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Article in *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* · January 2020

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Journal of Interpersonal Violence

1–24

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DOI: 10.1177/0886260519898434

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Abstract

This study examined how a diverse group of sexual and gender minority (SGM) homeless youth described and understood their victimization experiences occurring before they were homeless and those occurring after they were homeless and engaging in survival sex. In addition, the study explored how these youths manifested resilience when living on the street. The sample consisted of 283 racially/ethnically diverse youth between the ages of 15 and 26 years ($M = 19.6$, $SD = 1.28$) living in a large U.S. city. Participants identified their gender as male (47%), female (36%), transgender (15%), or queer and other (3%) and their sexual orientation as bisexual (37%), gay (23%), lesbian (15%), heterosexual (13%), or queer and other (13%). Thirty-seven percent identified as Black, 30% as multiracial, 22% as Latino/a, 5% as White, and 5% as another race. Content and thematic analyses were used to conduct a secondary analysis of qualitative data. Four themes were identified: *unsafe and unsupported at home; barriers to housing and employment stability; ongoing victimization and lack of protection; and unexpected opportunities for resilience*. Findings demonstrated that participants

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experienced victimization related not only to their SGM identities but also to chaotic home environments. Once homeless and engaging in survival sex, youth experienced barriers to securing employment and housing as well as victimization by police and clients. These experiences frequently involved prejudice related to their intersecting identities. Despite encountering numerous challenges, participants described surviving on the streets by living openly and forming relationships with other youth. Implications for practice and policy are discussed.

Keywords

sexual and gender minority youth, homeless youth, victimization, resilience

Sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth, defined as those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) or whose expressions of sexuality or gender differ from social norms (National Institutes of Health Sexual and Gender Minority Research Office, 2017), represent one of the most vulnerable populations of youth. SGM youths disproportionately experience victimization, both related and unrelated to their identities, which negatively impacts their health and well-being (Johns et al., 2019; Kann et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2009). Furthermore, semi-dependency (e.g., financial, emotional, social) on caregivers (Sawyer et al., 2018) increases SGM youths' risks of victimization from family members, precipitating a number of negative outcomes. For example, unsupportive home environments may contribute to increased risk of homelessness (S. K. Choi et al., 2015; Durso & Gates, 2012) and, in turn, reliance on survival sex (Rice et al., 2013). Survival sex refers to the act of engaging in sexual behaviors in exchange for money, material goods, or to meet basic needs (Greene et al., 1999). Research has linked both SGM homelessness (Whitbeck et al., 2004) and homeless SGM youth's engagement in survival sex (Tyler, 2008) to increased risk of victimization.

As SGM youth are not a monolith, those who engage in survival sex may have varied experiences of risk or resilience due to their intersecting identities (gay and lesbian youth vs. bisexual and transgender youth; White SGM youth vs. Black and Latino SGM youth). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how a diverse group of SGM youths describe and understand the victimization experiences that occurred during two distinct periods: before and after becoming homeless and engaging in survival sex. Information from this study has the potential to impact guidelines for service providers and policymakers working with SGM youths.

Victimization Among SGM Youth

Studies demonstrate that SGM youths are at heightened risk of experiencing victimization compared with exclusively heterosexual and cisgender youths, including both nonprejudice and prejudice-related events. For example, research shows that sexual minority youth are more likely to experience traumatic and other adverse events not explicitly tied to personal identity, such as physical or sexual violence and bullying (Johns et al., 2019; Kann et al., 2018). Similarly, studies reveal that SGM youth often report events directly attributed to sexual orientation or gender identity (e.g., verbal harassment, physical or sexual abuse; James et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018). These events occur in SGM youths' social environments, including homes and schools, and are perpetrated by family, peers, and community members (James et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018). Moreover, the behavioral strategies youths use to cope (e.g., concealment) may increase risk of depression, anxiety, and stressor-related disorders (Alessi & Martin, 2017; Pachankis et al., 2015).

