

Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking in a Rural State: Interviews with Adjudicated Female Juveniles

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Abstract Domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) is defined as the “recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act” (TVPA, 2000) where the person is a citizen of the U.S. and under age 18 years. The purpose of this study was to gain a more informed understanding of the scope of the problem of DMST for adjudicated juvenile females, to identify factors associated with DMST for this vulnerable population, and enhance our understanding of the pathways in and out of DMST from the victims’ perspective (especially rural vs. urban). Qualitative interviews were conducted with 40 adjudicated juvenile females in a southern, rural state. Results indicate a significant number of adjudicated female youth are engaged in sex trafficking, often to obtain drugs, and that a significant number feel forced to perform sex acts in exchange for drugs and/or for a place to sleep which is also highly correlated with being a victim of sexual abuse. Early intervention for juvenile females who fit the noted vulnerabilities needs to be implemented in time to prevent our youth from being victimized. Suggestions for future research are addressed.

Keywords Domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) · Child sex trafficking · Rural · Female juvenile delinquency · At risk youth

Introduction

Cases of human trafficking have been documented in all 50 states in America. No state is immune to labor and sex trafficking, even rural states. Young victims of human trafficking often find themselves involved in some capacity with social services (Stransky & Finkelhor, 2012), typically those dealing with issues of juvenile delinquency either because they have been displaced from their homes or are caught engaging in underage sexual activity (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988), and rural states are no exception. Most acts of juvenile delinquency are the same for both males and females (Monitoring the Future, 2008); yet female sexual behavior tends to garner more scrutiny—oftentimes being associated as part of her delinquency (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 1998). Even though research shows that young females have a greater risk of becoming victims to sexual harassment and/or violence than their male counterparts, female sexuality is often perceived by those who work with “at risk youth” as part of the girls’ deviance (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 1998). This propensity to adjudicate or manage the girl’s underage sexual behavior rather than see her as a victim may impede case workers’ ability to provide adequate assistance to their young clients, particularly if the girls have been caught up in a trafficking situation.

Fortunately many agencies who work with females in the juvenile justice system are beginning to recognize the influence of trafficking in the sexual behavior of juveniles, and laws and policies are beginning to address the fact that what on the surface may seem like a young girl acting out may be steeped in exploitation and manipulation (Human Trafficking Victim’s Rights Act, 2013). Many young women and girls who find themselves in the juvenile justice system have a history of family involvement with child

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welfare, and that the factors that led to their families' involvement with child welfare also correlate with the risk-taking behavior that not only leads them to a variety of precarious situations, but also towards the juvenile justice system (Shaw, 2003). Things like physical and sexual abuse tend to greatly impact young adults' self-worth and subsequently, the decisions she makes regarding delaying sexual activity. In addition, family dysfunction makes young women and girls more susceptible to sexual predators (Sewell, 2012; Walker, 2013). Very often, it is difficult to tell what a choice is and what is exploitation and/or manipulation.

Because there are so many interactions between juvenile sexual behavior and other "risk factors," the conditions putting those in danger for trafficking may be difficult to recognize. The purpose of this study is to begin to explore those overlapping conditions that place young women involved with social and/or juvenile services at greater risk to become trafficking victims. As more and more agencies begin to recognize the growing problem of human trafficking in the United States, direction is needed on what factors agencies can begin to direct their attention to so that they can implement methods to effectively reduce the risk of young women falling victim to traffickers. How can young girls be prevented from falling victim to trafficking, particularly those who are already vulnerable? To be sure, the responsibility of the problem of human trafficking lies directly with the traffickers themselves, but the hope is that by better understanding the complicated dynamics that exist within human trafficking, agencies and individuals who work with juveniles can be provided with better tools to help combat this growing problem.

