved in pimping relationships, but the informants cautioned us that youth are often reluctant to disclose their relationships out of fear for their own safety. The school administration granted permission for focus groups to occur during the school day (i.e., at lunch). Participating students had parental permission and assented to take part in the study. The study was conducted with approval of the Institutional Review Board at the funded institution.

Data Collection/Measures—Study investigators designed the informant interview protocol to solicit information about the broader issue of teen pimping, how these relationships develop, and how they are viewed by adolescents familiar with them. Informants also provided suggestions about appropriate language to use in asking other youth about this issue. The student focus group protocol was informed by what we learned from the informant interviews. The first set of questions focused on teen and sexual relationships broadly and on decision making regarding sexual behavior within romantic

relationships, followed by specific questions about teen pimping relationships and those individuals involved in them.

Trained health educators from the local community used scripted protocols to lead the informant interviews and the student focus groups. Both the interviews and focus groups each lasted about an hour and began with a short description of the study, a review of confidentiality agreements, and the assent process. We recorded all conversations with the permission of the participants. Participants received a \$20 gift card for their time.

Data Analysis

Consistent with the grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003), a senior author and the first author double coded the interviews and focus group transcripts, grouping the data by key questions to identify emerging themes and sub-themes within and across the interviews. Another team member checked 10% of the transcripts for consistency in the themes. We used direct quotes to represent the types of responses received.

Results

Study results are organized into the following themes that emerged from the interviews and focus groups: (1) description of the phenomenon; (2) risk factors for being pimped; (3) perceptions of pimping relationships; (4) perceived relationship benefits and consequences; and (5) disease prevention.

Description of the phenomenon

Youth and informants agreed that pimping exists in their communities and schools, and noted that terms such as pimp, daddy, boyfriend, and sugar daddy were commonly used to describe an individual who sexually exploits another for financial gain. Adult and student participants indicated that both males and females serve as pimps and that young women are increasingly lured into the commercial sex industry by other females pretending to be their friends.

Both informants and students suggested the main differences between younger and older pimps centered on how they recruited young women, and where and how pimps solicited customers. For example, because younger males often lacked experience and had yet to establish their reputations, they used more violence or threats of violence against the young women to establish obedience once recruited.

“Teen pimps usually don’t get the same level of respect [as older pimps] and they might use more violence because of it. Because the girls just view them as their peers.” (Female Informant)

In contrast, participants noted that older pimps were more likely to manipulate girls through emotional control, guilt, or “smooth talking.”

“He could be selling her dreams, telling her, promising her things...” (Female Student) Both groups also suggested that older pimps were more inclined to have their “girls” walking the

street, while younger pimps increasingly relied on the Internet to solicit customers for their girls, which is often an easier and less risky avenue for exploiting young women (Mitchell, Jones, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2001; United States Congress, 2007).

“...You got the Internet and you got the track. The Internet you just sit in the hotel room and do phone calls; the track...she out there moving.” (Male Student)

Risk factors for being pimped

Respondents noted that young women meet pimps in a variety of ways, including being recruited in their communities or by someone they grew up with. Both informants and students indicated that girls as young as 10 and 11 are being pimped.

“Eleven, ten. You got ten year olds and eleven year olds out there...Like right after a girl receives her period, she can be sent out.” (Female Student)

Informants indicated that pimps are aware of vulnerabilities that increase their opportunities to recruit young women and actively pursue those who are estranged from their families or are homeless, in need of money, shelter, or food, or who have low self-esteem.

“A girl could meet her pimp because she's actually looking to be involved for survival. She needs to feed herself, clothe herself, and so she understands the street economy...” (Female Informant)

Perceptions of pimping relationships

Advisors indicated that exploited girls do not self-identify as victims because they do not necessarily view their relationships as unhealthy. They enter into these relationships thinking they are consensual and are unaware that they are being coerced or deceived. Participants noted that young women agree to trade or sell sex as a favor to their “man” to contribute financially to the relationship or to earn his love and commitment.

“A pimp could say to a girl...You know, if you don't do this for me, I'm gonna go out there and have to sell dope again and I'm gonna go to jail.” (Female Informant)

Several female students commented that sex for money is not looked down upon under certain conditions (e.g., it's acceptable to sell sex for one's own benefit – but not through a pimp).

