The Illusions and Juxtapositions of Commercial Sexual Exploitation among Youth: Identifying Effective Street-Outreach Strategies

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Abstract

To explore sexually exploited youths' perspectives of how street outreach workers can effectively provide outreach and connections to services, we conducted qualitative interviews with 13 female participants, ages 14–22, in a Midwestern U.S. city. Participants reported multiple types of exploitation, most first exploited by age 13, plus substance use, and recurrent homelessness. Nearly all had a pimp, and all used the internet as a venue for sexual exploitation. Participants wanted outreach workers to use “soft words” to refer to exploitation. They expressed contradictory images of their “boyfriend” pimps and their exploitation. They wanted outreach workers to “provide resources,” “be non-judgmental,” “listen,” and “care.” Street outreach can be one way to support sexually exploited youth, but should occur in multiple settings.

Keywords

Sexual Exploitation; Street Outreach; Adolescents; Homelessness

Young people who are homeless face daily struggles and decisions that many people could never imagine having to face. For some of them, sexual exploitation, i.e., trading sex for money, drugs, shelter, food, or other goods, may be seen as a way to survive and make an

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income, especially for those who are homeless for longer periods of time (Kennedy, Klein, Bristowe, Cooper & Yuille, 2007). Being homeless for more than one month has been shown to increase the risks for sexual exploitation (Nadon, Koverola, Schludermann, 1998) while other studies have found a disproportionate number of sexually exploited youth are homeless or precariously housed in hotels, abandoned buildings, or other inadequate shelter (Saewyc, MacKay, Drozda & Anderson, 2008; Wilson & Widom, 2010).

There is international consensus that sexual exploitation of children and youth is defined as the exchange of sexual activity for money or other consideration (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989), yet there are a variety of terms used in the literature, even when definitions are the same, contributing to the challenge of estimating the prevalence of sexually exploited adolescents. These terms include: survival sex (Greene, Ennett & Ringwalt, 1999), juveniles involved in prostitution (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2010), sex work (Wilson, Garofalo, Harris, et al., 2009), child prostitution (Willis & Levy, 2002), exchanging sex (Edwards, Iritani & Hallfors, 2006; Saewyc, et al., 2008), and sexual exploitation (Edinburgh, Saewyc, Thao & Levitt, 2006). Researchers have documented at least one in five homeless youth report participating in survival sex (Greene, et al., 1999; Halcon & Lifson, 2003), while others have estimated as many as one in three street-involved youth in Canada have traded sex for money, drugs, and shelter (Saewyc et al., 2008). These rates are considered an underestimate, however, as different sampling methods and approaches can affect the numbers of youth who are found and are willing to disclose their sexual exploitation.

There are many pathways into commercial sexual exploitation, and often multiple concurrent risk factors that contribute to young peoples' ongoing involvement in the sex trade (Kennedy et al., 2007). Histories of sexual abuse and other forms of maltreatment heighten youth's vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation (Wilson & Widom, 2010). Teens who have been sexually abused within the family may run away to escape the abuse, only to become targeted for sexual exploitation while on the street (Edwards, et al. 2006; Saewyc & Edinburgh, 2010). Sexual abuse, whether within or outside the family, can cause alterations in cognitions, interpersonal interactions, and coping responses that can subsequently lead to risky sexual behaviors, and risk for sexual exploitation (Negri, Noll, Shenk, Putman, & Trickett, 2010; Smith, Davis & Fricker-Elhai, 2004).