Although SGM youth are considered a population at risk, victimization experiences may vary by subgroup. A recent study indicated that cisgender gay male, transgender male, and transgender female youth may experience higher prevalence of victimization than cisgender female SGM youth (Birkett et al., 2015). Those marginalized by other aspects of identity (race/ethnicity) may experience particularly complex lived realities, also contending with experiences of prejudice based on their other identities (James et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018). These aspects of identity, especially racial/ethnic minority status, may increase risk for SGM-related prejudice (Poteat et al., 2009).

The impacts of victimization among youths are magnified by distinct challenges that family relationships can pose for this group. Rejection by family members are not just risks to SGM youths' well-being (D'Augelli, 2002), but may also interact with their dependent statuses (e.g., the need for financial support) to confer additional stress and trauma. Notably, bias from family is behind several of the most commonly cited reasons among SGM youth for homelessness, with youth often being forced out because of their sexual orientation and gender identity (S. K. Choi et al., 2015; Dank et al., 2015; Durso & Gates, 2012). Homelessness in turn carries its own risks for negative outcomes, including further victimization (Whitbeck et al., 2004).

SGM Youth Homelessness and Engagement in Survival Sex

Evidence indicates that SGM youths are disproportionately represented in the overall homeless population of youths in the United States, with some

studies estimating that as many as 40% of homeless youth are LGBTQ (Durso & Gates, 2012). A recent review of the literature showed that SGM homeless youths may experience a higher prevalence of victimization compared with heterosexual homeless youths (Keuroghlian et al., 2014). Moreover, to meet basic needs, homeless SGM youths may be more likely to engage in survival sex, further increasing the risk of victimization (Keuroghlian et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2013) and other negative health outcomes (Dank et al., 2015). Given that many of the same risk factors inform both survival sex and homelessness, including prior victimization and poor familial relationships, the co-experience of survival sex and homelessness is relatively common (Able-Peterson & Meuleners, 2009). It has been suggested that 41% of homeless youth, as opposed to just 3.5% of youth in general, may trade sex for money or material goods (Edwards et al., 2006); moreover, figures may be underestimated due to the inherent difficulties of studying survival sex (Krisch et al., 2019). As such, adolescent survival sex has often been studied within the context of youth homelessness rather than in the general population of adolescents (Dank et al., 2015; Rice et al., 2013; Walls & Bell, 2011). The likelihood of youth engaging in survival sex also increases with each year of homelessness (Tyler, 2009). Although the need to generate income contributes to a high prevalence of survival sex among homeless youth, frequent interactions with other homeless youth engaging in survival sex also influences their decisions to do so (Curtis et al., 2008).

Within the homeless youth population, certain subgroups may be particularly at risk. Youth of color and SGM youth have both been shown to be overrepresented in the homeless youth population (Able-Peterson & Meuleners, 2009; Gattis & Larson, 2017). Both of these subgroups are also more likely than their White or heterosexual counterparts to engage in survival sex (Rice et al., 2013; Tyler, 2009; Van Leeuwen et al., 2006). Vulnerabilities among homeless youth may be just as relevant in these groups, if not more so. For example, prior sexual victimization, which is more common among SGM youth, may influence youths' choices to engage in survival sex (Baams et al., 2019). Furthermore, SGM youth of color may be even more likely to engage in survival sex as their access to essential resources may be impacted by intersecting forms of discrimination (Tyler, 2009). There is a lack of research on how the intersection of sexual/gender and racial/ethnic identities may inform the experiences of homeless youth engaged in survival sex. However, research on transgender adults who experienced homelessness showed that those identifying as Black, Latino/a, or biracial/multiracial were more likely to engage in survival sex than their White counterparts (Kattari & Begun, 2017).

Resilience

Resilience theory was developed to understand why all people do not succumb to negative outcomes after experiencing traumatic events or other adversities (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Resilience has been commonly defined as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543). Resilience theorists utilize the term “promotive factors” to describe domains within an individual’s ecological system that assist with overcoming risk (Zimmerman et al., 2013). Such factors include connection to racial/ethnic identity, relationships with safe adults, prosocial engagements (e.g., extracurricular school activities, connection to service providers), as well as positive family relationships or “fictive kinship” (i.e., chosen family; Herrick et al., 2014; Zimmerman et al., 2013).

