

# Associations between childhood maltreatment and sex work in a cohort of drug-using youth

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## Abstract

Although research has examined the impacts of childhood maltreatment among various marginalized populations, few studies have explored the relationship between child abuse and subsequent involvement in sex work among drug-using street-involved youth. In the present study, the relationships between the level of childhood maltreatment and involvement in sex work were examined using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) as part of an extensive interview protocol in an ongoing prospective cohort study of street-involved youth in Vancouver, Canada. Between September 2005 and June 2006, 361 youth were recruited using extensive outreach methods and snowball sampling. The prevalence rates for abuse in the sample were 73% for physical abuse; 32.4% for sexual abuse; 86.8% for emotional abuse; 84.5% for physical neglect; and 93% for emotional neglect. Univariate and logistic regression analyses demonstrated that not only was sexual abuse independently associated with sex work, but emotional abuse was as well. These findings have implications for early intervention efforts aimed at vulnerable, high-risk youth populations as well as intervention strategies for active sex trade workers.

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## Introduction

Childhood maltreatment is pervasive and known to be associated with a variety of adverse effects on health and social functioning (Allen, Simpson, Lalonde, & Phaneuf, 1998; Briere & Elliott, 2003; Doyle, 2001). Recently, the United Nations released

the findings of its first comprehensive, global study of violence against children (Pinheiro, 2006), in which 131 governments worldwide participated. The report states that although many forms of violence against children have long been noted, the magnitude of the problem is only just coming to light. Among the strongest findings is that although some violence in children's lives is unexpected and isolated, the vast majority is experienced at the hands of those closest to them, namely parents, caregivers, teachers, schoolmates, and employers.

Within the general North American population, recent prevalence estimates for sexual and physical

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abuse stand at 14% for men and 32% for women, and 22% for men and 20% for women respectively (Briere & Elliott, 2003). Early sexual abuse alone has been linked to sexual risk behavior among the general population (Steel & Herlitz, 2005), to sexual HIV-risk behaviors among adult females (Parillo, Freeman, Collier, & Young, 2001), and to drug use among youth populations (Perkins & Jones, 2004; Swanston et al., 2003).

Research has shown that childhood sexual and/or physical abuse significantly predicts engagement in sex work among selected populations, including: adult females (Bagley & Young, 1987; Farley, Lynne, & Cotton, 2005; Potter, Martin, & Romans, 1999; Simons & Whitbeck, 1991); men who have sex with men (Kalichman, Gore-Felton, Benotsch, Cage, & Rompa, 2004; O'Leary, Purcell, Remien, & Gomez, 2003); female adolescent populations (Bagley, 1999; Simons & Whitbeck, 1991); drug-using men and women (Braitstein et al., 2003); and male/female adolescent populations (Seng, 1989). These findings are of concern given the well-known risks associated with sex work among drug-using populations, including high rates of violence and assault, homelessness, social isolation, and sexual and drug-related harms. For example, in Canada, the largest ever serial killer investigation is currently underway, with most of the victims involved being drug-addicted sex workers from Vancouver's notorious Downtown Eastside neighborhood. Many more women from the Downtown Eastside have still not been accounted for—in all, there are 61 unsolved cases of disappearances of women since 1982 (CBC News, 2006), most of whom were known to be drug users and sex workers. Although there are many known risks involved for both male and female sex workers such as sexually transmitted disease, transmission of blood-borne pathogens such as HIV and Hepatitis C (Medrano, Desmond, Zule, & Hatch, 1999), and potential victimization and violence (Farley et al., 2005), the Vancouver tragedy underscores the most severe harms involved in sex work within heavy drug-using communities.

Despite what is known about the potential link between prior abuse and engagement in sex work, a number of gaps remain. First, while the definition of child maltreatment in reporting legislation in many jurisdictions has expanded in recent decades to include not only sexual and physical but emotional abuse and physical and emotional neglect, few studies separate out these types of childhood

maltreatment among participants (Medrano et al., 1999; Rodgers et al., 2004; Spatz Widom & Kuhns, 1996). Although evidence shows a high co-occurrence of multiple types of childhood maltreatment, typically studies focus on single types, usually either sexual or physical abuse (Bernstein et al., 2003). Second, research looking at childhood abuse as a predictor of sex work involvement has primarily focused on sexual abuse within adult female populations. Much less is known about associations between childhood abuse and sex work among males, and among vulnerable populations such as street-involved youth and drug users. Lastly, research on childhood maltreatment is often limited by legal reporting requirements. In most North American jurisdictions, researchers are required to report disclosures of childhood abuse of legal minors to authorities, which can pose a challenge to establishing trust relationships with youth research participants and can result in limited abuse research with this population. However, because youth who are involved in sex work represent an especially vulnerable population, and because of the need for research that can inform early intervention efforts, studies looking at childhood abuse among vulnerable youth populations are particularly important. The present study was therefore conducted to evaluate how various types of childhood maltreatment (sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, and physical and emotional neglect) may be associated with subsequent engagement in sex work within a population of high-risk street-involved youth.

## Methods

### *Study population*

The At Risk Youth Study (ARYS) is a prospective cohort study of street-involved youth in downtown Vancouver, Canada. As described elsewhere (Wood, Stoltz, Montaner, & Kerr, 2006), snowball sampling and street-based outreach were employed to recruit a sample of street-involved drug-using youth. Youth were enrolled if they were between 14 and 26 years of age, and had used illicit drugs other than marijuana in the past 30 days. Data collection procedures for the ARYS cohort involve semi-annual blood sampling for measurement of HIV and Hepatitis C (HCV) antibodies, along with completion of an interviewer-administered questionnaire.

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