Literature Review

After drug-dealing, human trafficking is tied with illegal arms dealing as the second largest criminal industry in the world and human trafficking is the fastest growing (HHS, 2006). This \$32 billion-dollar-a-year industry is thought to affect more than 30 million people worldwide. Human trafficking consists of both sex trafficking and labor trafficking. The focus of this study was exclusively on the domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) of adjudicated females. DMST is defined as the "recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act" where the person is a citizen of the U.S. and under age 18 years of age (Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000—revised [TVPA], 2008). This includes the exploitation of children through stripping, prostitution, and/or pornography. And while cases of sex trafficking require proof that the individual acted due to force, fraud, or coercion, DMST does not have

the same requirement because of the victim's age and their inability to consent to such actions. In addition, The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA; 2000—revised, 2008) defines a "commercial sex act" as the giving or receiving of anything of value (i.e. money, drugs, shelter, clothing, food, etc.) to any person in exchange for a sex act. The money or item can be "given to or received by any person." Meaning the child can be the recipient of the money or item in a sex trafficking situation and still be the victim (American Bar Association, 2013, p. 1). This is common with regards to homeless juveniles who may engage in "survival sex" in order to obtain the most basic of necessities for survival. Therefore, it is important to recognize that when juveniles engage in survival sex, they are considered to be victims of sex trafficking.

Since human trafficking in general, and especially DMST, is so difficult to detect due to its covert nature, we do not have a solid grasp on the amount of trafficking that occurs annually. Estimates run between 100,000 and 300,000 children each year are lured into DMST in the United States (U.S. Department of State, 2010), however these numbers, and the ranges themselves indicate significant reliability issues and there are a number of distinct challenges related to determining estimates of this crime (see Stransky & Finkelhor, 2012). The TVPA requires uniform reporting for trafficking, however, this is not occurring (U.S. Department of State, 2010). What we can state is that 40 % of cases that were reported to federally-funded human trafficking task forces in this country between the years 2008 and 2010 involved sex trafficking of minors (Banks & Kyckelhahn, 2011). Adding to the difficulty with determining actual numbers of DMST is that many times DMST victims are carrying false identification provided to them by their traffickers, indicating they are at least 18 years old. When this happens, they are typically cited and released on prostitution or other minor charges when approached by law enforcement. Or they are misidentified as victims of sexual abuse, which they are, but that ignores the complexity that being a victim of trafficking brings for the victim, the criminal justice system, and social services. Furthermore, many times DMST (and human trafficking in general) is treated in the criminal justice system as a crime other than trafficking (Logan, Walker, & Hunt, 2009).

Although DMST occurs across gender, racial, and socioeconomic status, it is known there are a number of risk factors that some make juveniles more vulnerable to DMST. For example, juveniles are more vulnerable simply due to their age, as they have less life experience and fewer coping mechanisms to assist them in making decisions (Smith, Vardaman, & Snow, 2009). Juveniles are more likely to fall prey to the tactics and manipulation used by skilled traffickers/pimps. Being a victim of abuse and/or

neglect is also found to be a risk factor. In a recent report released by a juvenile facility in Texas, it was determined that over 90 % of DMST victims had been physically and sexually abused prior to being trafficked (Smith et al., 2009). Similarly, a report released by a youth shelter in Las Vegas, NV reported that 71 % of DMST victims had been sexually abused prior to being trafficked (Clark County Public Defender—Juvenile Division, 2008).

Another factor that makes youth more vulnerable to being victims of DMST is if they have a drug-addicted parent. There have been a number of cases across the country of a parent exchanging sex with their child for drugs (Smith et al., 2009). Drug addicted parents are more apt to provide poor parental supervision or neglect their children, and introduce their children to drug use. In addition, children who run away from home, especially “chronic” runaways (four times or more), are considered “easy prey” for traffickers/pimps who pose as someone who will protect them and provide for them. Having a history with Child Protective Services (CPS) also makes a child more likely to come into contact with a trafficker/pimp, as recent cases have taught us that they target group/foster care homes, knowing the children who live there are going to be vulnerable to their tactics (Smith et al., 2009). Having an older boyfriend can make a juvenile female more likely to be a victim of DMST, as this is a common tactic used by traffickers/pimps. The “boyfriend” develops an intimate relationship with the teen and then later exploits them. And a recent survey of 104 “prostituted” juveniles in Clark County, Nevada found some common similarities among the youth. Beyond the commonly accepted vulnerabilities stated above, this survey also found 46 % were suicidal, 47 % were rape victims, 56 % had one or both parents in jail, 75 % had been arrested, 84 % use alcohol, and 89 % use narcotics (Clark County Public Defender—Juvenile Division, 2008).

