



Criminal justice involvement among young adults exchanging sex in Detroit

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Criminal justice involvement
Sex work
Drug use
Neighborhoods

ABSTRACT

For young adult sex workers, the risk of arrest and incarceration are dramatically influenced by the venue of sex exchange and individual and neighborhood characteristics. Using a unique venue-based survey sample of young adults in Detroit who are exchanging sex, multivariable logistic regression models were used to identify associations with arrest and incarceration. Criminal justice involvement was normative, and risk was increased by working on the street venue, using drugs, lacking stable housing, juvenile arrest or incarceration, dropping out of school before age 18, and neighborhood characteristics. Several promising points of intervention could reduce criminal justice involvement for young adults exchanging sex.

1. Introduction

For young adults aged 18–30 involved in sex exchange, frequent engagement with the criminal justice system is common, and interactions between sex workers and police occur regularly. These interactions are most common for street-based sex workers, who sell sex in public spaces, but also occur across the broad range of venues in which sex or simulated sexual activity (such as stripping, erotic dancing) is exchanged for money, drugs, shelter, or other needed items. Police interactions can result in a summons or desk-appearance ticket, or being taken into police custody (Thukral & Dittmore, 2003; Thukral, Dittmore, & Murphy, 2005). Up to three-quarters of individuals exchanging sex have been arrested previously, and almost half were initially involved in the justice system before the age of 18 (Cohan et al., 2006; Raphael & Shapiro, 2002). Although estimates of the incarceration rate for sex workers vary, up to one-third have served sentences in either a jail or a prison, many more than once (Hankel, Heil, Dewey, & Martinez, 2015). For the purposes of the analyses and discussion presented here, “sex workers” will be used as an umbrella term including individuals who exchange any type of sex, or simulated sexual activity, such as erotic dancing or stripping.

Although criminal justice involvement is common for sex workers, differential experiences of arrest and incarceration can be conceptualized using a social ecological framework. Originally developed

to describe the effects of community and environment on child development, this framework emphasizes the ways in which individual, sex exchange venue, neighborhood, and policy/policing environment factors all shape an individual's risk for criminal justice involvement (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Sallis, Owen, & Fisher, 2008) (Fig. 1).

As a result of decades of targeted economic and criminal justice policies, young, unemployed men of color bear a disproportionate burden of incarceration (Spohn & Holleran, 2000; B. Western, 2006). Young adults without a high school education and those with incarcerated parents are also significantly more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system (Harper & McLanahan, 2004; Bruce Western & Petit, 2010). Additionally, drug use results in more frequent and more serious criminal justice involvement and the relationship between sex work and drug use is complicated. Addiction may preclude many legal forms of employment, leaving sex work as one of few viable options for generating income. Additionally, some sex workers may use drugs as a means of coping with the trauma and conditions of that work (Cobbina & Oselin, 2011; Sallmann, 2010).

Chances for criminal justice involvement are not evenly distributed across venues for sexual commerce (e.g., the street or strip clubs), and sex workers are not evenly distributed by race, gender, and class across venues (Cohan et al., 2006; Murphy & Venkatesh, 2006). Sex workers who are racial and ethnic minorities, those who use drugs, and those who are among the youngest and oldest are more likely to be

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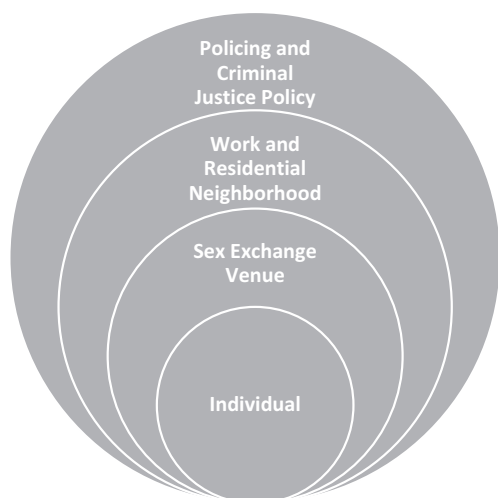


Fig. 1. Social-ecological model of risk for criminal justice involvement for sex workers.

exchanging on the street rather than in brick-and-mortar venues (Cohan et al., 2006; Cunningham & Kendall, 2011; Murphy & Venkatesh, 2006; Thukral et al., 2005; Thukral & Dittmore, 2003). Individuals involved in street-based sexual commerce have the highest risk of arrest and incarceration due to punitive policies that target the selling of sex in outdoor public spaces and thereby increase the penalties for street-based sex exchange. Only those with sufficient resources can transition to private, indoor spaces where sexual services are marketed through online ads and websites reviewing escorts and call girls, and where the risk of arrest and incarceration is significantly lower (Bernstein, 2004; Cunningham & Kendall, 2011).