Resilience has most often focused on children and adolescents to understand how they overcome early adversity (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005), but has also extended to specific subpopulations of adolescents, including SGM youth and adolescents of color (K.-H. Choi et al., 2011; Herrick et al., 2014). Studies of resilience among SGM populations both affirm and challenge assumptions of resilience theory. For example, resilience theory generally considers authentic self-expression as a promotive factor, but to mitigate risks stemming from homophobia and transphobia, SGM individuals may conceal their identities publicly, suggesting that what may be a risk for other youth is protective for SGM youth (K. H. Choi et al., 2011). Thus, it is apparent that promotive and risk factors are not mutually exclusive. Research with adolescents of color also demonstrates that what can be considered a risk factor (e.g., experiencing discrimination) also has the potential to facilitate resilience (e.g., relying on other adolescents of color to cope with stigma and discrimination) (Arrington & Wilson, 2000). Despite extant research on subgroups of youth, it has been suggested that the resilience literature lacks a sufficient intersectional perspective to understand how multiple identities (e.g., race, sexuality) shape an individual’s ecological system and therefore warrants further development (K. H. Choi et al., 2011).

Method

This study was part of a larger one that during 2011 to 2012 examined the characteristics and needs of SGM youth engaged in survival sex in New York City, as well as their interactions with social service providers and law enforcement personnel (Dank et al., 2015). The research questions guiding the current study were as follows: (a) How do a diverse group of SGM youth

describe and understand the victimization experiences occurring before they were homeless and those occurring after they were homeless and engaging in survival sex? (b) How do these youth manifest strength and resilience when living on the street? We conducted a secondary analysis of data obtained in the initial study.

Participants

The sample consisted of 283 youths between 15 and 26 years old ($M = 19.6$, $SD = 1.28$). Participants identified their gender as male (47%), female (36%), transgender (15%), or queer, questioning, and other (3%). They identified their sexual orientation as bisexual (37%), gay (23%), lesbian (15%), heterosexual (13%), or queer, questioning, and other (13%). The majority of the youth identified as racial or ethnic minorities, with 37% identifying as Black, 30% as multi-racial, and 22% as Latino/a. The remainder identified as White (5%) or another race (5%). Approximately 44% did not complete high school, whereas 36% obtained a high school diploma, 11% a GED (General Educational Development) or equivalent, and the remaining 9% did not provide their level of education.

Procedure

Respondent-driven sampling (RDS) was used to recruit SGM youth who exchange sex for money and/or material goods through consecutive waves of survey interviewing. A small number of participants ($n = 13$), referred to as initial seeds, were carefully selected with the help of local service providers and youth leaders. To specifically target SGM youth involved in the commercial sex market, the following inclusion criteria were set: 13 to 21 years old; identification as an SGM youth (i.e., LGBTQ youth, young man who has sex with men, or young woman who has sex with women); and involvement in the commercial sex market in New York City. A few participants older than 21 were included in the sample because they first engaged in survival sex below the age of 18 and had a large network of peers who they were able to refer for study participation. To ensure that sample and social network attributes reached equilibrium, four or more waves of chain referral sampling were achieved (Heckathorn, 1997). Participants who functioned as initial seeds were given paper business card-sized coupons with a toll-free 24-hr number that youth could call to arrange for an interview appointment. Upon arrival for an interview, participants were rescreened for eligibility, appropriateness for recruitment into the study, and any other referrals or interventions that might be required. When it was determined that participating in the study could exacerbate existing potential participants' psychological distress, they

were not included. Efforts were then made to provide appropriate referrals or assistance.