Ethnic and sexual minority groups are disproportionately represented among homeless and street-involved adolescents, and there is evidence they are also more likely to be targeted for sexual exploitation. In Minnesota, for example, the most recent state-wide survey of homeless people found 37% of homeless youth identified African American, while African American adolescents comprise only 6% of the general youth population (Wilder Research Center, 2010). Similarly, 11% of homeless adolescents were Latino, and 16% of homeless youth identified as American Indian, while these groups make up only 5% and 1% of the general population, respectively. The circumstances are even more disproportionate for sexual minority youth: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth make up 3% to 5% of the general population of adolescents, but between 20% to 40% of homeless youth (Sifra, Quintana, Rosenthal & Krehely, 2010). Studies have found LGBTQ youth are also at higher risk of being sexually exploited than heterosexual teens (Kipke,

O’Conner, Palmer, & Mackenzie, 1995; Saewyc et al., 2008; Gangamma, Slesnick, Toviesi, & Serovich, 2008). A recent study of transgender youth found 67% had engaged in sex work (Wilson, et al., 2009).

Why might minority groups be at greater risk for sexual exploitation? In addition to higher risk of poverty and homelessness, exposure to racism, homophobia, transphobia and similar forms of stigma and discrimination may further contribute to this vulnerability. For example, ethnic minority youth may face difficulty finding employment due to institutionalized racism in education, hiring, and housing, which can increase their forced proximity to gangs and pimps in poverty-stricken neighborhoods, as well as their recruitment into commercial sex work in order to support themselves and family members (Farley, 2006). Wilson and colleagues similarly suggested transgender females might be more likely to engage in sex work due to limited employment options, because of transgender discrimination by employers (2009). For Native youth, the legacy of colonialism and racism continue to marginalize their communities, and contribute to intergenerational stressors such as alcoholism, family violence, and sexual abuse, which also increase their vulnerability to exploitation (Seshia, 2005). Similarly, LGBTQ youth can experience significant family rejection, for example, being kicked out of home when they disclose their orientation or gender identity, as well as significantly higher risk of physical and sexual abuse (Saewyc et al., 2006), and bullying and rejection at school (Birkitt, Espelage & Koenig, 2009). This combination of rejection and violence, and lack of opportunity can make ethnic, sexual, and gender minority youth more vulnerable to those offering exploitive relationships as a substitute for healthy family relationships and friendships.

While exploitation can happen to youth regardless of gender (Saewyc et al., 2008, Wilson et al., 2009), the research literature has mainly focused on girls and young women, as do most services provided to help sexually exploited adolescents. The two are inter-linked: sexual exploitation of girls seems to be more visible and recognizable (Dennis, 2008), so services are focused toward those who are visible, and then most research recruit samples from among those who access these services. When researchers draw upon population-based studies, however, or samples whose original research purpose was not focused solely on sexual exploitation, the evidence suggests that boys and young men are equally likely to be exploited as girls and young women (Edwards et al., 2006; Nicholson, Homma, & Saewyc, 2011; Pederson & Hegna, 2003). It is also possible that sexual exploitation is more stigmatizing for boys, and thus they are less likely to be willing to disclose their abuse; this may be due to internalized homophobia, if their abusers are male, or due to gender role expectations about males being “in charge” of sexual relationships, and so cannot be exploited or abused (Dennis, 2008). Certainly boys are less likely to disclose sexual abuse, and even when they tell someone, it is several months later, on average, than among girls (Edinburgh, Saewyc & Levitt, 2005).

Although involvement with or control by a pimp is less common among sexually exploited boys (Saewyc et al., 2008; Dennis, 2008), this is not the case for girls, many of whom are involved with a pimp, who recruits them and then exploits them while using either violence and intimidation, or charm and emotional manipulation (Kennedy et al., 2007; Phoenix, 2002). Pimps are often effective in manipulating girls by feigning love and affection to

convince them to become involved in or to stay involved in prostitution (Kennedy, et al., 2007). There is also evidence that once sexual exploitation occurs, it becomes progressively more difficult for young people to “get out” over time, as a result of personal shame or fear of their pimp’s reaction. This may keep exploited teens on the streets and unwilling to ask for help.

