

Pathways Into Sex Work: Risk Factors and Critical Life Experiences Predicting Youth and
Young Adult Participation in Transactional Sex

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by:

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Despite the existence of several laws in Canada to protect young people from sexual exploitation, the involvement of youth and young adults in the sex trade remains an important public health issue. While it is difficult to determine the overall prevalence of sex trade involvement among Canadian youth, it is estimated that between 12% and 32% of street youth report a history of prostitution (Weber, Boivin, Blais, Haley, & Roy, 2004). Further, given the fact that the majority of sex workers enter the industry during adolescence, these early years represent an important point of intervention to address the root causes of sex trade involvement (Heilemann & Santhiveeran, 2011; Morton, Klein, & Gorzalka, 2012; Robinson, 2007). The purpose of this literature review was to explore and identify the various factors or antecedents that place youth and young adults at an increased risk for involvement in the sex trade through engagement in transactional sex. In this way, the review aims to illuminate common pathways that young people may follow to become involved in this risky lifestyle. The ultimate product of this review was the creation of a model to illustrate these pathways into the sex trade. This model was developed with the hope it would: identify the common lived experiences of young sex workers; inform interventions for preventing youth entry into the sex trade; reduce harms associated with sex work; and support exit from the sex trade among this population.

Literature Review

This literature review was primarily conducted using the MEDLINE and PsycINFO databases. A variety of search terms were used, including “prostitution,” “sex workers,” “sex work,” “determinants,” “entry,” “predictors,” “pathway,” “youth,” and “young adults.” Additionally, the references of the articles found through these searches were mined for other relevant sources. Sources were primarily limited to scholarly articles and books that focused on the experiences of North American youth and young adults between the ages of 12 and 25 working in the sex trade. However, literature discussing the experiences of adult sex workers

were also consulted to corroborate the findings related to the youth and young adult experience or illuminate areas where research is lacking for this population. While this process yielded a surprising volume of research on this topic, it became quickly apparent that the transient nature of this population poses significant challenges to conducting high quality research on this group. For this reason, the literature largely consists of cross-sectional studies and qualitative accounts from professionals with experience working with young people involved in the sex trade.

Definitions and Discussion of Terms

Gerassi (2015) provides useful definitions for key terms related to this issue. Sexual exploitation is the broadest of these terms and includes “any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust for sexual purposes, including but not limited to profiting monetarily, socially, or politically” (Gerassi, 2015, p. 592). In contrast, sex work can be defined as the “exchange of sexual services, performances, or products for material compensation” (Gerassi, 2015, p. 592). It is essential to separate these two terms, as not all forms of sex work involve elements of exploitation; to assume that all sex workers are victims of pimps and traffickers robs them of their agency as human beings. Finally, the concept of transactional sex falls under the larger category of sex work, and can be defined as the “exchange of sexual favour for something of value such as food, clothing, or shelter ... often as a method of survival” (Gerassi, 2015, p. 593).

In contrast to these conceptual definitions, the definition of prostitution lies largely within the legal domain. In the United States, prostitution is defined as “(1) the unlawful promotion of or participation in sexual activities for profit ... (2) the ownership, management, or operation of ... [an] establishment for the purpose of providing a place where prostitution is performed ... or (3) the assisting or promoting of prostitution” (Gerassi, 2015, p. 593). However, in Canada the laws defining prostitution are somewhat less clear, particularly in light of recent legislative

changes. Until recently, prostitution among adults was treated as a “nuisance” and was sanctioned indirectly by criminalizing a variety of activities necessary to carry out prostitution, such as “public communication for the purposes of prostitution, being found in a common bawdy house, and living off the avails of prostitution” (Perrin, 2014, p. 2). Under this legislation, charges were laid on a case-by-case basis and tended to disproportionately criminalize prostitutes instead of the johns. For example, according to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights (2006), 68% of women charged with solicitation were convicted, whereas 70% of men receiving the same charge had those charges withdrawn. In the landmark Supreme Court ruling on *Canada v. Bedford*, it was determined that the historical laws surrounding prostitution actually violated the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* because they forced prostitutes into dangerous working conditions and prevented them from taking measures to protect themselves from risk (Perrin, 2014).

The current legislation is predicated on the notion that prostitution is inherently exploitative and harmful; thus, the legislation aims to discourage prostitution in order to preserve human dignity and protect communities from harm. This new approach has resulted in a shift towards criminalizing pimps and johns by making the purchase of sex illegal, while prostitutes are theoretically exempt from prosecution because the sale of sex remains legal (Perrin, 2014). Notably, Canadian law has always criminalized acts of prostitution involving individuals under 18 years of age (Morton et al., 2012). While these laws are intended to prevent the sexual exploitation of minors, critics remain concerned that conceptualizing youth prostitution in this way fails to protect young people involved in sex work by forcing them to work in discrete and risky scenarios to avoid police and deterring them from accessing social services (Bittle, 2013, p. 279). Under this system, “young [people] are punished and controlled under the guise of protection, [while] the conditions that give rise to youth prostitution continue unabated” (Bittle,

2013, p. 281). In this way, the current legal approach to youth prostitution serves to isolate the youth sex workers from their social circumstances, framing prostitution as an individual choice and obscuring the broader social forces that lead young people to become involved in the sex trade (Bittle, 2013).

