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## Adolescents' motives for selling sex in a welfare state – A Swedish national study

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### ABSTRACT

In addition to money or other compensation, other motives for selling sex may be important in a welfare country such as Sweden. The aim of this study was to carry out an exploratory investigation of adolescents' motives for selling sex in a population-based survey in Sweden. A total of 5839 adolescents from the third year of Swedish high school, mean age 18.0 years, participated in the study. The response rate was 59.7% and 51 students (0.9%) reported having sold sex. Exploratory factor analysis and hierarchical cluster analysis were used to identify groups of adolescents according to underlying motives for selling sex. Further analyses were carried out for characteristics of selling sex and risk factors. Three groups of adolescents were categorized according to their motives for selling sex: Adolescents reporting: 1) Emotional reasons, being at a greater risk of sexual abuse, using sex as a means of self-injury and having a non-heterosexual orientation. 2) Material but no Emotional reasons, who more often receive money as compensation and selling sex to a person over 25 years of age, and 3) Pleasure or no underlying motive for selling sex reported, who were mostly heterosexual males selling sex to a person under 25 years of age, the buyer was not known from the Internet, the reward was seldom money and this group was less exposed to penetrative sexual abuse or using sex as a means of self-injury. In conclusion, adolescents selling sex are a heterogeneous group in regard to underlying motives.

### 1. Introduction

Population-based studies of adolescents selling sex in the Nordic countries and the United States indicate that more boys than girls sell sex for compensation (Fredlund, Svensson, Svedin, Priebe, & Wadsby, 2013; McNeal & Walker, 2016; Mossige et al., 2007; Pedersen & Hegna, 2003; Svedin & Priebe, 2007). Selling sex among adolescents has been associated with a few sociodemographic factors including parents' education, economic situation in the family and immigrant background (Fredlund et al., 2013; Lee, Shek, & Busiol, 2016; Pedersen & Hegna, 2003; Svedin & Priebe, 2007), but it has also been associated with sexual, physical and emotional abuse, poor mental health and self-injury (Heilemann & Santhiveeran, 2011; Hwang & Bedford, 2003; Lavoie, Thibodeau, Gagné, &

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Hébert, 2010; Svedin & Priebe, 2007; Svensson, Fredlund, Svedin, Priebe, & Wadsby, 2013). These findings lead to the following questions: Why do adolescents sell sex in social welfare countries like Sweden? Except for economic reward, are there other motives behind the behavior? Are there any gender differences in the motives for selling sex? Few studies have investigated adolescents' motives for selling sex, and to our knowledge there has been no population-based study of the subject so far.

Buying, but not selling, sexual services is considered a criminal act under Swedish law, but if the person is under 15 years of age it is considered rape (*The Swedish Penal Code, Chapter 6*). The most common compensation for sexual services among adolescents is money, but other forms of compensation such as drugs, alcohol and cigarettes, food and shelter are also commonly seen (Fredlund et al., 2013; Svedin & Priebe, 2007; van de Walle, Picavet, van Berlo, & Verhoeff, 2012). Previous population-based studies indicate that adolescents with experience of selling sex have most commonly sold sex fewer than five times (Fredlund et al., 2013; Lavoie et al., 2010; Svedin & Priebe, 2007). Interview studies indicate that young people who sell sex do not identify themselves with the term 'prostitution', since the selling is often seen as something temporary and the term prostitution is associated with a more long-term or full-time occupation (van de Walle et al., 2012). In this study we use the term 'selling sex' and define it as a form of sexual exploitation of children (see e.g. Hallet, 2017).

The prevalence of adolescents selling sex in the Nordic countries has been estimated at 0.6–1.2% among girls and 1.7–2.1% among boys, indicating that selling sex is slightly more common among boys than girls (Fredlund et al., 2013; Pedersen & Hegna, 2003; Svedin & Priebe, 2007). In a study in the Baltic Sea region which included 18-year-old adolescents in Sweden, Norway, Lithuania, Estonia and Poland, selling sex was more common among boys than girls in all countries except Estonia (Mossige et al., 2007). Studies from the United States have found the prevalence of adolescents who sell sex to be 1–2% (Kaestle, 2012; McNeal & Walker, 2016), and more common among boys than girls (McNeal & Walker, 2016). The prevalence of adolescents who sell sex could however be underestimated in school surveys, since representative studies are hard to perform when dropping out of school is more commonly seen among adolescents selling sex than among those who do not (Brown & Roe-Sepowitz, 2008; McNeal & Walker, 2016) and selling sex is negatively associated with feeling happy at school (Kaestle, 2012). In the research concerning adolescents who sell sex, there is currently a strong female gender bias and there are few studies investigating male adolescents selling sex (Mitchell et al., 2017).