Exploited youth are at high risk for being the victim of other types of violence, as well as experiencing poor health due to depression, self-harm and suicide attempts, substance abuse, sexually transmitted infections and early pregnancy (Edinburgh et al., 2008; Parriott & Auerswald, 2009; Roy, et al., 2000; Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck & Cauce, 2001). For example, 60% of sexually exploited older street youth in western Canada had used heroin, compared to only 29% of non-exploited peers (Saewyc et al., 2008). In a study of transgender adolescents in Chicago, sexually exploited transgender youth were 8.95 times more likely to have used street drugs such as crystal methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin, or ketamine than their non-exploited peers (Wilson et al., 2009).

While existing research focuses on the demographics and risk behaviors of runaway, homeless and exploited youth, there is limited information about how to identify street youth who are being sexually exploited. Research suggests that many youth do not access shelters and reject service providers who do not meet their needs (Slesnick et al., 2009; Hyde, 2005; Robertson & Toro, 1999). An additional concern is sexually exploited minors may have limited options available for age-appropriate shelters, or the ability to access health care providers without insurance (Kang, Slesnick, & Glassman 2009). Street-outreach is one method to find and connect homeless, sexually exploited youth to local providers, but there is even less information about strategies to provide effective outreach and supportive services for sexually exploited youth. None of the existing research to date appears to have asked sexually exploited adolescents what they want from street outreach workers and supportive services to help meet their needs, but only one study of adult women in North Carolina (Arnold, Stewart, & McNeece, 2000).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the sexual exploitation experiences and service needs of sexually exploited homeless youth in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, in order to understand current pathways into exploitation and how outreach workers can best support exploited teens.

Methods

In the fall of 2008, four street outreach workers who work with sexually exploited youth conducted qualitative interviews as part of a needs assessment of exploited youths’ experiences of being involved in the sex trade, current trends in the sex trade, and what types of street outreach approaches and services they found effective. Venue-based sampling was used for this study to recruit participants from youth shelters, street corners or areas where exploited youth congregate, as well as from a support group for girls who had been sexually exploited. Although the project was open to exploited youth of any gender, twelve girls and one transgender (male to female) youth ranging in ages from 14 to 22 agreed to participate in the research. The participants self identified their race as 6 African-American, 2

Caucasian, 1 Native-American, and 4 multi-racial. Nearly one third of participants (4 of 13) identified their sexual orientation as gay, lesbian or bisexual. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, and a stipend of \$25.00 was paid for her time, which was considered a relatively small incentive compared to the amount they might typically charge for the same amount of time engaged in sex work. Youth who were visibly emotionally distressed (had recently experienced violence or a traumatic event, or were crying, for example) or appeared to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs (if the participant could not form sentences or talk coherently) were not interviewed. Further in-depth analysis of these interviews for this study was approved by Children's Hospital of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board.

All four interviewers had extensive experience working with sexually exploited youth and came from diverse backgrounds (Native American, sexual minority, and formerly homeless youth). Interviews were semi-structured, and were captured in field notes with brief verbatim quotes documented as often as possible. Participants were asked their opinions, as experts about their life circumstances, about a variety of topics including: paths to entrance into prostitution, types of exploitation experienced, living situations, how the environment affects their actions, services used, and how alcohol and drugs are used in the context of exploitation. Participants were also asked, "What might be respectful and effective approaches and interventions for working with sexually exploited girls and young women?" This question was further clarified for those who did not understand, by adding, "How would you like to be approached or met by a street outreach worker?"

Detailed interview field notes were coded using the ATLAS.ti 5.0 program by the research team (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2006). Each investigator read the interviews, they then met together and discussed the interviews, section by section, before coding. The coding was done as a group, and content were analyzed along domains of experience and the meaning of sexual exploitation practices, coping strategies, accessing health care, and using outreach services geared to homeless youth.

Results

All of the participants experienced multiple types of sexual exploitation in venues ranging from private homes, spas, strip clubs, hotels, brothels and street prostitution. All the participants experienced homelessness and described substance use. The majority had been in government care in either a juvenile detention center, in foster care, hospitalized for mental health issues or in substance abuse treatment; most girls reported more than one type of placement.