For those who have been victims of DMST, the consequences are severe. There are a variety of mental health issues related to DMST, such as anxiety and stress disorders, attachment disorder, conduct disorder, depression, eating disorders, learning disorders, PTSD, dissociative disorder, impulse control disorder, personality disorders, self-harm disorders, sleep disorders, and substance abuse disorders (Smith et al., 2009). However despite the seriousness of these effects, many victims of DMST may not recognize themselves as having been victims of sex trafficking. This can present a unique challenge for those individuals who work with these young victims as many young women may either outright deny participating in the sex trade industry or simply re-frame their experience as something unique or exceptional.

Theory

It is important for those who work with these young women to recognize that in order for effective communication to occur, meanings must be mutually shared by participants engaging in the social interaction. In other words, if individuals working with DMST victims should understand that some young women may be more willing to see themselves as victims than others, and that perception of self can impact subsequent rehabilitation work between the young women and their service providers. As Rosenberg (1989, p. 39) has indicated, one’s sense of self is not only a “social force” in that it encourages individuals to act in certain ways, but it is can also be a response to certain social factors. In essence, identities are fluid in that they are negotiated and re-negotiated within a social context; and, our behavior is often based on our attempt to manage our identities. For some young women, being told that they are victims may be liberating in that their victimization is being acknowledged; whereas others may feel disempowered (or worse, looked down upon because of cultural perceptions regarding sex work), because they do not perceive themselves as victims.

From a sociological perspective, identities can be personal, situational, or social. Whereas personal identity is based on what it is that makes us unique or set apart from others, social identities are based on identification with a group or category of people. Situational identities tend to be short-term and within a particular social context—contexts that change based on what we believe is expected of us at that particular time (Vryan, Adler, & Adler, 2003). A young woman who has participated in DMST may justify her situation as something that was temporary and perhaps necessary for the situational context in which she was in. A situational identity could impede rehabilitation work in that a young woman may deny the impact of experience; or, it could be empowering in that the victimization does not define her personal identity. This is not to indicate that victimization has a null effect on identity (van Hoof, Raaijmakers, Beek, Hale, & Aleva, 2008). It certainly does. Research by van Hoof et al. (2008) indicates a significant mediating effect of victimization on personal identity. However, there were other factors that mitigated that impact (i.e.: family cohesion) (van Hoof et al., 2008). One’s identity cannot be divorced from a social context and the construction and sustainability of that identity is a process that is impacted by one’s interaction with the social world (Goffman, 1963).

The purpose of this study was to gain a more informed understanding of the scope of the problem of DMST for adjudicated juvenile females, to identify factors associated with DMST for this vulnerable population, and enhance

our understanding of the pathways in and out of DMST from the victims' perspective (especially rural vs. urban). Through qualitative interviews with adjudicated female youth, this study contributes to the literature by including qualitative data from a population that is vulnerable to DMST and yet is not often directly studied in academia due to the difficulties in obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval because of the many challenges associated with working with both juveniles/children and incarcerated populations.

Methods

Qualitative Procedure

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 40 adjudicated females incarcerated in a female juvenile detention center located in a southern, rural state. This youth detention center is the only level-3 (closed-security) youth development center in the state for female offenders. Level-3 facilities are primarily "staff secured" facilities whose doors are locked to prevent people from entering the facility rather than preventing escape, though youth are not allowed to leave without permission and a staff chaperone. This is a 40-bed residential facility that houses adjudicated females from 12 to 18 years of age. The facility houses public offenders (those who have committed misdemeanor offenses), youthful offenders (those who have committed felony offenses), and sex offenders. Youth who are admitted into the program aid in the development of an individualized treatment plan that will assist them in developing coping skills for the issues that have led to their incarceration.