The Proposed Model

While the lived experiences of youth and young adults involved in the sex trade are highly unique to the individual, the results of this literature review suggest that patterns do arise at the population-level that allow for the generation of an explanatory model to better understand this issue and design programming to support this population. The proposed model (Figure 1) suggests a potential pathway that youth and young adults may follow to become involved in transactional sex. According to this model, differential exposure to some combination of individual risk factors – including individual attributes, abuse, substance use, psychological factors, and social factors – makes young people vulnerable to entrance into one or more critical life experiences: homelessness, school dropout, and/or economic marginalization. During these critical periods, at-risk youth and young adults are forced to navigate tumultuous circumstances with a paucity of resources. Although it is possible that young people in this situation will overcome adversity and avoid resorting to transactional sex as a subsistence strategy (as represented by the horizontal arrow indicating exit from this stage in Figure 1), by the time they have entered into this set of critical life experiences they are at an extremely high risk for involvement in the sex trade. Understanding this issue in such a fashion forces recognition of the fact that “adolescent prostitution lies at the intersection of sociological, economic, and psychological issues,” and that a young person’s initiation into the sex trade cannot be viewed as a simple matter of choice (Robinson, 2007, p. 11). Instead, youth and young adult participation in transactional sex results from the complex interplay of a variety of factors and life

experiences. Further, this dynamic web of forces influencing entry into the sex trade also impacts the ability of youth and young adults to exit the industry (represented by the cyclical and horizontal arrows indicating exit from Transactional Sex Involvement in Figure 1).

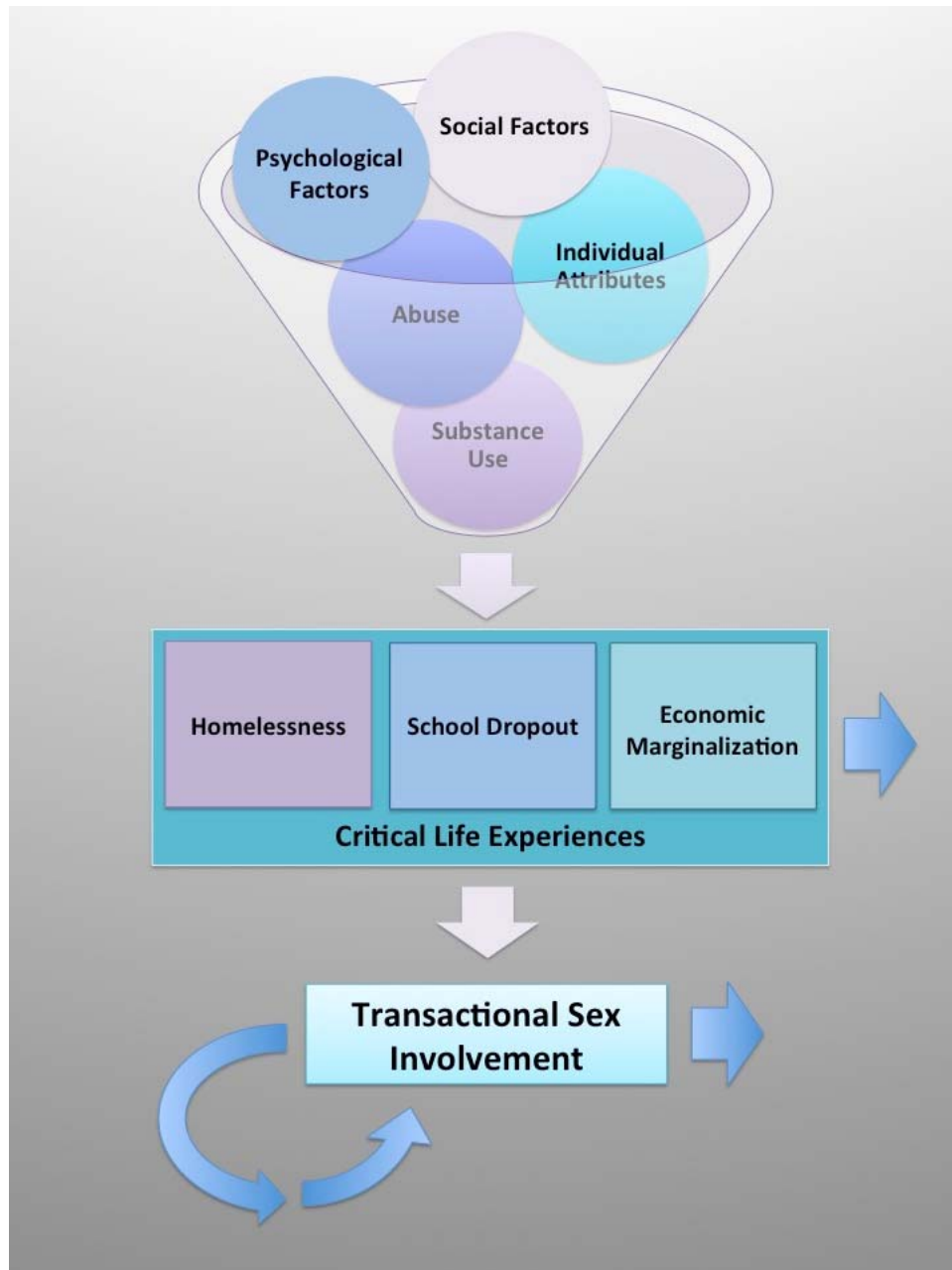


Figure 1. Visual representation of the proposed model. Several risk factors exist to predispose youth and young adults to involvement in transactional sex. Exposure to these risk factors, as moderated by critical life experiences, influence the likelihood of young people becoming involved in the sex trade.

Risk Factors Predicting Youth Involvement in Transactional Sex

Like any public health issue, the high prevalence of youth participation in transactional sex can be analyzed to determine which personal attributes and other risk factors produce vulnerability to exploitation among young people. Unfortunately, the challenges associated with researching youth and young adults involved in the sex trade make it difficult to achieve a saturation of data regarding the risk factors for initiation into sex work. However, several risk factors have emerged consistently across the literature. These individual risk factors can be grouped under a variety of themes, including individual attributes, victimization and abuse, substance abuse, psychological factors, and social factors.

