

“We’re Automatically Sex in Men’s Eyes, We’re Nothing But Sex...”: Homeless Young Adult Perceptions of Sexual Exploitation

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Abstract Research shows that homeless youth are uniquely vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation (CSE). But what are young adult perspectives on definitions and pathways of CSE? We analyze focus group data from participatory research with a homeless youth-serving agency. Participants were a ethnically diverse sample/ethnically diverse sample of twenty four female-identifying young adults (ages 18–23) receiving services. Some perceptions of the participants were consistent with previously documented pathways into CSE. But, important novel themes emerged, including: sexual exploitation as a continuum of sexually explicit interactions (i.e. stripping, fetish, survival sex, trafficking); ever-present conversations and decision-making about CSE in homeless youth and young adult culture; and the paradoxical issue that service-seeking around homelessness and overt identification of CSE victims can target them for greater victimization.

Keywords Domestic minor commercial sexual exploitation · Homeless youth and young adults · Survival sex

Commercial sexual exploitation of children, youth, and young adults is increasingly seen by policy makers, service providers

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and the general public as an important issue, particularly in relation to domestic sex trafficking of minors within the United States. Research and practice have documented that youth and young adults experiencing homelessness are at particular risk of commercial sexual exploitation (Greene et al. 1999; Holger-Ambrose et al. 2013; Saewyc et al. 2008; Tyler and Johnson 2006). This article presents findings from a qualitative study with young adults ages 18–23 to better understand how homeless young adults understand their experiences with commercial sexual exploitation, the experiences of their peers (including youth under age 18), and the negotiation of sexually exploitative situations and encounters in everyday life.

Data were collected as part of a participatory action research study initiated by a youth opportunity center for youth experiencing homelessness in Minneapolis. That study (herein referred to as the ‘parent study’), had two primary aims for the agency. First, they wanted to identify opportunities for the youth serving agency to prevent commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) among participants aged 16–23 years using their drop-in center. Second, they wanted to hear directly from participants in their programs for the purpose of improving programming in response to young adult feedback. Here we share general findings gleaned from the agency-specific project.

We used two research questions to guide this analysis: (1) How do homeless young adults conceptualize and understand commercial sexual exploitation? (2) What are homeless young adult perspectives on pathways into commercial sexual exploitation? Being homeless presents particular vulnerabilities to CSE and necessitates unique preventive strategies for youth and young adults in these situations. Insights directly from youth experience are critical for the development of effective prevention and intervention efforts. As service provision focused on CSE ramps up in the Twin Cities and the United

States, the knowledge gained from this study has potential to contribute to evidence-based actions and policies that sustain prevention of CSE and strengthen protective assets in the lives of youth and young adults.

Language and definitions are important. In this paper, commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) is defined as the exchange of sexual acts for money or in kind such as shelter, food, drugs, or alcohol wherein the value of the exchange goes directly to the individual or to a third party profiting off of the exchange. This includes behaviors such as ‘survival sex’, the exchanging of sex or sexual acts to meet basic needs such as shelter, transportation, food or clothing, and youth and young adults being used in prostitution, pornography, or stripping/ erotic dancing. This study gathered data from young adults experiencing homelessness. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines homeless youth as individuals under the age of 25 years (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2014). The youth serving agency’s eligibility criteria are individuals aged 16–23 years. Thus we use the term ‘youth’ to refer to this population. The participants in our study were between the ages of 18–23 years and will be referred to as ‘young adults’.

It has been estimated that approximately a third of homeless young adults aged 19–21 years have been solicited for paid sex or participated in sex exchange (Tyler and Johnson 2006). Solicitation leads to sexual exploitation. Homeless young adults who were directly propositioned for sexual exploitation were 5.5 times more likely to report participation in commercial sex than homeless young adults who did not report being propositioned for paid sex (Tyler 2009).