Youth who met the eligibility criteria were subsequently interviewed after informed assent was obtained. At the end of the interview, participants received US\$20 cash, in addition to three unique and coded coupons that they were instructed (through a brief education session) to pass along to other youth they knew were also part of the commercial sex market and SGM. Participants were paid an additional US\$10 per successful referral. Unique numeric codes on the front of each coupon were used to prevent duplication, to identify which youth recruited subsequent participants, and to keep track of overall recruitment patterns. Participants referred by the initial seeds comprised Wave 1 of the sample and were given three coupons to pass along to potential new recruits. After this, the process was self-sustaining and resulted in the recruitment of a demographically diverse and representative sample of SGM youth involved in the commercial sex market in New York City. Research for the initial study was approved by the institutional review board (IRB) of Urban Institute. The procedures for the secondary analysis of qualitative data were approved by the IRB of Rutgers University.

Measures

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The interviews, which ranged from 20 to 120 min, provided detailed descriptions of participants' experiences in the commercial sex market, including their interactions with law enforcement and service agencies. Seven youth leaders were trained to conduct the interviews; however, one youth leader conducted the majority of the interviews. Answers to every key question (e.g., How do you obtain customers? What social service agencies have you visited? Who would you go to when in trouble? What changes in your life or services do you need to make your life better?) were accompanied by qualitative coding of the evidence, when questions were applicable to the participants; the evidence consisted of direct quotes from the interview itself. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed by a professional transcription company to ensure accuracy of the data. Interview data were coded directly into a data collection instrument. For a more detailed description of the methodology of the initial study, see Dank et al. (2015).

Data Analysis

The data analytic process occurred in two steps. First, we (BG and DM) used content analysis (Berg, 2001) to search for words and phrases among all

participants' responses that illuminated their experiences of abuse, neglect, or victimization. Such words and phrases included trauma, abuse, harass, attack, various physical violence indicators (e.g., kick, punch, hit), and indicators of verbal harassment, including common slurs. Then, we searched for words or phrases that suggested participants encountered stigma and discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. These included indicators of sexual orientation and gender identity (e.g., trans, gay, lesbian, and common slurs) as well as search terms for possible perpetrators (e.g., cop, police, parent, mom/mother, dad/father). To ensure that our analysis was not constrained by the examination of specific content, we also engaged in open coding, which was guided by the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis examines patterns within the data, while also attempting to illuminate the lived realities of participants that might not be as readily apparent on the surface level. To do this, we alternated between participants' responses with the codes and categories we identified by our content analysis and the new ones we generated through open coding. This enabled the creation of codes that moved beyond the content analysis and thus reflected a better understanding of the data.

Once we identified our final list of codes and categories, we moved toward theme development. Throughout the theme development process, we (EA, BG, and DM) engaged in weekly peer debriefings to discuss and refute themes until reaching agreement. During these meetings, we explored our biases (e.g., assuming that participants experienced negative encounters with police), to allow for the identification of themes that tied directly to the data. After we developed our final themes, the fourth author (MD), who led the data collection process, was asked to review them. She assisted in creating a more cohesive story to better illuminate participants' experiences. To strengthen methodological rigor, we engaged in negative case analysis (i.e., highlighting experiences that did not occur for most participants) and kept an audit trail to document all processes and decisions (Padgett, 2017).

Results

The exact points of entry into survival sex varied across participants; for example, some were introduced to this method of survival by friends, family, or other third parties, whereas others self-initiated (Dank et al., 2015). Regardless of how participants began engaging in survival sex, we identified that the complex interplay of trauma in childhood, lack of family support, and rejection due to their SGM identities prior to entry was further complicated by continued exposure to prejudice and discrimination and physical and sexual assault on the street. Four themes were identified from our analysis:

unsafe and unsupported at home; barriers to housing and employment stability; ongoing victimization and lack of protection; and unexpected opportunities for resilience. We identified participants by their study numbers, and when available we included their sexual orientation and gender identity. Some did not disclose their sexual orientation and were thus grouped into the “queer, questioning, and other” category. In these instances, only the identity disclosed was included.