Individual Attributes

While anecdotal evidence and public opinion tend to suggest that females are disproportionately involved in sex work, research on the risk or protective effects of gender is scant and largely inconclusive. For example, Reid and Piquero (2014a) note that while most studies of sexual exploitation focus on girls and women, a growing body of evidence suggests that both male and female youth are susceptible to exploitation; in fact, some studies have claimed that boys are exploited at an equal or greater rate compared to girls. For instance, in an analysis of data from the *National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health*, Kaestle (2012) found that males were more likely to engage in both the buying and selling of sex. In addition to a potential influence on likelihood of entry into sex work, some studies have also reported that gender may impact duration and extent of involvement. In another study, Reid and Piquero (2014b) found a statistically significant association between gender and chronic involvement in sex work among youth, which was defined as five or more incidents of exploitation or prostitution; while 63% of female youth in their sample reported chronic involvement, only 26% of males reported the same. Walls and Bell (2011) attribute these conflicting findings to the

tendency towards small, non-representative, and biased samples in studies of this highly transient and difficult-to-reach population.

In contrast to the ambiguity regarding male and female sex as risk factors for youth involvement in sex work, Walls and Bell (2011) cite several studies that report the vulnerability of transgender youth to exploitation. For example, in a study of 151 transgender female youth in two major American cities, Wilson et al. (2009) found that 67% had engaged in sex work. In explanation, the authors suggest that discrimination in the form of “transphobia” is a unique factor contributing to marginalization in this population, particularly in the form of job market exclusion due to discrimination by employers. Additionally, transgender youth are more likely to experience abuse and exclusion from their families as a result of disclosing their gender identity, which serves to further their marginalization (Holger-Ambrose, Langmade, Edinburgh, & Saewyc, 2013). Together, these factors foster significant vulnerability to exploitation among transgender youth.

In addition to gender, sexual orientation has also been implicated as a risk factor for sexual exploitation. In a recent study of 199 homeless young adults, Tyler (2009) found that homosexual or bisexual youth were almost two-and-a-half times more likely to have traded sex than heterosexual youth in the same sample. Further, findings across the literature consistently suggest that homosexual and bisexual male youth participate in transactional sex more often than their heterosexual counterparts (Walls & Bell, 2011). Similar to transgender youth, Walls and Bell (2011) explains this disproportionate vulnerability among homosexual and bisexual male youth as resulting from marginalization due to discrimination and homophobia. In many ways, these findings are intimately linked to gender. While Kaestle (2012) reports a higher likelihood of selling sex among males, the author’s concurrent finding that females are very unlikely to purchase sex suggested that the males in the sample were selling sex to other males. For this

reason, it is important to recognize the ways in which gender and sexual orientation intersect to create overlapping patterns of vulnerability among youth. To emphasize, one study found no differences between heterosexual and homosexual or bisexual female youth in terms of vulnerability to exploitation, which implicates male gender as a moderator in the relationship between orientation and risk of exploitation (Gangamma, Slesnick, Tovissimi, & Serovich, 2008).

Finally, ethnicity remains a particularly salient attribute influencing vulnerability to sexual exploitation. For example, Tyler (2009) found that non-white homeless young adults were two-and-a-half times more likely than white youth to have participated in the sex trade. These findings were substantiated in multiple other studies, all of which found African American youth to be overrepresented among young people involved trading sex (Reid & Piquero, 2014b; Walls & Bell, 2011). A potential explanation for this disparity is that Black youth face unique stressors and barriers to accessing services that may force them into resorting to transactional or survival sex (Tyler, 2009). Further, in addition to experiencing increased vulnerability to exploitation, Black youth are also at an increased risk for victimization within the sex trade as well as disadvantaged in terms of competing for high rates of pay, because customers are generally willing to pay more for sex with White or light-skinned females (Cole, 2007; Reid & Piquero, 2014b; Walls & Bell, 2011). As a result, Black youth are placed in situations where they must perform more often, or riskier acts, in order to make as much money as another person of a more preferable ethnicity. This unique juxtaposition of social marginalization and racial prejudice places Black youth in the role of the “double victim” with regards to sex trade work (Cole, 2007).

In Canada, Aboriginal status is an important risk factor for youth involvement in the sex trade, as indicated by the overrepresentation of Indigenous women in this industry. For example, in a study of 100 street-based sex workers in Vancouver, Farley and Lynne (2005) found that

52% of participants were Indigenous, compared to 1.7% of the general population. Additionally, Currie (2000) estimates that Indigenous women comprise 70% of street-level sex workers in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. However, Hunt (2013) notes that these estimates are likely understating the involvement of Aboriginal peoples in the sex trade, as many locations of sex work, such as rural or on-reserve communities, tend to be neglected in research. Bingham, Leo, Zhang, Montaner, and Shannon (2014) explain this increased representation by noting that Aboriginal women are three times more likely to experience generational sex work involvement than their non-Aboriginal counterparts; in this way, the authors elucidate a pathway for sex work involvement that is observed exclusively among Aboriginal individuals. Further, the authors note that the collective experience of colonization, particularly in the form of residential schools, served to perpetuate intergenerational cycles of trauma and violence that have resulted in the social marginalization and vulnerability of contemporary Aboriginal individuals (Bingham et al., 2014). In addition to being at increased risk for involvement, Indigenous youth in the sex trade also tend to be isolated by interventions and social programs that operate from a place of “saving” them from this dangerous lifestyle, as they interpret these approaches as perpetuating exploitative colonial relationships (JJ, 2013, p. 76).