There are numerous other risk factors for CSE among youth and young adults, including previous abuse, substance use, delinquency, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) identification (Ahrens et al. 2012; Reid and Piquero 2014; Walls and Bell 2011). However, the strongest predictor for youth aged 12–25 years becoming involved in sexual exploitation is having friends or family members involved in prostitution. Youth with this risk factor are 7 times more likely to be involved in CSE compared to their peers without friends/family involved in prostitution (Klatt et al. 2014). One study found that almost half of sexually exploited LGBT young adults (46 %) became involved in sex trading through a friend (Dank et al. 2015). This highlights the important role peers play in either promoting or preventing involvement in commercial sex for young adults experiencing homelessness.

Methods and Design of Parent Study

Participatory Action Research

The parent study utilized participatory action research (PAR) methods, which emphasize communal decision-making in

project design, planning, and implementation (Stringer 2014). Youth participatory action research with homeless and vulnerable youth has been a successful way to incorporate youth feedback into service delivery models (Holger-Ambrose et al. 2013).

A team from the University of Minnesota’s Urban Research Outreach-Engagement Center (UROC) was approached by a local homeless youth serving agency, YouthLink, to answer the question: what are the best opportunities for the agency to prevent and intervene with commercially sexually exploited (CSE) youth participating in their services and programs? In response, UROC convened a project implementation team consisting of YouthLink management, case managers, youth representatives and researchers. Additionally, two youth advisors were engaged throughout the process, giving direction to the focus group design and wording of the questions posed. Youth advisors were paid for their time and expertise with \$50 Visa gift cards for the first month and \$15 gift cards to the establishment of their choice for follow up meetings after the initial month. Prior to recruitment, approval for the study protocol was obtained by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Minnesota; this included not collecting any identifying information about the participants.

The initial primary intent of the parent study was to conduct a participatory research project to help a specific agency improve their efforts for intervention and prevention within their service population, rather than producing generalizable knowledge. Data collection for the parent study included interviews with current and previous staff, a first series of focus groups with participants around the question of ‘what is CSE as they have seen it’, and a follow up series of focus groups with a mix of new and repeated participants focusing on the question of ‘what can the organization do in response to how young adults experience CSE that would contribute to prevention and early intervention?’. However, after completing the parent study, the whole research team felt we had learned novel information about CSE among homeless youth and young adults that was highly relevant for a general audience. As described more in depth below, this article explores data from the first series of focus groups on young adult perspectives on CSE, as this data was deemed most relevant to a general audience.

Parent Study Focus Group Series One Design

Focus groups in the first series were structured around two main questions: What is sexual exploitation? What is the pathway for homeless youth and young adults to exploitation? After participants communally defined commercial sexual exploitation and gave examples, the bulk of the time was spent with participants creating what we called a “pathway map”. Each participant was given a piece of paper with the outlines

of a map drawn on it. Figure 1 is an example of the diagram used. Participants were encouraged to draw or write what happens between “the good life” and “being in the life” in a stepwise fashion. “The life” is a term used by youth to describe involvement in CSE. Participants were also asked to document the types of people and the feelings that pushed or pulled youth along that path. After each participant was given an opportunity to fill out a map individually, the group collectively created a map and individuals shared their maps. The process of making the maps served to creatively engage young adults and spark conversation. Series one focus groups concluded by asking participants what the youth agency could do or could have done to interrupt this pathway. Additionally, youth were asked to make similar pathway maps to define in a step-wise fashion the experience exiting the life and reaching ‘success’ as defined by the individual participant.