Forty interviews were the target number for this study based on the average number of youth entering the facility in a 12-month period. Forty interviews were also identified as the saturation point for this investigation when data themes began to converge. All youth incarcerated at the facility were eligible to participate in this study regardless of the charges responsible for their adjudication. Potential research subjects were informed about the purpose of the study and directed to contact the staff psychologist or other administrator if interested in participating. All potential subjects were informed that participation was completely voluntary and that all information obtained during the interviews would be kept completely confidential. Interviews took place during a 17-month period, which is how long it took to interview 40 participants. At the time the interviews initiated, the number of youth sent to the facility began to decline, while in the past the facility remained reasonably close to capacity, during the time of the study the average number dropped to 32 entries a year, and the

length of time youth were held was reduced as well. In addition, during the 17-month study time period, a small number of the youth had previously been interviewed for the study, released from the facility, and then once again sent back to the facility. All of the youth who resided in the facility during the duration of the study were invited to participate, there was only one refusal.

The interviews took place in a private room at the detention facility, and every effort was made to allow for privacy. There were several instances where the participant was on restrictions at the time of the interview, therefore a correctional officer had to be in the same room. For these few youth, the interviewer suggested the interview could be rescheduled, however, each youth made the decision to participate at that time. At the beginning of each interview, the participant was provided with an Informed Assent Form, which explained that participation in the interview was completely voluntary, that all of their responses were confidential, and that they were free to end the interview at any time. In addition, the facility director signed each form as their legal guardian. Every effort was made in the protection of participants and with issues related to confidentiality. Participants were also informed that the data collected would have no individual or identifiable data when it was made available to the public.

It was recognized that there were potential risks for participants; it was possible that a respondent might become distressed while answering some of the interview questions or following the interview. To minimize this, each participant was reminded verbally that their participation was voluntary, that they may refuse to answer any or all questions, and may stop participating at any time without penalty. Participants were also encouraged to speak to counseling staff or the staff psychologist if they felt distraught after the interview. After signing the assent form, permission to audio record the interviews was sought, however just under half (48 %) of the participants declined recording, in which case only handwritten notes were taken. For those interviews with no audio recording, while it was not possible to write down each word the participant stated during the interview, great care was taken to do so when the participant said something that stood out, in which case the interviewer started the quote to indicate it was a direct quote. This way, a direct quote could be included in forthcoming reports and publications, etc. from any of the participant interviews and not just those interviews that were audio-recorded.

At the conclusion of each interview, extensive notes relating to the interview and the participant were written. These notes assisted in recreating the interview more vividly during the analysis stage. Each taped interview was also personally transcribed by the first author, and those that were not recorded were typed as soon as possible

following the conclusion of the interview. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity, and other identifying information was masked. All protocols were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Interview Measures

Participant interviews lasted from 30 to 45 min. The questions were divided into two parts: one for all participants and a second section for those that had been victims of sex trafficking. The first section included demographic questions such as: age, residency status (urban, rural), living arrangements prior to incarceration, who they were primarily raised by, number of times they had run away from home, and time spent in foster care. The interviewer also asked participants about their abuse history (physical and sexual), and whether they had ever been in a situation where they did not have food or shelter and what they did to obtain those items. Interview questions were developed specifically for this study therefore their reliability and validity are unknown; however, questions were based on the current literature available, and with assistance from two experts on human trafficking, including a victims services provider.

Analysis

Some of the data collected for this study was easily quantifiable, and therefore both quantitative and qualitative analysis was completed on the data. Data that was quantified included basic demographic information such as age, race, homelessness, runaway status, living arrangements, abuse history, and substance use. This allowed for correlations to be run using such variables as those mentioned above and whether the youth had engaged in trading sex or were forced to "trade" sex.