Victimization and Abuse

An oft-cited risk factor for sexual exploitation is having a history of family dysfunction and abuse, particularly of a sexual nature. For example, Reid and Piquero (2014a) note that a younger age at first sexual contact, as well as the experience of rape or sexual assault, are both risk factors for youth entry into the sex trade. Further, Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Xie, and Pollio (2011) note that the experience of victimization can predispose youth towards engagement in a variety of deviant behaviours, including trading sex and using illicit drugs. Kaestle (2012) explains the significance of childhood sexual abuse by stating that these early experiences of

“eroticization” may “heighten interest in sexual activity and increase vulnerability to the advances of others,” thereby increasing an individual’s likelihood of falling victim to sexual exploitation (p. 319).

Further, physical and emotional abuse have also been posited as risk factors influencing youth initiation into the sex trade. For example, Walker (2002) discusses the typical life experiences of children and youth involved in prostitution, which includes emotional distance from their families as well as the frequent occurrence of extreme physical punishments for misbehavior. Further, Ferguson et al. (2011) note that in general, youth who engage in transactional sex have a history of family physical abuse, which is followed by a high risk of victimization on the street. The importance of childhood sexual and physical abuse as a predictor of initiation into prostitution was also discussed by Weber et al. (2004). In a similar vein, Patton et al. (2014) found that a history of dating violence, defined as violence perpetrated towards one by a romantic partner, was a predictive factor for youth involvement in the sex trade. In particular, Reid (2014) notes that this form of intimate victimization is strongly associated with adolescent entry into the sex trade.

Substance Use

Substance abuse is frequently noted, both anecdotally and in the research literature, as a correlate of youth sex trade involvement. For example, one nationally-representative, cross-sectional study of youth in the United States found that almost all types of substances used were correlated with an increased likelihood of participating in the sex trade (Edwards, Iritani, & Hallfors, 2006). These observations have been echoed across the literature (Ferguson et al., 2011; Hutto & Faulk, 2000; Kaestle, 2012; Patton et al., 2014; Reid & Piquero, 2014a, 2014b; Walls & Bell, 2011; Yuille, Klein, Bristowe, Kennedy, & Cooper, 2007). Further, this risk factor is related intersectionally to some of the factors noted above. For example, psychoactive

substances may be used as a means of coping with traumatic life experiences, such as physical and sexual abuse (Reid & Piquero, 2014b). Additionally, family dysfunction can be related to parental substance use, which increases the likelihood of youth engaging in this risky behavior (Reid, 2014). In a different sense, the impact of substance use on youth vulnerability may be moderated by gender; Reid and Piquero (2014a) found that substance use was associated with an early age of onset of sexual exploitation in males, as opposed to a late age of onset in females. However, it must be noted that there remains a lack of consensus regarding the causal link between substance use and sex work; researchers express uncertainty about whether substance use is more often a precursor to, or a result of, involvement in the sex trade (Reid & Piquero, 2014b). For example, Dodsworth (2015) notes that substance use helps sex workers to block out the negative experiences associated with this work in order to continue earning income. Regardless, substance use is strongly correlated to youth involvement in transactional sex and thus, must be considered as a risk factor.

In addition to substance use in general, several researchers have discussed specific substance use tendencies that may predispose young people to involvement in transactional sex. However, there is disagreement across the literature regarding which substances are most strongly associated with this outcome. For example, Kaestle (2012) found marijuana to be a significant predictor of trading sex among adolescents, while Weber et al. (2004) found the use of acid/PCP to be a risk factor for initiation into prostitution. In contrast, Walls and Bell (2011) found a statistically significant relationship between recent and lifetime use of alcohol or methamphetamine and engagement in survival sex; participants who had ever used alcohol and methamphetamines were 2.5 times and 1.7 times, respectively, more likely to have engaged in survival sex. Further, the frequency of substance use may play an important role in determining the effect of this behavior on sex trade involvement. For example, Weber et al. (2004) note that

frequent drug use among adolescents may lead to addiction, which could cause youth to resort to transactional sex as a means of supporting their habit.

Mental Illness and Psychological Factors

A history of mental illness has been noted in some studies as a risk factor for sexual exploitation. For example, in a study of homeless youth involved in transactional sex, Tyler (2009) found that 58% of the sample screened positively for depressive symptoms. Further, Reid and Piquero (2014a) found that youth exhibiting higher levels of psychotic symptomology were at an increased risk of initiation into sexual exploitation or prostitution during early or late adolescence. However, the causal link between these factors and entrance into the sex trade is unclear. For example, in a literature review of the hardships experienced by female adolescents involved in prostitution, Heilemann and Santhiveeran (2011) found this population to be at an increased risk for depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal thoughts, and feelings of shame or guilt. However, the authors noted that these psychological factors could result from the challenging and even traumatic experiences associated with sex work, rather than existing as pre-existing attributes that disposed these youths to entering the sex trade (Heilemann & Santhiveeran, 2011).

Social Factors

Finally, social factors such as peer relations have a particularly salient impact on the likelihood that youth will become involved in the sex trade. For example, Tyler (2009) notes that having friends who trade sex increases the likelihood of a young person engaging in transactional sex. In a similar vein, Ferguson et al. (2011) describe the phenomenon whereby homeless youth form “street families” in an effort to secure protection, emotional support, and “material aid” (p. 402). Association with a street family has a strong influence on the types of survival strategies employed by homeless youth. Further, strong loyalty to a group of peers may lead vulnerable

youth to engage in transactional sex in an effort to secure resources for their friends (Ferguson et al., 2011). These findings were corroborated by Reid and Piquero (2014b), who reported that youth may be vulnerable to recruitment into sex work by peers who are working for pimps and traffickers. Finally, simply being propositioned to trade sex has been identified as a risk factor for initiation into the sex trade (Tyler, 2009). In this way, it is clear that the more entrenched individuals become in the lifestyle surrounding prostitution, the more likely they are to enter the sex trade themselves (Yuille et al., 2007).