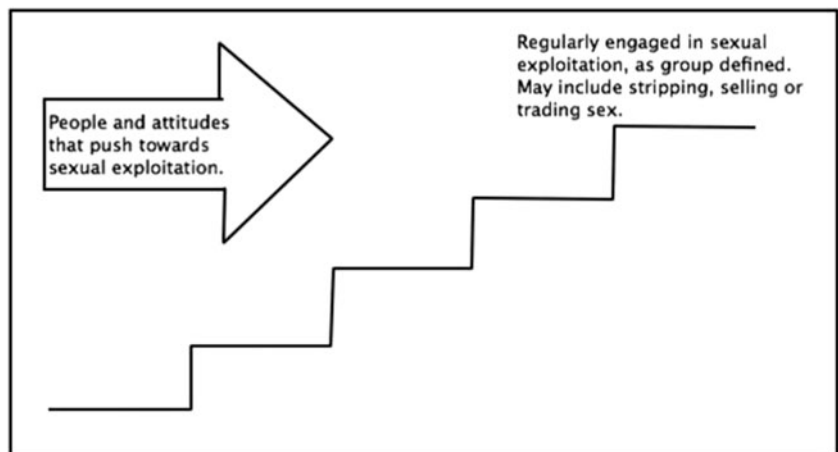
Considerations for Participant Safety and Emotional Well-Being

Our primary concern in this study was the safety and experience of young adult participants in the study. Our study had the potential to re-traumatize young adult participants so we took great care and time in planning data collection with our team of YouthLink staff, participants and researchers. A locally recognized, trauma-informed best practice in service provision with sexually exploited youth is to allow the individuals’ story of trauma and survival to be shared at the discretion of the individual and on their own time frame. Further, young adults involved in systems are typically subject to routine data collection activities—such as program intake, screening for eligibility requirements, and other forms of questioning from police and systems professionals. These can be probing, insensitive and difficult. We did not want to mimic these experiences in our data collection. The goal was to recognize the expertise and wisdom of young adults though the data collection process in a way that felt creative and empowering.

Our project design team, specifically direct service staff and young adult participants involved in the development of the protocols for this project, felt it was crucial that youth only be asked directly actionable questions. We wanted to prioritize data collection that would lead directly to implementation by the social service agency. For these reasons, youth were not asked to fill out or disclose information reminiscent of an intake process, including demographics such as age, race, current housing status, or current level of involvement with CSE. However, great care was taken to make sure that a wide range of backgrounds and experiences were represented (described below). Likewise, youth and service staff advised that direct questions regarding individuals’ own experience with CSE would not be a trauma-informed way to engage with participants and was unnecessary to collecting actionable information; these questions were deemed unnecessary since our primary goal was to understand broader youth and young adult culture around CSE. Instead, the team created open-ended questions asking for youth to give examples of CSE and describe what they saw as the pathways for involvement of CSE. This was deemed less intrusive and more supportive way for youth to share only what they felt comfortable sharing. While participants were not asked pointedly about their experience with CSE, they were asked to give input based on their own lived experience including what they experienced and had observed from friends and peers and were discouraged from sharing examples from movies or media. Participants disclosed examples from both personal lived experience and observed experience.

Commercial sexual exploitation is a sensitive topic with potential for several types of harm including stigmatization, breach of confidentiality, and re-traumatization. The advisory committee, including youth advisors, built in several safeguards to minimize these risks. First and foremost, participants were encouraged not to provide any identifying information at any point through the process including their name, age, or other demographic information. At the onset of the

Fig. 1 Pathway Map completed by each participant individually as well as collectively in the focus groups to describe the steps of how individuals become involved with CSE



group, a list of pseudonyms was provided and youth were encouraged to use these during the conversation to refer to themselves and other youth and young adults. This was suggested by young adult advisors as a way to promote a feeling of safety in the group and participant control over how and what was discussed. Facilitators emphasized at the onset that participants were not required to share about their own direct experience with sexual exploitation. They were encouraged to share their perspective on sexual exploitation occurring in their community. They were allowed to decide whether and if to share their own direct experience and/or their observations of others. Lastly, a mental health professional was available outside the focus group space in the event that a participant wanted additional space to process the experience or needed immediate emotional support. None of the participants used this support at the time of the study. At the conclusion of the focus groups, all participants were given information about additional case management and support resources offered by the partner agency.