For the qualitative data, a six step approach was utilized for data analysis (Creswell, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2010). The first step was data organization, including typing up summary interview notes, and the transcription of the interviews. The second step involved immersion in the data, which included reading all of the collected data multiple times in a variety of sequences to allow for comparison of individuals in particular categories (i.e. race, living arrangements prior to incarceration) which led to the development of themes. To test the coding scheme and insure reliability, a second reader coded two of the transcripts (approximately 10 %), which showed 100 % agreement between the readers. The third step was data coding, which was followed by the generation of themes. The fifth step was to select narrative passages to describe

the developed themes. And the final step was to interpret the findings.

Interview Sample Demographic Characteristics

Participants ranged in age from 14 to 19 (16.13 mean; 1.305 SD). Slightly over half of the participants were White (58 %), just over a third were Black (37 %), and the remainders were of mixed race (5 %). Forty percent of the youth were from urban areas and sixty percent were from rural jurisdictions. Participants were asked about their past history of physical abuse, if they had witnessed physical abuse in the home, and whether they had been victims of sexual abuse. Just over half of the youth said they were victims of physical abuse (55 %), just under half had witnessed physical abuse in the home (45 %), and just over half had been victims of sexual abuse (55 %). Slightly less than a quarter of participants had not been a victim of either type of abuse (22.5 %). While participants were not asked specifically about their substance abuse or substance abuse in the home, almost a third of the youth stated parental substance abuse was a significant factor in their life (32.5 %), and a significant number admitted they had substance abuse problems (57.5 %). Running away is a risk factor for sex trafficking, and a strong majority of participants had run away at least once (70 %), while over a third were characterized as chronic runaways (chronic is defined as running away four or more times; 37.5 %). Being homeless is also a risk factor for sex trafficking, and a third (32.5 %) of the youth interviewed had been homeless at least once. Finally, just over a third (35 %) had spent time in the foster care system. These data are presented in Table 1.

Prior to coming to the facility, just over a third lived with their mother (35 %), less than a quarter lived in a two-person home that included one step-parent (22.5 %), and a small percent lived with their father (7.5 %). Almost a fifth (17.5 %) of participants lived with their grandparent(s) prior to arriving at the facility, and one participant lived with an aunt (2.5 %). Ten percent of the youth lived in a foster home prior to incarceration and two other participants were age 18 or older and lived with a boyfriend. When asked who primarily raised them, the participants answers did not differ greatly, with forty-percent being raised by their mother, a small percent being raised by their father (7.5 %), one-fifth being raised by a parent and step-parent, just over a quarter were raised by grandparent(s) (27.5 %), one by an aunt (2.5 %), one was raised primarily in foster care (2.5 %). Just over half of the youth characterized their home life as positive (52.5 %), while the rest described it as being negative or chaotic (47.5 %). These data are presented in Table 2.

Table 1 Characteristics of female juvenile respondents

Variable	N	%
Respondent characteristics		
Age	16.13 mean; 1.305 SD	
Race		
White	23	58
Black	15	37
Mixed race	2	5
Background		
Rural	24	60
Urban	16	40
Home life		
Positive	21	52.5
Negative	19	47.5
Abuse history		
Physical	22	55
Sexual	22	55
None	9	22.5
Other vulnerabilities		
Parental drug use	13	32.2
History of running away		
Once	28	70
Chronic	15	37.5
Foster placement	14	35
Substance use/abuse	23	57.5

Note N = 40

Table 2 Respondent's family living arrangements

Variable	Current		Raised	
	N	%	N	%
Living arrangements				
Mother only	14	35	16	40
Father only	3	7.5	3	7.5
Parents/step-parent	9	22.5	8	20
Grandparent	7	17.5	11	27.5
Other relative	1	2.5	1	2.5
Foster home	4	10	1	2.5
Other		2	1	2.5