Four themes emerged from the analyses, focused around *pathways into prostitution*, the *juxtapositions and illusions of "sex work"*, the *locations of exploitation*, and "*soft words*" from street outreach workers.

Pathways into prostitution

There were multiple pathways for girls to be involved in prostitution and most were exploited by 13 years of age. One girl talked about waiting at her school bus stop, and a man drove up and offered her money for sex. Other responses from participants included: "I

started at age 14 because I was kicked out of the house, and homeless, and was friends with a female pimp, who said she could show me an easy way to make money”; meeting boyfriends who provided them with gifts; and being introduced to the sex trade when at age 15 by “friends” who brought her with them to private parties. Running away, homelessness, incest, and a history of contact with child protective services often preceded involvement in exploitation. One participant indicated that, at age 7, her mother would “force her to have sex with people so she could get drugs.” This same girl was later exploited by another pimp, from age 13 through 18.

The illusions and juxtapositions of “sex work”

Girls described their exploitation with contradictory images of their relationships with pimps and the reasons they entered and remained involved in prostitution. Eight girls who described their pimp as a “boyfriend,” and described him with positive attributes when discussing their relationship, including: feeling included in his group of friends; finding the pimp easy to talk to; and the pimp would buy CD’s, clothes and jewelry. One participant even said, “Pimps are seen as friends that like to party and have drugs.” Some of the participants stated they saw their pimp as protection, indicating street prostitution was dangerous, but the “boyfriend” pimp protected them on unsafe streets. Despite these positive perspectives and the view of pimp as a protector, five participants described various levels of abuse by their pimp, ranging from being punched or hit, to being shoved or having her jaw broken. Participants reported violence, coercion and isolation as part of the on-going power dynamic between them and their “boyfriend” pimps. While there was the illusion of protection from pimps, in reality, pimps were often threatening and violent.

Girls also described being coerced to use drugs, and being isolated from mainstream girls. Some pimps provided drugs to help the girls cope with exploitation. Eight girls described how the drug trade was intimately involved with trading sex. Girls described how “Using (drugs) makes engaging in prostitution easier,” for example: “E [ecstasy] keeps you awake and increases your sex drive.” Another girl explained that “when stripping or escorting, women use thizzle [a single tablet of ecstasy] to loosen up, and a pimp will give you heroin and weed to control the girls, and sometimes people drink before streetwalking.” Drug and alcohol became part of the life of exploitation. Several girls described how providing “alcohol and drugs is a way for pimps to keep the girls in.”

Many of the participants viewed their sex work as a positive experience that would earn them significant sums of money. The notion that sex work was a lucrative career came from boyfriends and peers. Four girls explained that “calls range from one hundred to six hundred dollars” and another girl said, “it’s addictive, you can do twenty to twenty-five tricks a day, that’s \$4,000 and money makes the world go round.” The ability to earn money was one way that the girls justified their on-going involvement in sexual exploitation. While girls described the sex industry as a place to make money, all but one girl also described being homeless, and half reported five or more episodes of homelessness. One girl stated that she was homeless “off and on since I was 12 and have been homeless three times since the age of 16.”

Participants who were proud of the amount of money they could earn also believed that non-sexually exploited girls had negative and derogatory views about them. They described others as saying they were “dumb, stink, or a ho with no goals.” One participant said that “people only see me as a prostitute and not as a person,” and that they thought she could “escape from prostitution if she only wanted to.”

Participants who identified as lesbian, bisexual or transgender reported different experiences within the sex trade than heterosexual participants. For example, some of the participants reported that they were paid more for a same-sex or bisexual encounter than a heterosexual encounter. Many of these same girls spoke of having “business arrangements” with people of the opposite genders; regardless of a girl’s sexual orientation, she engaged in sexual acts with either gender to potentially have a place to sleep or for income. With only one transgender female in the study, it was not possible to identify how being transgender might influence exploitation experiences.