Unsafe and Unsupported at Home

Participants expressed that they grew up in home environments where they had been exposed to multiple traumas (e.g., poverty, substance abuse, as well as abuse and neglect), describing these environments as chaotic. Amid this chaos, many felt detached from their families as well as unsupported and unprotected by them. For example, Participant P65256, an 18-year-old bisexual Hispanic woman, sometimes spent time with her father’s friends, who provided her with drugs. She reported that there were times that she was raped and molested by them. Her father, who also misused substances, did not protect her. Like many participants, she learned to take care of herself even before living on the streets: “My father didn’t know what the hell was happening. So it was easy for me to leave the house and it was easy for me to just be around.”

The stress and trauma participants experienced and the general lack of support they felt at home were magnified by their nonconforming sexual and/or gender identities. They described family and caregivers who not only were abusive at times, but also created environments that were hostile toward them. This led to a number of participants being kicked out of their homes, as illustrated in the following quote:

Okay well, basically I was kicked out at the age of 17 because of my sexuality by my [grandmother] who was my legal guardian at the time (P66236, 21-year-old multiracial gay man).

Those who were not kicked out recalled situations in which their families withdrew financial support after discovering their sexual orientation. Participant P63789, an 18-year-old Black gay man, detailed his particular situation:

P63789: What happened was . . . my dad found out that I was gay or whatever and my mum, she’s kind of up under his ass, so they cut me off and I really didn’t have any place to go. I still wanted to go back to school.

Interviewer: When you say cut you off . . . they kicked you out?

P63789: Kind of sort of.

Interviewer: Like, it was just bad enough you had to leave.

P63789: Yeah . . . I still wanted to go to school I still wanted to do what I needed to do, but I didn't really have any money to do it.

Participant P66160, a 19-year-old Black bisexual man, similarly described withdrawal of resources by one parent due to his sexual orientation. His mother was supportive of his sexual orientation, but, as described above, complex family dynamics prevented her from being able to provide this participant with financial resources.

. . . My mom, like sometimes she'd give me money or whatever but she has like . . . three other siblings and like nephews and stuff so and then she's married so it's like I'm kind on the back burner me and my older brother. And it's been like me get kind of like what's was like really leftovers.

Others decided that the best way to take care of themselves was to sever all ties from their parents and run away instead. As Participant P63577, a 21-year-old multiracial gay man, explained,

P63577: So when it came to my sexuality, [my mother] wasn't having it. And I then run away to New York when I was 15.

Interviewer: So, . . . were you kicked out of your home or you just felt unsafe?

P63577: I basically felt unsafe and unwanted so I just . . . left.

Barriers to Housing and Employment Stability

Once participants were on their own, they were left with the challenging task of figuring out how to support themselves. Some exchanged sex for money or material goods with people that they knew before they began doing it regularly with strangers. Others had friends or acquaintances that introduced them to the sex trade and found it was a consistent way to make money. Engaging in sex for money or material goods became necessary for meeting basic needs, as they encountered barriers to housing and employment that left them with few options.

Participants described that these barriers were oftentimes structural in nature, with stigma and discrimination making it difficult to find stable housing. For example, participants who sought help from various social service systems to secure housing often felt unsafe due to their SGM identities. As

Participant P66411, a 20-year-old Black gay man, expressed, “[The homeless shelter] is not gay friendly . . .” And when the interviewer asked about his experience interacting with another service agency, he added, “Yeah, I’m not content with [it either], but anxious to get out [of the service agency].”

Those identifying as bisexual also emphasized the challenges of accessing housing services alongside other service recipients who they described as nonaffirming of, or even hostile toward, identities that were not gay or lesbian. For instance, Participant P68817, a 19-year-old West Indian bisexual woman, felt unable to stay in a shelter due to the other lesbian and gay residents:

I looked at it like [the shelter is LGBTQ], but they only accept gay and lesbian. That’s what pissed me off, because I was like . . . if it supposed to be [LGBTQ] then, why is it that [no bisexual women] can come in, because . . . they do like girls, as well . . .

Similarly, those identifying as transgender also discussed the stigma and discrimination that they faced when attempting to find housing. Participant P65959, a 19-year-old Black heterosexual transgender woman, mentioned an initial inability to use housing services due to lack of gender-affirmative placement policies for transgender applicants:

And the first thing yesterday [the residential job training program] actually called me and they were having a problem because all my information still says I’m a male, but you know, I prefer to be placed on the girl floor.