Neighborhood characteristics further determine patterns of policing, arrest, and incarceration for sex workers. Residential segregation and concentrated disadvantage additionally place young adults who are poor or are people of color at risk for more intensive policing and more punitive sentences, and neighborhoods known for drug trade are often under heightened surveillance (Ousey & Lee, 2008; Rodriguez, 2011).

In this study, the primary objective was to examine the risk and protective factors for arrest and incarceration among a diverse sample of young adults exchanging sex in Detroit. This was a secondary analysis of data from the Detroit Youth Passages project gathered to help understand how sex exchange contributes to economic and social vulnerability. The collateral consequences of criminal justice involvement are wide-ranging, including exclusion from state and federal health care and welfare programs, limited employment opportunities, and stigma from family, friends, and community (Pinard, 2006). The secondary objective of this study was, in collaboration with our community partners, to identify potential points of intervention to decrease criminal justice involvement among this group.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study design

The Detroit Youth Passages project is a collaboration between three community-based organizations (CBOs) in Detroit (Alternatives for Girls, Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation, and Ruth Ellis Center) and the University of Michigan School of Public Health. The project included an ethnographic study using participant observation, semi-structured and life-history interviews with young adults identified through partner organizations, a photovoice project, and a venue-based, interviewer-administered survey that was designed to broadly explore the ways in which engaging in sex exchange contributed to sexual vulnerabilities inherent in the contexts navigated by young

adults of diverse genders, sexualities, and social positions (Graham et al., 2013; Lopez et al., 2012; Padilla, 2012). The work described here represents a secondary analysis of the survey data. The project was specifically targeted toward young adults who were uniquely situated with respect to gender and sexual identity and socioeconomic status, including cisgender and transgender women and gay and bisexual men with histories of economic and residential instability.

2.2. Sampling

A venue-based sample was chosen principally because it operationalized the concept of sexual geographies that, in part, framed the project. Venue-based sampling helped identify these relatively isolated, small, distinct target populations of interest (Kendall et al., 2008; MacKellar et al., 2007). Due to the challenges of recruitment in venues heavily regulated by managers, and with the goal of ensuring some degree of representation across a wide range of characteristics, snow-ball sampling was also employed within the venues, and participants were encouraged to refer contacts to the study. Prior descriptions of participant recruitment strategies support that venue-based and snow-ball sampling frameworks may allow for increased sampling of lower socioeconomic status groups and others that are missed by traditional study samples (Kendall et al., 2008).

2.3. Recruitment

The study team identified venues that would allow survey sampling of cisgender and transgender young adults who were representative of the racial and socio-economic diversity in the city and also were engaged in sex exchange at the time of the survey. The study team included former sex workers and outreach workers with experience working with our target groups in Detroit and were instrumental in defining the venues and subsequently categorizing establishments and locations in the city. The three initially identified venues were the street, after-hours parties and social clubs, and strip clubs. The strip clubs were further divided into high-end and low-end strip clubs, with high-end clubs having more security and also more visible security, more space between the performers and clients, and a lower client-to-performer ratio. Low-end strip clubs had less security and less visible security, more contact between performers and clients, and a higher client-to-performer ratio. Consistent with the eligibility criteria for services at our partner CBOs, we defined “young adults” as people 18–30 years old.

After identifying the venues, select members of the research team made preliminary visits to each one. They recorded extensive field notes that detailed the time and space dynamics of the flow of customers and workers, the availability of space for interviews, and the demographics of the potential participants. During these initial visits, the research team members approached the owners or proprietors of the venue (excepting the street) and described the broad scope of the study. On selected dates and times that were representative of the venue, research team members conducted a convenience sample of interviews. They attempted to recruit participants at slow times, when the \$30 incentive for a 30-min interview would augment, rather than cut into, earnings (Snow et al., 2013). Interviews were generally conducted in a quiet or private space, where participants felt most comfortable. They were also offered the opportunity to have a private meeting outside of the venue if they preferred. Interviewers recruited participants on the street venue from blocks that members of the study team had identified as having a high density of street-based sex work. These respondents were offered the option of conducting the interview in a car or restaurant at the time of recruitment, or to set up a private meeting at another time. The details of the street-based recruitment process are detailed elsewhere (Snow et al., 2013).

Trained interviewers used paper surveys to conduct interviews with 278 respondents from May 2012 to August 2012. Trained research

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