Recruitment, Consent, and Incentives

Staff from the homeless youth serving agency, YouthLink, recruited a convenience sample of participants from several programs across the agency. We conducted six focus groups in total, four in the first series of focus groups and two in the second series. As described above, here we analyze data only from the first series. Therefore, data from four unique focus groups are included here. Great care was used in selecting participants to represent the broad range of experience and background of YouthLink participants. We convened focus groups with the following at YouthLink: one with a program expressly serving identified sexually exploited young adults;

one with young adults in a housing program; and two with young adults participating in a general drop-in program. At the point of recruitment, staff explained the nature of the project, risks, and benefits. At the onset of the focus group, the facilitator explained in detail the purposes of the project, the risks and benefits, as well as the optional nature of participation. All participants gave verbal consent. Participants were given \$10 gift cards for their participation and provided with a meal.

Methods for Data Analysis of Series One Focus Groups

We conducted a descriptive qualitative inquiry using four focus groups that were conducted as part of a parent study (Series One), which focused specifically on understanding youth perspectives about CSE. We used an Nvivo thematic analysis to address our study aims, as described below.

Coding and Theme Construction

Audio from the focus groups were transcribed verbatim and thematically analyzed with the study questions guiding analysis. All the participants verbally shared information from their individual Pathway Maps and this was part of the digital recordings that were analyzed. Based on established known pathways and risk clusters for sexual exploitation of vulnerable youth, an initial code framework was developed prior to applying codes to transcripts (Table 1). Additional new codes were established in response to emergent themes; all coding was organized and managed using [QSR International’s NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software](#). The following table presents the main coding constructs that were used.

Table 1 Codebook summary for qualitative analysis based on prior research and emergent ideas

Overarching theme	General description and example nodes
Relationships	Descriptions of interactions with family members, peers, facilitators, and romantic partners.
What do youth trade sex for?	Descriptions of material and emotional gains from trading or selling sex.
Pathway to involvement	Descriptions of situations leading up to involvement in CSE including known risk factors, such as running away from home and other destabilizing situations.
Description of CSE	Types of behaviors such as stripping or oral sex, as well as who is involved in the transaction.
Motivations/Frames of mind	Descriptions of what young people think or feel leading up to and during involvement of CSE.
Recruitment/Solicitation	Descriptions of how young people are recruited including violence or boyfriend relationships, and locations where solicitations occurred.

Results

Participants

Twenty-four female-identifying young adults (ages 18-23) who were currently or formerly experiencing homelessness participated across the four focus groups. The sample is diverse with respect to sexual orientation and race/ethnicity. While demographic information was not collected, some participants self-disclosed identification as lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. The facilitator noted race/ethnicity and self-disclosure when it occurred. The majority of the participants presented African American (19); two participants verbally identified as Native American, one as Latina, and two as Caucasian.

Our goal in this project was to gather data from homeless and precariously housed young female adults to learn about how they view sex trading, trafficking and CSE among themselves and their peers. Eight participants had been previously identified as victims of CSE and were receiving specific services. From the content of the focus group discussions we know that other youth had experienced CSE and at least some of the youth who participated had traded sex as minors. Again, our goal was to understand how sex trading and CSE is understood and experienced among homeless young women. We wanted to understand youth culture around sex trading rather than documenting specific incidence of sex trading and trafficking among our participants. Therefore our sample is appropriate given our questions about youth culture and the approach of participatory action research which views participants as experts rather than “subjects.”

Conceptualization of Sexual Exploitation Among Homeless Youth

Participants described experiences of sexual exploitation as a spectrum of sexual acts including oral, anal, and vaginal sex as well as fetish work, dominatrix, massage, conversation, stripping and dancing. Participants included this broad spectrum of acts in the definition of sexual exploitation because they acknowledged that it included both sexual content and an exchange. Some participants expressed considering the option of sex work as a way to make money as well as that it was easier to get involved first through dominatrix or fetish work than beginning with exchanging sex. Yet they described how involvement in these earlier actions of sexual exchange (fetish and dancing) led to oral and vaginal sex exchange and prostitution. They described a range of activities that linked sexual behaviors for survival to vulnerability to pimp-mediated prostitution and trafficking. Young adults acknowledge certain acts as being part of a spectrum of sexual exchange while at the same time distinguishing them from prostitution. One young woman shared,

It’s always dancing first. It starts with dancing first-dancing is the gateway. Once you see that fast money, you see the routine tricks who always come and give good money, they keep throwing you bread, start saying, ‘What would you do for more? What would you do for this amount?’