Note N = 40

Quantitative Findings

Frequencies were run on all quantifiable variables, and several were of particular interest, as is presented in Table 3. In an attempt to gain data on "survival sex," youth were asked if they had ever "traded" sex for drugs, clothes, food, etc. Just over a third (34 %) stated that they

Table 3 Respondent's sexual history reported percentage

Variable	N	%
Sexual history		
Traded sex by choice (survival sex)	13	34
Traded sex by coercion	12	31
Sexual extortion (threatened to expose photos)	8	20
Trafficked	7	17.5

Note N = 40

had traded sex by what they considered their own choice. Almost another third (31 %) stated they traded sex due to threats or coercion. One-fifth of participants reported to have had explicit pictures taken, with the photographer then threatening to make them public if the youth did not do as they said. And just under a fifth (17.5 %) were victims of sex trafficking, this number is distinct and separate from the survival sex category.

To determine correlating variables, Spearman's Rank Order Correlation was run on several variables of interest. Because this study has a relatively small sample (N = 40) and therefore the data nonparametric, these authors determined that Spearman's Rho was the best approach to analyzing the data since Spearman's Rho accounts for non-normal distributions. One of the more notable relationships was between those female youth reporting trading sex by choice and self-reported drug use. The results of the Spearman's R for trading sex by "choice" was significantly correlated with drug use ($r_s = .469^{**}$; $p < .01$). Trading sex by force or coercion was correlated with having been a victim of both sex abuse ($r_s = .394^*$; $p < .05$), and physical abuse ($r_s = .583^{**}$; $p < .01$). Having been a victim of sex abuse was correlated with having been a victim of physical abuse ($r_s = .583$; $p < .01$) and witnessing physical abuse against others in the home ($r_s = .444$; $p < .01$). Having been a victim of physical abuse was also correlated with drug use ($r_s = .318$; $p < .05$). Therefore, there is some indication that our findings support previous research that certain vulnerabilities, such as sexual and/or physical abuse and drug abuse also correlate with a vulnerability of falling into trafficking (Table 4).

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative interviews with the adjudicated female youth determined that seven of the forty youth were found to be victims of DMST who did not engage in survival sex or self-trafficking. Their backgrounds are briefly discussed below. In addition, several themes emerged from the data. Many of the youth openly discussed their experiences with "survival sex," in which some felt empowered due to their

Table 4 Spearman's rank order correlation coefficients on vulnerabilities to trafficking and abuse

	Choice	Force	Sex abuse	Phys abuse	Witness	Drug use
Trade sex by choice						.469**
Trade sex by force			.394*	.583**		
Sexual abuse					.583**	.444**
Physical abuse						.318*
Witnessing abuse						
Drug use						

Note N = 40

Note * p. < .05, ** p < .01 (two-tailed tests)

ability to support themselves and obtain things they wanted. While others felt ashamed and expressed regret at allowing themselves to engage in such activity. Another theme that emerged from the qualitative data was the strong need that many of the youth had to feel loved. Since many of the youth had been raised in dysfunctional, chaotic, and often abusive households, they had a strong desire to feel loved which often lead them to engage in sexual acts they may not have otherwise participated in.

Non-Self-Trafficked Youth

For the youth who were victims of trafficking, excluding self-trafficking or survival sex (both voluntary and coerced), there were a number of commonalities and a few differences. Seven youth, out of the forty interviewed, fell into this category. Five of the youth were from urban areas and two were from rural areas. The race of the victims was split, four African American and three White. All seven of the youth were drug involved, had a history of sex abuse, six had histories of physical abuse, and the five urban victims were chronic runaways. The rural victims were trafficked by family members, while the urban victims were trafficked by: female friend (×2), "Original Gangsta" (OG; met on chat line), boyfriend, and a boyfriend of a friend. These findings are in line with anecdotal evidence obtained by the lead author while working with human trafficking task forces across the state.

