



## Rationalising predictors of child sexual exploitation and sex-trading



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### ABSTRACT

Although there is evidence for specific risk factors leading to child sexual exploitation and prostitution, these influences overlap and have rarely been examined concurrently. The present study examined case files for 175 young persons who attended a voluntary organization in Leicester, United Kingdom, which supports people who are sexually exploited or at risk of sexual exploitation. Based on the case files, the presence or absence of known risk factors for becoming a sex worker was coded. Data were analyzed using *t*-test, logistic regression, and smallest space analysis. Users of the voluntary organization's services who had been sexually exploited exhibited a significantly greater number of risk factors than service users who had not been victims of sexual exploitation. The logistic regression produced a significant model fit. However, of the 14 potential predictors – many of which were associated with each other – only four variables significantly predicted actual sexual exploitation: running away, poverty, drug and/or alcohol use, and having friends or family members in prostitution. Surprisingly, running away was found to significantly decrease the odds of becoming involved in sexual exploitation. Smallest space analysis of the data revealed 5 clusters of risk factors. Two of the clusters, which reflected a desperation and need construct and immature or out-of-control lifestyles, were significantly associated with sexual exploitation. Our research suggests that some risk factors (e.g. physical and emotional abuse, early delinquency, and homelessness) for becoming involved in sexual exploitation are common but are part of the problematic milieu of the individuals affected and not directly associated with sex trading itself. Our results also indicate that it is important to engage with the families and associates of young persons at risk of becoming (or remaining) a sex worker if one wants to reduce the numbers of persons who engage in this activity.

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### Rationalizing Predictors of Child Sexual Exploitation and Sex-trading

Prostitution is a perennial concern to politicians, care agencies, and the public (Matthews, 2008), as is the involvement of children and adolescents in commercial sexual activity and exploitation (Sanders, O'Neill, & Pitcher, 2009). This study examines the concurrent risk factors associated with entry into child sexual exploitation (CSE) and trading sex in persons at risk of becoming street sex workers in a large British city. Understanding the risk factors increasing a young person's vulnerability to CSE is important for several reasons. First, it is helpful for identifying individuals who are engaging in or

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at risk of becoming involved in trading sex (Cusick, 2002; Department of Health, 2000). Second, research on risk factors can guide interventions and support for young people to prevent them from becoming involved in prostitution (Brawn & Roe-Sepowitz, 2008; Nadon, Koverola, & Schludermann, 1998; Reid, 2011). Third, awareness of these risk contexts can help identify men who are sexually exploitative (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010).

In the United Kingdom, CSE is defined for persons under 18 as involving “situations, contexts, and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive ‘something’ (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities” (HM Government, 2009, p. 9). For people aged 18 or older, the term *trading sex* is used. Trading sex includes prostitution and has been defined as performing sexual acts to acquire money, food, drugs, or lodging (Tyler, 2009).

## Risk Factors for CSE and Trading Sex

### *Child Abuse and Neglect*

One of the most widely studied risk factors for CSE is childhood abuse and neglect (Matthews, 2008). Longitudinal studies (Kaestle, 2012) and studies of both clinical (McClanahan, McClelland, Abram, & Teplin, 1999) and nonclinical samples (Lavoie, Thibodeau, Gagné, & Hébert, 2010) suggest a link between childhood sexual abuse and later involvement in CSE and trading sex. For example, Lavoie et al. (2010) found that among a large sample of Canadian high school students, sexual abuse during childhood significantly predicted trading sex once one statistically controlled for the effects of gender. Although other studies have failed to find a link between a history of sexual abuse and CSE/trading sex (e.g., Nadon et al., 1998), the general trend associates childhood sexual abuse with high-risk sexual behaviors and trading sex (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010).

Another form of abuse regarded as a potential precursor of CSE/trading sex is physical abuse during childhood. Several studies have found high rates of childhood physical abuse in samples of prostitutes (e.g., Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1999; Kramer & Berg, 2003; Roe-Sepowitz, Hickie, Loubert, & Egan, 2011). Assessing a sample of shelter and street youths, Greene and Colleagues (1999) reported that the odds for having traded sex were twice as high for individuals who had a history of physical abuse compared to those who had not been physically abused. High rates of physical abuse among people involved in CSE/trading sex do not necessarily imply that CSE/trading sex is common among the majority of those who are physically abused. However, an association of physical abuse with CSE/trading sex is evident. Childhood physical abuse should thus be considered as a potential antecedent to CSE/trading sex.

The possible impact of emotional abuse and neglect on CSE/trading sex has also been examined. Several studies have supported an association for this type of abuse with later engagement in high-risk sexual behaviors, including prostitution (e.g., Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2011; Widom & Ames, 1994). Widom and Ames (1994), for example, compared the criminal histories of a large sample of victims of childhood abuse to those of non-abused persons. They found people who experienced abuse or neglect as a child had an increased risk of being arrested for prostitution compared to non-abused/non-neglected individuals. Emotional abuse and neglect thus seems to influence later involvement in CSE/trading sex.

### *Family Dysfunction*

Another risk factor for CSE/trading sex linked to abuse and neglect is family dysfunction. Family dysfunction and breakdown are common precursors of CSE/trading sex (Nadon et al., 1998; Pedersen & Hegna, 2003; Van Brunschot & Brannigan, 2002). Nadon et al. (1998) found that the prostitutes participating in their study had suffered from higher levels of family dysfunction than the control group of non-prostitutes. Pedersen and Hegna (2003), in a survey of all the 14–17 year olds attending public and private schools in Oslo, found parental break up was positively associated with selling sex for both genders. This shows the association of family dysfunction and family breakdown with CSE/trading sex is present in both prostitutes and community samples.

### *Education Difficulties*

Educational difficulties are also associated with CSE/trading sex. Coy (2008), for example, conducted life-history interviews with sex workers who had been in care. She found that the women participating in the study had high rates of school exclusion. Other, more rigorous studies using control group designs also found persons involved in CSE/trading sex more likely to have discontinued their education than non-prostitutes (Lung, Lin, Lu, & Shu, 2004; Van Brunschot & Brannigan, 2002). There is thus evidence that discontinuous schooling is associated with an involvement in CSE/trading sex.

### *Poverty*

Poverty is a common correlate of CSE/trading sex (Sanders et al., 2009). Limited education reduces chances to find employment. Qualitative analyses of interviews with prostitutes have shown that poverty and restricted options to earn money conventionally (or in sufficient amounts) are among the reasons that motivate some people to trade sex (Coy, 2008;

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