This spectrum is used by recruiters to exploit young people; it is easier to get a vulnerable young adult to engage in a less explicit form of sexual exchange. One participant who also disclosed involvement as an exploiter shared, “Sometimes it’s not all about prostitution, (...) it’s easy to turn people onto other stuff that has nothing to do with prostitution, like massage, or dominatrix, you name it, but it won’t involve sex.”

Participants used language conveying that sex exchange is an ever-present option that homeless young adults have to and do consider to get money and cover their basic needs. As young people experiencing homelessness consider their options for survival, selling sex and the related behaviors is one option they regularly consider and discuss amongst their peer group. A participant shared,

Well I think thoughts have a strong influence on your actions. So if you’re thinking about prostitution or the actions leading up to prostitution, your thoughts are racing. Like should I do it? Is it survival? Peer pressure? So yeah.

At the same time homeless young adults are considering selling sex, they are surrounded by ever-present solicitations to engage in paid sex. Participants reported routinely being solicited for various sexual acts, most often in exchange for money or substances. These solicitations happened in public places where they typically spend time such as on their regular walking routes, bus stops, on the bus itself, online using their social media accounts, and at the services they utilized specifically for homeless youth such as drop-in centers and shelters. A participant shared,

There was this man, at the bus stop. I didn’t have nothing (...) (This man) was like, ‘Where’s your boyfriend at?’, and I said, ‘He’s on his way down here, why?’ (...) He shows me some video on his phone of him jacking off, talking about, ‘hey I’ll give \$40 if you let me eat you out.’

Another shared,

‘Chris’ messages me on Tagged and said I will pay you \$200 to go behind the dumpster and ... Bend over and shake it. He told me go behind the dumpster, suck his ding-aling and bend over for \$200.

While a few participants noted that women solicit sexual acts as well, all of the examples shared included solicitations from men of various ages. Solicitations were described from men they did not know, men they knew well, and men they knew only casually. Participants frequently mentioned being solicited by men they had seen or met at a homeless youth services agency. Additionally, a common story included an assumption that if something was given by a male peer, usually drugs or alcohol, it was expected that the participant in exchange would perform sexual favors. Two participants gave examples:

‘You want a cigarette? Come suck this dick.’ There’s it right there.

‘You want to hit my blunt? You know what to do.’

Homeless young adults, by virtue of being homeless and accessing services, opened themselves up to be solicited by people that they met or saw at homeless-serving agencies, both through formal pimp-mediated recruitment or informal expectations and solicitations to trade sex with peers or other members of the community. One participant shared,

I can be walking down the street and see people from (a homeless youth organization) that I don’t even associate with and they’ll come up to me, ‘oh you want to make this quick cash?’ (Multiple participants: Yeah!) –‘you trying to get on this lucky train?’

Frames of Mind: Feeling Desperate, Seeking-Love, and Curiosity

Participants described the frames of mind that they believe make homeless youth vulnerable for sexually exploitative situations and relationships; one young woman shared, “When you get desperate you do a lot of desperate things, you think you never would’ve done or do before in your life.” The attitudes expressed were categorized into three main themes: Desperation, Curiosity/Immaturity, and Love Seeking. Substance use was mentioned in examples in all of these categories. These frames of mind were not described as mutually exclusive; being curious and immature might coexist with love-seeking.

Participants who talked about the motivation of desperation felt that others were looking to take advantage of the bad situation in which homeless youth find themselves. They talked about trading sex being something they did not want to do, but something that had to be done when there were no other options. This theme was also brought up in connection to seeing others participating in prostitution at an early age and having close family members and friends being sexually exploited. One participant shared,

You start off young, you grow up and see the differences between what’s going on in your family (...) you see your parents on drugs (...) and you know what she’s doing to make her money and then you look back and start doing the same thing.