Survival Sex

The qualitative data analysis demonstrated that a significant number of adjudicated young females are victims of DMST. The findings from this study are particularly telling with relation to the number of youthful offenders involved in self-trafficking or survival sex. A third of participants reported they traded sex for drugs at least once. One 15 year old stated, "Yes, I did but it was not necessarily my intention. I slept with men for drugs and money for other things. Some were boyfriends and some were other men." Similarly, a 16 year old admitted that she traded sex for

drugs/alcohol without much thought, "Yes I did, for alcohol and drugs...every now and then. I didn't realize what I was doing." And other times some of the youth traded sex for more basic needs and felt the trade was necessary since the individual desiring sex had provided them with something they wanted or needed, such as a place to stay. This suggests these youth felt that if someone is doing you a favor by letting you sleep at their house you do not have the option to say "No." For example, one 16 year-old admitted, "Yes, I did it for drugs. Sometimes I felt forced when I was staying at someone's house."

Often that self-perceived voluntary "trade" of sex for desired items (in these findings, almost exclusively drugs), later led to being victims of forced or coerced "trading." Just under a third of participants (31 %) stated they had felt coerced or forced into trading sex for drugs or money. A 15 year-old heroin addicted youth told a particularly scary story of when she was sexually assaulted by drug dealers she had considered close friends:

"Yes, I gave sex four times to two different people for heroin. But then one time I went to get some heroin from these people and they forced me to give oral sex, anal sex...they physically forced me and threatened me. I knew these people, they were like family. Thankfully some other friends came to get me."

The Need to Feel Loved

Another common theme found throughout the interviews was the strong need the youth had to feel loved. For many of them engaging in sexual acts was a way to fulfill that need. One 14 year-old admitted that she traded drugs for sex, but also to feel loved, "Yes, for drugs. They approached me. Sometimes I felt pressured, but I wanted the drugs...and I needed to feel cared for." Another teen mentioned her friend who traded sex for drugs to try to fulfill the need to feel loved, "I never have...but my friend has sex to get things she wants. It is the only way she feels loved and gets what she wants."

Discussion

This study has provided insight into the complicated and multi-layered phenomenon of DMST. The present study findings support prior research that shows a relationship between a family history of abuse and girls and young women falling prey to a sexual predator (Kotrla & Wommack, 2011; Logan et al., 2009). The youth interviewed who reported being a victim of sexual or physical abuse in their home also tended to report being victims of sex trafficking. It is worth noting that the female juveniles interviewed often did not see themselves as victims. For some it was a lack of awareness, and others refused to be seen as “victims” and therefore insisted “trading” sex for things they wanted/needed was their choice.

Another finding of interest is the difference between those youth trafficked in rural and urban areas. The present study indicates that youth trafficked in urban areas are mostly lured into trafficking by a boyfriend or female friend. This is in stark contrast to those from rural areas who were trafficked by family members. This finding has been supported anecdotally by victims’ advocates in the state who work directly with victims. In a 2015 study by Cole and Sprang of professionals who work with at-risk youth in a southern, rural state, they also found a significant percentage of traffickers were a family member (Cole & Sprang, 2015). However, the Cole and Sprang study did not see significant differences between rural and urban traffickers.

Further, findings indicate that a substantial number of the teens interviewed engaged in “survival sex.” There was a significant relationship between those young women who reported engaging in survival sex and self-reported drug use, as many of the women admitted to trading sex for drugs. Beyond that, there was also some indication that the youth who engaged in survival sex did so for a place to stay or to appease friends, etc. As prior research has shown, this type of obligatory sexual activity puts women at risk for further exploitation (see Homelessness, survival sex, and human trafficking: As experienced by the youth of covenant house, 2013). Moreover, this finding is important as it indicates a new dimension of human trafficking by which the victim is trading sex for something else (and perhaps for someone else) but identifying it differently or otherwise “justifying” it. In this regard, victims of DMST may not recognize themselves as victims but rather as survivors in that they did what they had to do to get through a difficult time. This finding merits further exploration as those who work with victims of trafficking may not recognize their clients as victims since the victims themselves may not identify as such. In addition, those working with DMST

victims may run the risk of encouraging a young woman to take on a victim identity before she is ready. It is important that those working with victims of DMST avoid a paternalistic approach in working with these young women. Those working with these young women should be prepared to understand the impact of not only other variables on a DMST victim’s identity but understand the victim’s perspective of herself in order to work with her more effectively.