In addition to infiltrating the peer groups of street youth, pimps use a variety of additional strategies to manipulate adolescents and recruit them into the sex trade. In an extensive review of these recruitment strategies, Yuille et al. (2007) note that pimps use several “powerful forces” in order to compel adolescent women to enter the sex trade, including love, debt, addiction, and physical force (p. 4). For example, pimps may establish themselves as a boyfriend figure to young women on the street to foster loyalty and manipulate their perception of the situation in order to convince them to trade sex for the first time. This form of recruitment is typically targeted towards young women who are not otherwise vulnerable to entrance into the sex trade, such as those with no history of abuse or who come from stable, middle class households; in this way, pimps are able to recruit “healthy, good-looking young women [who] can be worked for long hours on the higher scale strolls” (Yuille et al., 2007, p. 9). If this tactic is successfully employed, pimps may be able to “make a million dollars off of a drug-free, high-end girl before she [becomes] useless, a physical and emotional ghost of her previous self” (Yuille et al., 2007, p. 9).

A second strategy often used by pimps is to artificially place adolescent youth in debt and dependency by given them gifts, clothing, money, or drugs, and then claiming that they have to repay the gestures by trading sex. A third approach is to encourage a drug addiction in order to

create dependency on a pimp; in fact, 16% of women in prostitution report that they began working to support a drug habit (Yuille et al., 2007). This strategy was also observed by Reid and Piquero (2014b), who noted the tendency of pimps to create substance dependency in youth in order to manipulate them and foster dependence on them through the provision of illicit drugs; in this way, social factors intersect with other risk factors such as substance use. A less common strategy is to use brute force to push new workers into the sex trade, but this is rarely used as a recruitment strategy as it does not encourage loyalty among the women; instead, pimps are more likely to use a previously mentioned strategy to initially draw women into the sex trade and then resort to physical might as a disciplinary measure (Yuille et al., 2007). Finally, youth are particularly vulnerable to being “turned out” by family or other authority figures (Yuille et al., 2007, p. 11). In fact, 12% of the prostituted women interviewed in that study reported being forced into the sex trade by their mothers, fathers, foster parents, or older siblings (Yuille et al., 2007).

Critical Life Experiences Moderating Youth Participation in Transactional Sex

Importantly, the discrete risk factors noted above operate individually and in combination to create vulnerability to sexual exploitation among youth. However, there is a lack of clarity regarding the actual mechanism by which these factors predispose youth to involvement in transactional sex. Although these risk factors have significant individual effects, their impact appears to be exerted primarily by forcing youth into one or more critical life experiences: homelessness, school dropout, and/or economic marginalization. These critical life experiences, together and in combination, force youth to navigate tumultuous circumstances with a paucity of resources, which may result in their resorting to desperate survival strategies such as engaging in transactional sex. The proposed model suggests that the individual risk factors noted above are not sufficient in-and-of-themselves to force youth into the sex trade; instead, the relationship

between these risk factors and entrance to the sex trade is moderated by the following critical life experiences, which constitute the “perfect storm” that can represent the final breaking point pushing young people into the sex trade.

Homelessness

The first critical life experience proposed in this model is homelessness or general transience among youth and young adults. In a literature review of several studies, Tyler (2009) found that rates of trading sex among homeless youth have been estimated at anywhere from 11% to 46%. In a similar vein, Robinson (2007) notes that the majority of adolescent prostitutes are “runaways or throwaways” who have been asked or forced to leave their homes (p. 14). Ferguson et al. (2011) identify a link between residential transience and risky behaviours such as survival sex. Additionally, these authors note that homelessness places youth and young adults in situations where they lack positive role models and instead rely on peer networks and a street culture that promotes risky and illegal behaviours (Ferguson et al., 2011). Notably, Tyler (2009) reports that trading sex tends to be the last resort following engagement in a variety of other deviant subsistence strategies, including conning and stealing; for this reason, it is clear that the majority of homeless youth engage in transactional sex out of desperation, rather than voluntary choice. Likewise, Kaestle (2012) emphasizes that the research indicates that many youth who trade sex do so out of desperation, manipulation, and coercion. Further, the experience of homelessness can be related intersectionally to a variety of individual risk factors noted above. For example, homelessness is linked to substance use, as young people in this situation have reported using drugs such as meth to maintain alertness while sleeping on the street (Uhlmann et al., 2014).

School Dropout

A notion of critical importance is that many of the aforementioned risk factors for entry

into the sex trade are also factors influencing a young person's likelihood of dropping out of school. The link between these two experiences is demonstrated by that fact that an estimated 80% of young women involved in the sex trade have dropped out of school (Robinson, 2007). In a study of the relationship between school dropout and entering prostitution, Robinson (2007) notes that dropout results from a variety of "push out" and "pull out" factors (p. 3-4). For adolescent women, critical "push out" factors include the tendency of traditional schooling to socialize girls to adopt interpersonal skills that do not contribute to academic or career success; the inability of schools to appropriately meet the learning needs of young girls; the marginalization of girls due to preferential treatment of boys in the classroom; and the failure of the school system to effectively ensure equitable access to high-quality education across the spectrum of gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity (Robinson, 2007). Additionally, young women are disproportionately impacted by "pull out" factors such as pregnancy or obligations to contribute to their family's finances and care for family members (Robinson, 2007).