To escape homelessness, this participant described needing to offer compromises on their gender expression to housing service providers:

I told [my case worker] though . . . that if they couldn’t accommodate me being on the girl’s floor, the boy’s floor would be fine because housing over not being in the girl’s dormitory is way better than homeless.

As with housing, barriers to employment left participants feeling unable to leave the sex trade despite the desire to do so. Sexual minority participants commonly described struggling with either the inability to meet job requirements (e.g., high school diploma or equivalent) or systematic rejection by potential employers. Participants expressed distress regarding these obstacles, as they sought to move on from the sex trade, but because of these barriers felt it was the only option for meeting basic needs. As Participant P63846, a gay White man, stated, “I need a job like a legitimate job other than that that will make everything a lot better.”

Another participant (P63646), a 20-year-old multiracial bisexual woman who was living in a shelter, spoke about the difficulty of finding a job. She explained that she would be willing to take any type of job; she just wanted to be able to support herself and her child:

Interviewer: . . . Are you still . . . trying going out there filling out applications?

P63646: Yes.

Interviewer: Have you thought about going, getting a GED or going back to school?

P63646: I wanted to do my either GED or go back to school because I want to do culinary, because I love cooking so. And I want to open a restaurant like I actually have things that I want to do, I just need to get out of the shelter, so I could do that . . . I love cooking.

The barriers to employment for transgender participants were even more complex. They spoke at length about being discriminated against when asking for applications or interviewing for jobs, leaving them believing that they did not have any other options but to engage in sex work to support themselves:

I just don't want to quit being trans and like . . . it's the only thing that's holding me like from getting a real job. (P63877, 18-year-old Hispanic transgender man)

I didn't want to become a trans and do sex work because I feel like it was something there was so, but it's something I fought not to do but it was my last resort and it's not that bad. It just has this thing that can be really draining because it's not a nine to five. (P66163, 21-year-old Black transgender woman)

Ongoing Victimization and Lack of Protection

Once on the street and engaging in survival sex, participants reported that they continued experiencing victimization by multiple sources, including individuals they knew. For example, Participant P69023, a 19-year-old Hispanic lesbian woman, described that conflicts emerged between her and others engaged in the sex trade, which, at times, could become violent:

Sometimes . . . somebody's hating on you, you know. Wanting to try to take your money or something like that and we get into a fight because I'm not going to sit there and let you take my money I work for . . .

Another participant (P66174), a 20-year-old multiracial woman, described how it was hard to know who to trust when exchanging sex for money or material goods. She spoke about being victimized by a customer, who planned the attack with the participant's pimp:

. . . I was maintaining a relationship with a "regular" . . . that I was connected to through my [pimp], and so, you know like, when I went over there to visit [the regular] . . . my [pimp was actually there] waiting and . . . they jumped me and they raped me and that was, that was probably the worst thing I ever had.

Beyond negative interactions with customers, pimps, and other sex workers, participants frequently reported being subjected to victimization by police officers. As they described these experiences, participants expressed confusion, anger, and disappointment. They expected that they would be able to rely on the police for protection; instead, they reported that they were victimized by them. As one participant, a 21-year-old multiracial gay man, stated,

[The officers] were like, oh you gay bitch or gay that, oh you wish you had a pussy. I'm like what are you talking about I'm a dude like what are you talking about I don't want one of those. (P66373)

Participants also reported that victimization by police involved slurs related to their intersecting sexual and racial identities. As three participants explained,

[The police] stopped me because I'm Hispanic or gay, unless your different they're not gonna stop you. (P66249, 21-year-old multiracial gay man)

It's scary, being gay and then telling them I'm a black and they're white cops. (P66268, 20-year-old Black bisexual man)

Well it's just that, like I'm a gay girl. I'm black and I dress like, I guess I dress targetable, but I don't think I do. (P55692, 18-year-old Caribbean woman)