“...Some people don't just go to the track, some got house calls, some go on the Internet. Like them be the dumb ones, like you going out there selling your body, not getting in the shower, none of that, you constantly give your money to him and he don't care about you, and he beating on you and everything. But if you go out there on your own and do what you do why you gotta do it, you know, for, you can keep money for yourself, keep yourself up, it ain't nobody else's business. That's a whole different story.” (Female Student)

Several young men also suggested that it is acceptable to sell or exchange sex for food, clothing, or to help out a loved one. In contrast, adult informants perceived the female students involved in these relationships as being vulnerable, having low self-confidence, and in need of help.

Relationship benefits and consequences

Some of the young women noted that securing material possessions was a benefit of pimping relationships, whereas several young men believed that girls involved with pimps were benefitting from “getting a lot of sex.” Both groups suggested that violence against young women was a consequence of their involvement in pimping relationships, as was the inability to end these relationships. Ending a relationship with a pimp is often extremely difficult because young women are viewed as a pimp's property; any attempts to leave relationships are usually met with threats of violence or intimidation.

“A pimp could say to a girl...I'm gonna turn out your sister. I'm gonna kill your mama.” (Female Informant)

“...Basically if a girl tries to leave her relationship with her pimp she's brought back by any means necessary. So, we've had just two girls in the past thirty days released from juvenile hall, went back home with their parents and were trying to get themselves together and do straight...and their doors were kicked in and pimps took them out by gunpoint. So, basically, like once a pimp invests in you, you become that pimp's property.” (Female Informant)

One advisor also commented that a common strategy pimps use to prevent a young woman from ending the relationship is by getting her pregnant.

“He'll let her have the baby and he'll take care of the baby. And if she ever wants to leave, he'll tell her she's leaving but not with the baby. That's another way of keeping her involved.” (Female Informant)

Disease prevention

Participants noted young women in pimp-controlled relationships have some decision making power regarding whether or not to use condoms; however, they are often paid more if they do not use them.

“Basically, if they get offered more money to go bare they'll usually do it because they're fourteen. If someone says I'll give you two hundred extra bucks to take off the condom, you know...” (Female Informant)

Discussion

This study explored the phenomenon of teenage pimping among a small sample of urban adult informants and students to learn about how adolescents involved in or familiar with these types of relationships perceived them. Both the informants and youth agreed that teen pimping exists in their communities. Most of the younger pimps are male, but pimps are increasingly turning to the young women they are exploiting to assist in recruitment efforts. Respondents believed a pimp's age is associated with different intimidation strategies; younger pimps are more likely to use violence early on to control the girls they exploit, whereas older pimps employ a greater degree of cognitive and emotional manipulation to keep girls under their control.

Our respondents suggested that exploited youth often do not identify as victims; instead, they agree to sell or exchange sex as a favor for a romantic partner (e.g., to help a boyfriend pay bills), for financial reasons (e.g., a girl working for her own benefit without a pimp), or for survival purposes (e.g., food, shelter, or clothing). Our respondents suggested that many young people are coerced into sexual exploitation by someone they care about, and often encounter extreme difficulty in trying to end their relationships or get away from their pimps. However, some of our respondents believed that selling sex was acceptable under certain circumstances. These findings, coupled with the serious physical, mental, and emotional consequences (Reid & Jones, 2011) of involvement in a pimping relationship, underscore the importance of addressing this issue broadly and directly with youth and school officials.

To date, school-based prevention efforts that are focused exclusively on CSEC are rare. One possible avenue for reaching youth more immediately would be to leverage existing school-based programs (e.g., HIV, pregnancy, and violence prevention interventions) in regions where commercial sexual exploitation is high by expanding the content to address issues such as healthy and unhealthy relationships, identifying signs and situations that may place individuals at risk for exploitation (Eyre, Read, & Millstein, 1997), pimp recruitment tactics, and resources for seeking support. This approach could benefit youth by providing information and skills needed to develop healthy relationships, recognize coercive ones, and deglamorize the pimp culture. School personnel would benefit from training and resources on how to support youth in or a target for these relationships.

This study has a number of limitations, most notably the small convenience sample and the exploratory nature of the aims. Nonetheless, the insights provided by participants offer a glimpse into a phenomenon that remains otherwise invisible and inaccessible. The findings highlight critical areas for augmenting traditional content in school-based sexuality education classes or HIV, pregnancy, and violence prevention programs to raise awareness about pimp-controlled relationships, the need to help youth identify healthy and unhealthy relationships, and their potential impact on disease and pregnancy prevention.

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