These general observations are substantiated by research findings regarding the impact of school completion and connectedness as protective factors preventing youth from entering the sex trade. For example, Kaestle (2012) posits some dimensions of school connectedness, such as overall happiness and a sense of fairness at school, as protective against initiating involvement in the sex trade as adolescents enter young adulthood. Further, Patton et al. (2014) found that school involvement was significantly promotive in relation to transactional sex involvement. In a somewhat similar sense, Reid and Piquero (2014a) found that youth who completed more grades in school were at a reduced risk for initiation into the sex trade at an older age. The authors note that these findings highlight the "pivotal role of social capital during young adulthood, particularly in terms of educational achievement" (Reid & Piquero, 2014a, p. 1767), which demonstrates how school dropout can be a precursor to the third critical life experience:

economic marginalization.

Economic Marginalization

First and foremost, an examination of this critical life experience requires the acknowledgement that participation in transactional sex functions as a subsistence strategy for young people. For this reason, any form of economic marginalization, or the inability to obtain sufficient resources for survival, logically produces a particular vulnerability for young people to enter the sex trade. For example, in one study over 12% of the prostituted women interviewed cited economic necessity as the foremost reason for their entrance into the sex trade (Yuille et al., 2007). In another study, 88% of participants framed prostitution as their only viable subsistence strategy due to factors such as lack of educational attainment and being too young for formal employment (Robinson, 2007). Finally, in a study of 199 homeless young adults, Tyler (2009) identified less than full-time employment as a significant risk factor for trading sex, which further underlines the point that many youths are resorting to the sex trade as a survival strategy rather than out of completely voluntary choice.

Additionally, the decision to resort to these illegal subsistence strategies can throw young people into a vicious cycle of economic marginalization, as the risk of felony convictions may result in further exclusion from the labour force. To make matters worse, criminal behaviour tends to increase with a longer duration of unemployment, virtually eliminating all access points to the formal economy. Further, economic marginalization is linked to the other two aforementioned critical life experiences: homelessness and school dropout. A lack of stable housing can result in labor market exclusion due to factors such as poor personal hygiene and social stigma. In addition, the lack of educational attainment and job skills that results from dropping out of high school can result in significant difficulty in securing gainful employment (Ferguson et al., 2011). For example, on average female dropouts earn only 40% of the salary

earned by their counterparts possessing high school diploma (Robinson, 2007).

Factors Predicting Continued Involvement in the Sex Trade

In order to develop interventions aimed at preventing young people from entering the sex trade, it is useful to gain an understanding of the factors that influence persistence or cessation of involvement in this industry. In general, Cimino (2012) notes that sex workers attempting to exit prostitution will generally become caught in a cycle of entry, exit, and re-entry (as represented by the cyclical arrows in Figure 1). Additionally, Baker, Dalla, and Williamson (2010) note that sex workers attempting to exit the industry face many barriers impeding their cessation of participation in trading sex, including a variety of individual, relational, structural, and social factors. In order to better understand the experiences of sex workers attempting to exit the sex trade, several general models of behaviour change have been applied to the topic of prostitution; additionally, multiple models specifically related to exiting prostitution have been generated. Further, the explanatory value of these models has been substantiated by research on the importance of psychosocial resources such as resilience in empowering sex workers to exit the industry.

Baker et al. (2010) propose an integrated six stage model for exiting prostitution that builds on general research on behaviour change, previously developed models for exiting prostitution, and knowledge of the many barriers faced by individuals attempting to escape the sex trade. According to this model, sex workers go through a process that begins with being fully immersed in the sex trade and unable to imagine leaving the profession and then progress towards an awareness of the desire or need to exit the profession. Once this intention to exit the sex trade develops, sex workers begin deliberately planning their exit strategies and assessing available support resources. Finally, the model concludes with a cycle of exit and re-entry in which the sex worker makes repeated attempts to terminate involvement in the sex trade before

finally making a conclusive exit. This model is valuable for its depiction of the oscillation between various stages of readiness and ability to exit prostitution; for example, the model acknowledges that individuals may regress from awareness of their need to find a new subsistence strategy back to being fully immersed in the sex trade, which serves to normalize and validate the experiences of sex workers struggling to exit the industry.

In her Integrative Model of Behavioural Prediction, Cimino (2012) builds upon the work of Baker et al. (2010) by combining their model with elements of various other behaviour change models in order to generate a comprehensive illustration of the general pathways taken by sex workers attempting to exit the industry. This model emphasizes the individual agency of sex workers, stating that all behaviours surrounding the process of exiting prostitution involve a degree of choice. Cimino (2012) notes that one's ability to exit the sex trade depends in large part on their intentions to perform this behaviour, which is a function of attitudes, norms, self-efficacy, and the underlying belief system. For example, a high degree of self-efficacy might support a sex worker in resisting resorting to prostitution under stress, which could help to break the cycle of exit and re-entry that is typical of this profession. Further, the author notes the importance of skills and abilities, as well as the absence of environmental constraints, in achieving a successful exit from the sex trade. In this way, the model notes several specific constructs that can be targeted through interventions to support sex workers in exiting the sex trade. Additionally, this model is useful because it attempts to identify specific individual attributes that may determine an individual's ability to successfully exit the sex trade despite otherwise similar circumstances.