Locations of exploitation

While street-based prostitution commonly occurred, it co-occurred with other types of exploitation (see table 1). None of the participants were exploited in only one venue, they would trade sex for a time in a hotel, strip club, on the street, massage parlor or in a private home. When exploitation occurred in a private home, the home typically belonged to a friend, a pimp or a customer.

The internet was used by all the participants, and sexual exploitation arranged on the internet involved a variety of social networking sites. Girls met their abusers/tricks on Craigslist, in chat-rooms, My Space, and Black Planet. Participants viewed the Internet as easy to use, safe, and a source of people who have “money to spend.” One girl explained, “Most people are choosing to work on the Internet because they feel it is safer than working on the streets.” Some participants felt that the internet could be used as a tool “to meet professional men from out of state and at the Casino.” Participants also viewed the Internet as a means to market themselves and increase the numbers of business exchanges. It was being used “as a marketing tool, quicker way of getting around, easier way of not being seen,” for example, as one participant stated, “It is a lot easier to find people on the Internet on MYSPACE. There are a lot of people on there looking to ‘hook up’.” Another participant explained that using on-line social networking sites provided “more access to find men that want to hook up. It makes it faster to meet someone online and find out what they do and then just go straight to their place or a hotel.”

“Soft words” from street outreach workers

Participants identified specific interaction styles that were important to them in engaging with outreach workers. They wanted street outreach workers to “be real and respectful,” “build up their trust with girls,” “be brief and not push themselves on people,” “provide us with resources,” “be non judgmental, listen, be in a place without bars on the windows,” and “care.” Participant also wanted professionals to use “soft words” when talking to them about their exploitation. “Girls are afraid of being judged; street outreach workers should ask them

if they are working,” said one participant, and added, “be general and don’t come out and say that you are working with girls who are working.” Another participant referred to exploitation as “the game,” and said men will sometimes approach girls and say they want to kick it.

Participants were asked what types of supplies they would like street outreach workers to carry with them. They identified condoms and lubricant as their primary need, followed by hygiene supplies. Half of the participants wanted street outreach workers to carry information about service providers with them. Clothing other than underwear and socks, as well as gift cards, and bus tokens were requested by only one or two participants. Other items that were not mentioned regularly included cosmetic sponges, used inter-vaginally to mask menstrual periods, as well as mace and first aid kits, possibly denoting concerns about safety.

Discussion

Four main themes described the experiences of exploitation and service needs of these sexually exploited girls. *Pathways into prostitution* started early, often by age 13 and included past history of family violence and running away. *The juxtapositions and illusions of “sex work”* revealed the coercion and control behind the rationalization of pimps as “boyfriends” and exploitation as lucrative “sex work.” Despite these illusionary positive perspectives, nearly all the participants had been homeless, were coerced into using alcohol and drugs to cope with their exploitation, and had been seriously assaulted by pimps or others. Regardless of orientation, they were pressured into sexual acts with either gender. These young women reported multiple, diverse venues as *locations of exploitation*, including social networking sites on the internet. Because of the pervasive stigma of sexual exploitation, the participants wanted “*soft words*” from street outreach workers, by which they meant both euphemistic terms for exploitation as well as respectful, non-judgmental and caring interactions with street outreach workers.

Many of our findings were mirrored in other qualitative studies with women involved in prostitution (Kennedy et al., 2007). In most cases, it seemed as though the participants involved in our study used the illusion they were earning money through “sex work” to mask the painful truth that they were being exploited, because they felt they had no other choices. This illusion, that being exploited can bring opportunities many girls on the streets do not have--money, a place to live, food and love from a “boyfriend”/pimp--may make it difficult for them to escape exploitation.

Street outreach is a type of intervention that is rooted in harm reduction and “meeting people where they are,” which is why it may be a successful method of identifying, approaching and engaging with sexually exploited girls and young women. In street outreach approaches, they may feel a greater sense of control, because the approach and interaction is taking place on their “turf.” Street outreach workers are often some of the first people that sexually exploited young women may ask for help, and need to listen carefully for the subtle disclosures and requests. If an outreach worker or service provider does not recognize that exploited young women may use other “soft words” to describe their involvement in the sex

trade, they may miss this completely, and not be able to provide the appropriate approach and support.