A second frame of mind emerged around the theme of curiosity and immaturity. Youth expressing this sentiment talked about hearing of the negative aspects of prostitution, namely violence, but thought they would be better able to keep control over the situation. They talked about reflecting on feeling like they did not need anyone’s help and did not need to listen to advice. They also talked about being curious of new sexual experiences as well as combined sexual experiences and substance use and the allure of ‘fast’ and ‘easy’ money. One shared,

I feel like it all sums up to curiosity. Curiosity plays a big part. Exploring your options. (...) Someone can tell you, oh I’ve experienced it, I’ve been beat, (...) but if they have nice stuff, it’s like, well okay, it can’t be that bad, if you continue to go back to it. (...) I’m not the same person as you, so my outcome is not going to be the same as yours. (...) This is what you did wrong, and this is what I know I’m going to do so as not to get stuck in your situation. Whereas again, you really don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.

The final frame of mind participants surfaced was love-seeking. Youth expressing this sentiment shared experiences of thinking they were in love and feeling like they trusted people who ultimately betrayed them. Some participants talked about the process of realizing that what they were going through was not love. As one participant explained, “Love. They feel in love. (...) Well that’s what they thought. All those girls are thinking that they’re in love.” In the voice of a previous boyfriend, one participant described a conversation to convince her to sell sex: “‘You’ll do it if you love me.’ You’re lying out your ass. Ain’t nobody love you.” Another shared,

Might also be if you like somebody or you lust somebody, cause it couldn’t be true love if they’re taking you through that or if they’re letting you do it. Or if they haven’t come to their sense and said, today we need to stop this. (...) And then obviously, throughout all of it, you’re misled. All of that leads to being misled.

Direct Recruitment into Sexually Exploitative Situations

Participants gave various examples of how homeless young women are recruited into sexual exploitation. These stories were clustered around three main actors: males in the role of

boyfriend or sexual partner, females working in conjunction with a pimp, and unintentional recruitment by female peers.

Males most often appeared in recruitment stories in the role of a boyfriend or sexual partner. This relationship was typically associated with violence. One such example includes boyfriends or potential partners pressuring or encouraging young women to have sex with the boyfriend's friends or family members. This also included examples of women being sexually assaulted or encouraged to have sex by a boyfriend of a close female friend. This recruitment theme is associated with the motivation of love-seeking. Someone shared,

So I hook up with him a couple days after that and he starts acting like he's in control of me. He's trying to tell me what to do and hook me up with his friends and stuff. And he's like you better do what I say...

Additionally, females were reported as intentional recruiters working for pimps. This theme included more examples of using glamour, the allure of wealth and beautiful things, the attraction of sexual freedom, and the allure of making money. Females as recruiters were associated with the motivation of curiosity and easy money. One participant shared,

Like a sex party, they have all the lingerie and girls things and once you're there you are talking with all the other girls. (...) And then one girl will start, 'oh yeah girl, I've been doing this thing to get some money', 'you should come get some of this stuff, you can use it for...', so it starts with the passion party.

Lastly, participants talked about being casually encouraged to trade sex by their peers. They gave examples of having informal relationships with peers who were trading sex and it became assumed they also were trading sex. They also discussed the challenge of making friends while homeless; too often peers were not intentionally trying to recruit them into working for a pimp but were sharing the best ways they had learned to survive. This unintentional recruitment encouraged peers to trade sex and is associated with the motivation of desperation. One participant shared,

I look at it that someone can genuinely be your friend (...) but not know their own self worth so the only advice I have is ok (...) Girl yeah, you should do this or try this. Not wanting to intentionally tear them down, but they don't know any better and they only can teach what they know.

In summary, our qualitative data revealed several key novel findings summarized here. First, youth participants unanimously agreed that sexual exploitation as experienced by

youth and young adults is a spectrum of behaviors and experiences, rather than a discrete event or singular experience. Young adult participants described many activities such as erotic dancing and acts that felt non-sexual to the participant (i.e. fetish work), but were arousing to the purchaser. These types of acts were described as 'easier' for youth to do and participants suggested they function as gateways into more explicit, violent, and difficult forms of sexual exchange.