While models of this type are heuristic tools for understanding the general pathways into and out of the sex trade, they should be substantiated by research on individual factors such as psychosocial resources that may influence an individual's journey through these pathways. For

example, in her study of 24 adult female sex workers, Dodsworth (2012) noted that the participants could be placed in one of three categories based on how they constructed their identities in relation to sex work. For example, some of the women viewed sex work as integral to their identities and as a result, identified themselves as victims of the sex trade and felt unable to conceive of an alternate lifestyle for themselves. Other women in the study considered sex work to be one of many factors that comprised their identities; these women tended to normalize sex work as a viable career, but believed that their involvement in the sex trade was entirely voluntary. Finally, a third group of women defined their identities in opposition to sex work and felt that resorting to these activities was threatening to their self-worth and self-efficacy; these women were most likely to display resiliency and a sense of deservedness in pursuing alternative lifestyles outside of sex work. Although this research was conducted with adult women, it may have a certain degree of utility in explaining how youth and young adults may incorporate sex work into their identities in their formative adolescent years in a way that makes it difficult (or impossible) to escape the industry at a later date. Further, the perception of lack of choice associated with strongly identifying as a sex worker aligns with the level of street entrenchment and desperation reported by youth involved in transactional sex, which may indicate that these individuals are less likely to feel empowered to exit the sex trade.

Dodsworth (2015) notes resilience as an essential psychosocial resource for managing involvement in the sex trade. Resilience can be defined as “a set of qualities that helps a person withstand many of the negative effects of adversity and successfully adapt to negative life events, trauma, stress, and other forms of risk” (Dodsworth, 2015, p. 55). For this reason, resilience can be seen as the mediator that determines an individual’s appraisal of a challenging situation, which can strongly determine the likelihood that a sex worker will be able to exit the sex trade. Personal resilience depends on a variety of factors, including individual attributes, life

experiences, relationships, environmental factors, and the risks and adversities involved in the situation to be navigated. Further, resiliency among adolescents is intimately linked to an intricate web of factors, including puberty, sexual identity, and personal coping skills (Dodsworth, 2015). In the context of the current proposed model, resilience helps to explain why certain young people will progress through the entire model and end up engaging in transactional sex, while others will successfully navigate the critical life experiences without ever resorting to sex work (as represented by the horizontal exit arrow in Figure 1). For example, two young people may each be faced with a situation where resorting to sex work seems necessary but, based on differences in resilience and cognitive appraisal of their circumstances, one will view this dilemma as a problem to be solved while the other will view it as an unavoidable (if not destined) last resort (Dodsworth, 2015).

While these theoretical constructs carry significant explanatory value for understanding the process of exiting the sex trade, it is notable that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to confirm their validity through empirical testing. For this reason, it seems the complex nature of this issue mandates embracing the wide variety of models available in order to adequately represent the myriad experiences of individuals entrenched in the sex trade, rather than looking for a single universal model to generalize these experiences. However, the generalizability of these models to the experiences of youth and young adults involved in the sex trade may be limited, as they were developed using research primarily focused on adult female prostitutes. Nevertheless, due to the paucity of research regarding this population of interest, these models can be used with caution to inform interventions to prevent youth initiation into the sex trade and support young people wishing to exit the industry. Together with the proposed model for youth entrance into the sex trade, these models suggest that interventions should aim to address the factors predicting young peoples' involvement in transactional sex, break down barriers

preventing sex workers from exiting the industry, and empower individuals to stop trading sex by promoting psychosocial resources such as resilience in at-risk youth and young adults.

Recommendations to Prevent Youth Participation in Transactional Sex

Although the prevention of youth initiation in the sex trade is a worthy goal in itself, it is also useful to realize that effective intervention at this point in the life course could have a dramatic impact on the prevalence of sex trade work among adults, as several studies have noted that the majority of individuals involved in the sex trade entered the industry in adolescence (Heilemann & Santhiveeran, 2011; Morton et al., 2012; Robinson, 2007). Because of the complexity of this issue and the difficulty of determining one specific pathway that most commonly leads to youth and young adult participation in transactional sex, it is essential to take a holistic approach to prevention by designing interventions that operate at a variety of levels: upstream, midstream, and downstream. This fact is also widely reflected across the literature. For example, Dodsworth (2015) notes that service provision must reflect the diversity of pathways individuals follow to become involved in the sex trade in order to be effective.

Upstream Approaches

From a public health perspective, the most important approaches to intervene on this issue are those that aim to prevent at-risk youth from becoming involved in transactional sex in the first place. These interventions could operate by a variety of mechanisms. For example, they could aim to ameliorate the various individual risk factors for transactional sex, or could operate to assist young people in successfully navigating the critical life experiences that often lead to a desperation-driven entrance into the sex trade. In particular, Dodsworth (2015) notes that these interventions should “help ... [young people] cope with adversities during periods of transition” (p. 54), which is consistent with the proposed model. Kaestle (2012) notes that schools may be a particularly salient point for intervention on this issue, as well-informed teachers and

administrators may be in a unique position to recognize risk factors among youth and subsequently connect students with appropriate resources and services. For example, it may be useful to design school-based programming to promote general wellbeing in high-risk communities in order to mitigate a variety of adverse health and social outcomes. In particular, Kaestle (2012) notes the importance of early intervention for survivors of childhood sexual abuse and runaway youth, who are among the highest-risk adolescents in relation to this issue. However, it is important to note that interventions that are too far removed from the outcome they attempt to influence may quickly lose relevance for the practitioners expected to design and implement them. For example, many teachers would struggle to grasp the idea that they are somehow responsible for keeping their students from entering the sex trade. Additionally, Patton et al. (2014) point out that school-based interventions fail to reach those youth who do not attend school, which suggests a need for midstream and downstream interventions tailored towards young people who have reached the later stages of the proposed model, as these interventions are more likely to gain the traction necessary to have a measurable impact on this issue in the short-term.