As with other research (Young & Rice 2010) the settings where exploitation occurred varied widely, from street to strip club to the internet. Street-outreach efforts to locate youth and provide supplies, linkage to shelters and community services, are primarily limited to the street and not these other venues. Outreach workers may need to consider novel venues and internet outreach as strategies for connecting with sexually exploited young women.

There were many potential lost opportunities for these young women to have received help, in the foster care system, mental health system, and juvenile detention, yet none of these systems seemed able to offer a clear path for preventing exploitation or helping teens exit ongoing exploitation or homelessness. The participants also did not identify these systems as places that provided them sensitive, personalized care or targeted services meeting their individualized needs. A public health nursing model using advanced practice nurses working directly with street outreach workers might be an additional useful approach, helping to connect teens to health care, social services, and housing (Saewyc & Edinburgh, 2010).

While it may seem counterintuitive to help sexually exploited girls and young women by providing supplies that may allow them to continue being exploited, meeting their identified needs is an important means of establishing trust. Such nonjudgmental care may encourage them to seek out street outreach workers again for referrals to other services. This can be likened to the “pre-contemplation stage” in Baker, Dalla, and Williamson’s model of women exiting prostitution (2010), which was adapted from the transtheoretical stages of change theory. In the earliest “pre-contemplation” stage, outreach workers connect with youth who may not be considering leaving situations where they are exploited. During this time, providers can assist with meeting their immediate needs, providing health education, and engaging them in safety planning.

Limitations

The limitations of this study should be considered. The research involved a relatively small sample of only young women from a single Midwest metropolitan area in the United States. Since sexual exploitation is an illegal activity, and one that could have perceived or real repercussions in violence from pimps, this makes it difficult to locate a large number of participants who are willing to be open and discuss their experiences. As well, the participants were recruited primarily from services for street-involved and homeless youth, which did not turn out to be a venue for successfully recruiting sexually exploited young men. In Minneapolis and St. Paul, there are no supportive services specific to sexually exploited males. The sexual exploitation experiences and service needs of boys and young men may be quite different, as might the experiences of those who are exploited but are not homeless, or those from other regions. At the same time, the similarities between the perspectives and experiences reported by these young women and slightly older women in Vancouver (Kennedy et al., 2007) and in Florida (Arnold et al., 2000) suggests these results may be relevant to street outreach work among sexually exploited young women, at least, in other regions of North America. More specific and targeted outreach (both street and internet) should be conducted in order to locate and build trust with the males involved in

sexual exploitation. Future qualitative studies should focus on the experiences of sexually exploited boys and young men, their use of services, and ways that street outreach workers might effectively support what may be an even more marginalized group.

Sexual exploitation of young women is initiated in multiple venues, including the internet. Exploited girls may have an illusion of what they are doing that differs from reality, as a way of coping with their harsh experiences, and the path out of exploitation may be difficult. Street-outreach needs to creatively expand how services are delivered to effectively locate and meet the needs of this population, as a first step.

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TABLE 1**Participant Gender and Background Information**

	N
Total	13
Female	12
Transgender	1 *
LGBT Identified	5
Institutional Intervention	
Juvenile Detention Center	9
Foster Care	9
Hospitalization	11
Substance Abuse Treatment	6
Location of Sex Work	
Hotel	8
Strip Club	6
Street Based	12
Home	2
Pimp's Home	6
Perpetrator's Home	6
Peers' Home	2
Car	4
Night Club	4
Where Girl was Living while Exploited	
Couch Hopping	6
Shelter	4
Family	4
Independently	1
Boyfriend/Pimp	9
Street	0 **

* Identified as female.

** None identified as living on the streets.