Second, participants described a pervasive conversation among homeless youth and young adults about the merits of sex trading that they believe encourages and promotes sex trading as well as other forms of sexual exploitation. In this conversation, homeless young adults were described as providing tips, suggestions and ideas about what they believe are 'best practices' for engaging in sex trading and sex selling as a way to meet unmet basic needs. It is a strategy that youth and young adults must consider for survival.

Third, focus groups results provide information about specific recruitment strategies they had witnessed in their peer community or experienced and the observed frame of mind (i.e. beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions) among young people experiencing CSE.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand the perceptions of sexual exploitation among young adults experiencing homelessness. The focus group data we analyzed had strong themes regarding survival, violence, and struggling to "get by", as well as resilience. It is impossible to understand the experience of self-identified women without considering cultural aspects of gender. Watson, in a qualitative study of young woman experiencing homelessness, found evidence to support gendered theories of power and individualism as frameworks to understand females' survival mechanisms (2011). The power imbalance between men and women, coupled with the expectation that the individual is responsible for their own situation, results in women creating their own capital (Watson 2011).

Young adult participants expressly talked about how sex exchange is one of the few options for homeless youth to get what they need. Regardless of whether youth actually engaged in sex exchange, all youth in this study reported that homeless young adult women and girls confront and think about sex exchange as an option for acquiring needed resources and must negotiate the pressures of solicitations amid the allure of relationships with sexual partners and peers. Our participants indicated that their peers in the general population of homeless youth directly and indirectly discuss and engage in sexual exchange. With continual pressures of unmet basic needs, solicitations and people looking to exploit youth's weaknesses, sexually exploitative situations are a dynamic force that continually confront homeless youth and young

adults. Previous research on the unique patterns of sexual exploitation in the Minneapolis metro-area supports our study findings specific to homeless youth solicitation and recruitment in public areas including public transportation and homeless youth serving agencies (Martin et al. 2014).

Additionally, when participants talked about both informal peer recruitment and intentional recruitment, they said their status as a homeless youth involved in services flagged young people as targets by others they had met or had seen at homeless youth serving agencies. While homeless youth need targeted services and supports, accessing these services may lead to increased pressures for involvement in CSE and victimization. This paradox is part of the landscape of receiving services and did not seem to be limited to any single agency or type of service.

The themes related to frames of mind revealed in this study closely align with previous work on this population, including the clustering of risk factors (Klatt et al. 2014). Likewise, generally the intentional recruitment themes revealed here are aligned with what is known about grooming practices specifically for recruiting youth into CSE (see Williamson and Prior 2009). Two main recruitment tactics, finesse pimping (characterized by manipulation predominately through emotional control and utilizing the roles of provider or lover) and guerilla pimping (characterized by dominance through direct violence and physical force), can be utilized by people playing the role of boyfriend, but one involves more subtle emotional manipulation while the other is characterized by violence (Williamson and Prior 2009). Our study revealed narratives from the perspective of the young adult themselves that include both styles of recruitment. Additional studies have expounded on the relationships between sexual exploitation and violence victimization (Martin et al. 2014; Wilson and Butler 2013). Our finding that participants were recruited or encouraged to engage in CSE by peers reinforces existing research (Ferguson et al. 2011; Tyler 2009; Warf et al. 2013). However, generally studies noting the influence of peers engaged in sex trading have not distinguished between intentional recruitment by peers and the informal recruitment that was described by our participants. Thus, an over-reliance on the notion of a predatory or deliberate type of recruitment may obscure another critical pathway for youth involvement. Our study expands current knowledge with these findings.