Downstream Approaches

It is necessary to implement downstream interventions aimed at providing resources to and reducing harm among the population of youth actively involved in sex work. A major challenge in working with this population is their transience; due to their lack of permanent residence and tendency to avoid law enforcement and public health workers, it can be extremely difficult to design interventions that will actually reach youth sex workers. For this reason, it is pertinent to identify novel locations in which this marginalized population can be engaged in prevention or intervention programs. Patton et al. (2014) note that hospital emergency departments tend to be frequented by youth engaged in multiple risky behaviours such as drug

use and transactional sex, as these behaviours are associated with a propensity for injury. For this reason, the authors suggest that this may be a promising location from which to engage young sex workers and connect them with supportive resources including harm reduction initiatives related to drug use and risky sexual practices, as well as formal programs to assist them in exiting the sex trade (Patton et al., 2014).

While these exit programs do currently exist, Cimino (2012) emphasizes the need for application of best practice recommendations in designing and implementing such programming. For example, the author notes that these interventions are most effective when they are “holistic and include a combination of housing, counseling, employment training, and education” (Cimino, 2012, p. 1237). Notably, the resources recommended by best practice correspond to the critical life experiences denoted in the proposed model. In this way, these programs work to systematically address environmental barriers that prevent individuals from exiting the sex trade, particularly by eliminating the imperative to trade sex as a means of survival, which aims to break the cycle of exit and re-entry typical of those escaping the sex trade (Baker et al., 2010). Unfortunately, while programs based on these principles should work in theory, their real-world impact on individual ability to exit the sex trade is questionable. For example, in their study of 201 Canadian sex workers, Benoit and Millar (2001) found that women who did eventually exit the sex trade made an average of 5.6 exit attempts before permanently terminating their involvement, despite being enrolled in formal programming to support their exit. For this reason, Cimino (2012) argues a need for a more individualized approach in these support programs, whereby practitioners can assess sex workers for individual attributes and barriers assisting or preventing them from exiting the sex trade in order to tailor programming to suit their specific situation. Nevertheless, programs that support and rehabilitate sex workers remain vastly superior to approaches involving criminal prosecution, particularly in terms of ensuring their

long-term wellbeing by preserving factors such as employability (Cimino, 2012).

Further, due to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal individuals in the sex trade, it is absolutely critical to develop culturally appropriate interventions for this population. Hunt (2013) notes that these interventions are most effective when they focus on harm reduction, uphold the rights of sex workers, and are “located in the broader struggle for Indigenous rights, self-determination, and sovereignty” (p. 91). In particular, the author states that these interventions should “decolonize dominant conceptualizations of sex work and Indigenous women” by embracing sex workers as valued members of their communities, providing services to meet their basic needs, incorporating cultural practices and beliefs into program planning, and acknowledging the agency of Indigenous sex workers (Hunt, 2013, p. 92). Further, Bingham et al. (2014) note the importance of amplifying Aboriginal voices in the program and policy development process. Finally, the elevated involvement of Indigenous peoples in the sex trade must be recognized as yet another pertinent issue contributing to the marginalization of this population, and should be added to the agenda of Indigenous issues at all levels of government (Hunt, 2013). For example, a critical issue for consideration at the federal level is that current legislation surrounding sex work fails to protect Indigenous sex workers and their communities from harm; in fact, this policy actually exacerbates the social marginalization already disproportionately experienced by this population (Bingham et al., 2014).

Recommendations for Next Steps

First and foremost, more research is needed to corroborate the proposed model in order to validate its claims surrounding the root causes of youth and young adult involvement in transactional sex. This research may take the form of further scholarly study or consultation of the grey literature and personal experiences of professionals working with sex workers to confirm, modify, or disconfirm this model. Additionally, resources must be invested in ensuring

effective knowledge translation and exchange between academics studying this issue and professionals in service provision for street-entrenched young people, including frontline workers, public health professionals, and law enforcement. Further, these findings must be communicated to government and policy makers in order to influence the political climate to be more conducive to funding support services and resources targeted at this population. Finally, this knowledge must be utilized to inform more effective interventions and programming for young people involved in the sex trade, as our current approach to this issue is not entirely effective.

Conclusion

According to the literature, a variety of individual factors remain salient contributors to youth and young adults' risk of entering the sex trade. These include individual attributes (such as gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity), a history of victimization and abuse, a history of substance use, mental illness and other psychological factors, and social factors. In particular, the effect of these individual factors on risk of involvement in transactional sex is mediated by three critical life experiences, alone or in combination: homelessness, school dropout, and/or economic marginalization. As depicted in the proposed model, young people are differentially exposed to a unique combination of individual risk factors, which may put them at risk for one or more of these critical life experiences. Ultimately, each individual's ability to navigate these life experiences under conditions of depravity determines their likelihood of entrance into the sex trade. Although this model depicts general patterns and common pathways for entering the sex trade, it is important to note that each young person's lived experience of transactional sex involvement will be unique. For this reason, more research is needed to corroborate this model and determine the specific sources of individual differences in the process of being drawn into the sex trade.

Together with existing models for cessation of involvement in the sex trade, the proposed model can be used to inform interventions to mitigate the entrance of young people into the sex trade and support their exit from the industry. In particular, the public health approach offers a single, cohesive strategy to address this issue due to its clear prioritization of preventative action, such as programming to address risk factors pushing young people towards engaging in transactional sex. However, due to the neoliberal ideals of many provincial governments in Canada, most policy-making places emphasis on individual choice and responsibility in issues such as this one. As a result, it is difficult to garner funding to support upstream interventions predicated on the notion that involvement in the sex trade is the result of a complex web of individual and social vulnerability. For this reason, in the long-term it will be necessary to take action to influence the political climate to be more conducive to proactive initiatives for preventing initial entry into the sex trade. Nevertheless, harm reduction interventions and sex trade exit programs must be prioritized in the short-term due to their immediate and measurable impact on this population.

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