Yet another impact of identity in which someone working with a victim of DMST should be aware is the resulting behavior when one’s identity is threatened. Many young women are acutely aware that engaging in sex work, whether for trade or by force, is generally considered deviant by mainstream society. If one’s identity as a victim or as an actor with agency is threatened, one engages in a re-negotiation process in an effort to re-store a more favorable identity (Goffman, 1963). It is important that those working with these young women take care not to send cues regarding their personal attitudes or thoughts about the situation. This is particularly important in that what one takes on as personal identity tends to localize them in a particular social space, which serves to reinforce and reproduce social situations (Vryan et al., 2003). It is important that these young women move forward with an identity that empowers them rather than keeps them locked into particular situations; thereby becoming lost in the system.

Implications for Social Work

One way that social workers can facilitate this process is to realize that human trafficking does not always resemble a paradigm of someone being kidnapped, held against one’s will, and forced to engage in sexual activity while being overwhelmed with drugs and/or threats. It can, and often does, include manipulation to the extent that a victim may believe they are making a rational choice for themselves. Social workers should be willing and prepared to recognize DMST and the dynamics that accompany it. At the same time, social workers should understand that victims themselves may not recognize their situation as a trafficking situation and may not be willing to take on the identity of a victim of trafficking initially. For example, one 17 year old youth interviewed insisted that she made the choice to engage in “prostitution” because it was “easy” and she made “lots of money.” She made it very clear during the interview that she felt she was in control at all times. Social workers should work with these young women in a way that enables them to move forward with an identity that empowers them in a healthy way.

Future Research

As risk factors leading to DMST are considered, certain family dynamics should continue to be included in this deliberation. How can the harmful effects of that a contentious home life has on these young women be undermined and thereby reducing their risk of falling into a trafficking situation? Further exploration in this area should also seek to determine how those working with adjudicated youth can recognize risk factors and help prevent them from falling prey to traffickers. Recognition of risk factors and continuing education in this area is particularly important with regard to service providers, including (and perhaps especially) foster parents. All too often social workers and foster parents are the last individuals with direct accessibility to these young women before they are emancipated from the foster care or juvenile justice system and left to their own devices, making them easy targets for traffickers.

Limitations

While this study made positive contributions to the field regarding variables surrounding domestic minor sex trafficking of adjudicated juvenile females, it should be viewed in light of several limitations. Since all interviews were conducted with teens residing in a facility in one rural southern state, generalizability is limited. A second limitation is that not all of the interviews were tape recorded due to a lack of consent from some of the participants. Tape recording of interviews not only allows the interviewer to capture word for word the responses, but also the tone. Furthermore, while not tape recording, the interviewer is forced to spend more attention to the task of note-taking, which can make it more difficult to develop rapport with the interview participant. This can be especially challenging when the interview participant already has “trust” issues, as many of the youth being interviewed clearly did. A third limitation of this study is the location of the interviews. It is noted that interviewing subjects while they are incarcerated can result in interview participants being less forthcoming (Schlosser, 2008).

Finally, the relatively small sample size makes it difficult to include inferences regarding the direction and impact the presence of certain variables have on the risk of young women engaging in or falling victim to human trafficking. As the purpose of this study was exploratory, that was not the intent of this research. However, these findings have revealed several factors that should be considered in future research. In addition, in order to more clearly examine and/or isolate correlating factors that place young women at risk for trafficking, future research should

expand this study to include a larger, more widely representative sample, enabling one to engage in more focused analysis. However, it is hoped that this article has at least provided some starting points for continued research in this area.

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