A main contribution of this study is the young adults' perceptions and understanding that sexual exploitation is a part of the general experience of youth homelessness. Many studies and services focus on counting the number or percentage of homeless youth who trade sex (oral, vaginal and anal) for material goods or money. This does not take into consideration the various sexual acts that young adults may participate in that fall outside of the general understanding of sex and

sexual activity. Further, this also does not take into account the young adults who negotiate sexually exploitative situations even if they are not actually trading sex or being prostituted. Previous understandings of the sexual exploitation of homeless youth lends itself to a practitioner-focused interpretation to identify youth "at-risk" of and/or experiencing sexual exploitation as opposed to youth deemed not at-risk. If instead sexual exploitation is understood as integral to the experience of all homeless youth and young adults, practitioners can better engage with the entire homeless youth and young adult population on this issue.

Limitations

Participation was limited to female-identifying young adults. While we know sexual exploitation occurs among males as well as females, the insights provided through this project only reflect a female perspective. This limitation was due to the specific request of the hosting agency as well as budgetary and time constraints. While participants were not directly asked about their regional background, all youth were recruited from a Minneapolis-based agency. It is reasonable to suspect that homeless youth in a rural or suburban context have unique perspectives not reflected in this project. Future research gathering the perspectives of rural and male homeless young adults should be undertaken.

Additionally, this sample only included young adults actively seeking and receiving services and consequently may not reflect the experiences of more severe manifestations of sexual exploitation and trafficking where victims are prevented from seeking help or services. While it is particularly challenging to gain access to these individuals, their experience and insight is invaluable and further studies attempting to access this subpopulation should be pursued.

Lastly, as we did not ask each participant to disclose their full involvement with CSE or their age at first involvement, we do not know if this sample is representative of CSE of minors or rather predominately represents the perspectives of young adults whose initial involvement in selling and/or trading sex or sexual services began after age 18.

Implication for Practice and Research

Our findings have several implications for practice in serving homeless youth and young adults and victims of CSE, as well as future direction for more research.

Service provider engagement in this issue is often limited to a screening question asking a youth or young adult if they have ever traded sex for food, money, drugs, or a place to stay. Basing services and support on this question

misses opportunities to prevent and intervene with sexually exploited youth and young adults. Based on what young adults shared in our research, it seems clear that from their perspective, they can, and often do, answer “no” to this question yet they may be experiencing what adult service providers consider to be sexual exploitation. Further use of the language “sex trafficking” may be even more removed from the day-to-day experiences of young adults who are sexually exploited. Service providers should understand sexual exploitation as a spectrum and a dynamic reality being continuously confronted by young adults experiencing homelessness and engage them accordingly.

Engagement of the entire homeless youth and young adult community on the issue of CSE recognizes the strong peer component of both informal and formal recruitment. It also brings adult service providers into the ongoing conversation already occurring among homeless young adults. Direct service staff should be trained and comfortable with engaging youth and young adults around earlier behaviors in the CSE spectrum such as informal peer-to-peer trading of sexual acts for substances and stripping. If staff recognize disclosure of these types of behaviors as participation in CSE they can ask appropriate follow up questions to understand the full situation a youth or young adult might be experiencing. Homeless youth serving agencies may need to evaluate the consistency in staff response to youth and young adult CSE disclosure, safety and security measures within the site to discourage recruitment, and youth and young adult connections with staff that promote positive staff and client conversations around the full spectrum of CSE.

This study has several implications for future research. First, the use of a participatory approach with young adults and a service provider yielded important new insights about areas of mismatch between how young adults talk about and experience sexual exploitation and how staff and services respond to the issue. Young adults are a valuable asset and hold critical knowledge and thus should be included in research design and implementation. Thus, youth-focused perspectives are critical to developing a fuller understanding of sexual exploitation in the lives of homeless youth and young adults. Second, our study has identified additional gaps in our knowledge that future research should address. This includes an expanded focus from only young women to include young men. The young women in our focus groups highlighted that boys and young men are also victims of the full spectrum of sexual exploitation. More work is needed to explore youth culture around sexual exploitation. Further, future studies should explore the perspectives and experiences of youth and young adults who recruit their peers and those who sexually exploit their peers and sexual partners.

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