In interview studies, the motives for selling sex among adolescents have varied from pure curiosity to being physically forced (Bagley & Young, 1987; Edinburgh, Pape-Blabolil, Harpin, & Saewyc, 2015; Hwang & Bedford, 2004; Song & Morash, 2014; van de Walle et al., 2012). Differences could especially be seen in the selling of sex being perceived by young people as voluntary or forced (Hwang & Bedford, 2004; van de Walle et al., 2012), even though there might not be a clear line between these two groups, e.g. survival sex could either be defined as voluntary (the person is not physically forced) or forced (the person has no other choice than to sell sex for survival). However, consent is irrelevant and force, fraud or coercion is not required to define minors' selling sex as sexual exploitation according to the UN definition (Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017). For some individuals, selling sex was perceived as an easy way to get money or expensive gifts or as a way to obtain shelter for the night (Edinburgh et al., 2015; Hwang & Bedford, 2004; Song & Morash, 2014; van de Walle et al., 2012). For others, selling sex constituted the main source of income and in general these individuals were found to have more problems with alcohol or drugs, mental health and finances in interview studies (van de Walle et al., 2012). Further motives for selling sex among adolescents were drug abuse (Bagley & Young, 1987; Hwang & Bedford, 2004; Kennedy, Klein, Bristowe, Cooper, & Yuile, 2007), coercion or persuasion by a pimp or boyfriend (Bagley & Young, 1987; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Kennedy et al., 2007; Rothman, Bazzi, & Bair-Merritt, 2015), influence by senior or junior peers (Bagley & Young, 1987; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Song & Morash, 2014), feeling appreciated, being touched or physically close to someone (Hwang & Bedford, 2004; Jonsson, Svedin, & Hydén, 2015) or as a way to regulate feelings such as anxiety (Jonsson et al., 2015). Using sex as a means of self-injury has been strongly associated with selling sex in adolescents (Fredlund, Svedin, Priebe, Jonsson, & Wadsby, 2017). Interview studies indicate that young heterosexual men have more positive experiences of selling sex while young females have more feelings of shame and guilt after selling sex (van de Walle et al., 2012).

Selling sex among adolescents is associated with sexual, physical and emotional abuse, poor mental health, self-injury, sexual risk-taking behavior, conduct problems, running away from home, and drug and alcohol abuse (Edinburgh et al., 2015; Edwards, Iritani, & Hallfors, 2006; Heilemann & Santhiveeran, 2011; Hwang & Bedford, 2003; Lavoie et al., 2010; Pedersen & Hegna, 2003; Svedin & Priebe, 2007; Svensson et al., 2013). However, differences have been seen between genders concerning risk factors and adolescents selling sex. For example, mental health problems can be seen especially among girls (Svedin & Priebe, 2007) and conduct problems and antisocial behavior especially among boys (Pedersen & Hegna, 2003; Svedin & Priebe, 2007). Population-based studies indicate that almost all of the girls selling sex have been exposed to sexual abuse while boys have been exposed to a lower extent, about 60–70%. Penetrative abuse is especially seen among girls (Svedin & Priebe, 2007; Svensson et al., 2013). Studies that investigate these factors in relation to motives for selling sex are lacking.

## 2. Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to carry out an explorative investigation of adolescents' motives for selling sex for compensation in a population-based study in Sweden. The study aims were to 1) identify groups of adolescents according to their motives for selling sex, 2) investigate differences in gender concerning motives for selling sex, 3) investigate associations between motives for selling sex and characteristics of selling sex including type of compensation, means of contact with the buyer, number of instances of selling sex and age of the buyer, and 4) investigate associations with risk factors such as trauma symptoms, sexual orientation, sexual abuse, self-injurious behaviors, and alcohol and drug abuse.

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