Transgender participants in particular described arrests in which their diverse gender expressions were altogether ignored, forcing them to either assert themselves in ways leading to further victimization or to accept situations in which the criminal justice system prioritized their sex assigned at birth over their gender identity:

. . . I told [the officer], 'Listen, you can't strip search me in front of these people, I need to see a female officer you can't do this. Take me somewhere

privately you know that is just between me and you . . . and you know he told me I'm gay, I'm a faggot and he doesn't give a fuck . . . (P67767, 19-year-old Black transgender woman)

They'll say fuck it if you're transgender and if you [are] having your marker or anything changed they [are] putting you with the men. They don't give a fuck if . . . you got tits bigger than Patti LaBelle's, they're going to put you in with the men if it says male. (P66218, 21-year-old Black bisexual transgender woman)

Although most participants described negative or traumatic experiences with the police, there were situations in which some felt supported. For example, Participant P66184, a 21-year-old multiracial woman, described breaking down crying due to the kind of treatment they received from an officer after being arrested:

[The police officer] was like, because if my daughter ever, God forbid, got in trouble and got arrested I would want an officer to treat her like she was a human being . . . and then [I] was like: "Oh my God, there are good people in the world . . ."

Unexpected Opportunities for Resilience

Living on the streets clearly came with risks, especially potential exposure to continued violence and victimization. However, many participants expressed that living on the streets and engaging in survival sex was their only option. Thus, they had to learn to survive, and it was through this that unexpected opportunities for fostering resilience emerged. For example, participants were able to live authentically, develop relationships outside of families unable to support them, and challenge authority figures they may have perceived as oppressing them. As Participant P66379, a 20-year-old multiracial gay man, expressed,

I wish [my family] would not hate me because they think that I'm a walking devil [or have] a disease . . . just because I'm gay . . . No I can't change their perceptions but nor will I sit around and be criticized, condemned to hell on a daily basis and stuff.

The need to live in ways where participants felt affirmed was especially salient for transgender participants, who could finally dress and behave in ways that were congruent with their gender identities. For instance, Participant

P67767, a 19-year-old Black transgender woman, explained that engaging in survival sex was the only way she could have begun to transition and gain her independence from a family that did not accept her:

I . . . always wanted to be a transgender and be so independent. I want to have gay flags in my house. I want to have pictures. I want to have . . . stuff. It's like, living with family, I couldn't really.

Living on the streets and engaging in survival sex meant that participants also had to rely on other individuals for support besides their families of origin. In certain situations, participants were able to develop relationships with others who could help them through difficult times. For example, Participant P66145, a 19-year-old multiracial bisexual man, reported that, given his age, the police wanted an adult to pick him up when he was taken into the station or arrested. However, he could not call his biological family members and thus relied on individuals he has met through the sex trade. He explained,

I'm too young for [the police] to keep me, [so I] called my . . . gay mother, so she came and turned it up over there, she [is transgender] . . . she was like: "I don't want to hear this, I want my child," so they gave me up.

It was not uncommon for participants to speak about relying on support from their "gay mothers" as well as other people in their lives besides members of their biological family:

I have a number of people I thought this, the counselor at [service provider] or I can always call my mum or whatever, or like my gay mother. My gay mother is like biological family I talk to them as well so. I have a number of people that I can talk to. (P66160, 19-year-old Black bisexual man)

Finally, although participants experienced and anticipated stigma and discrimination based on their multiple identities, at times they still managed to stand up for themselves when experiencing unfair treatment by authority figures or within various systems, even when it meant transgressing in ways that might exacerbate their problem or get them into more trouble. For example, as one noncisgender participant (P66145), a 19-year-old multiracial bisexual man, described,

When I first started out I had one problem, and the officer wanted me to take off my bra to see if I was male or female, and I spit at her and then I never went. It never happened again . . .

Another participant (P66193), a 20-year-old Black gay transgender man, described a moment in which they felt empowered when dealing with the criminal justice system:

P66193: [I] had to walk through the court, like typically you go from jail to the bookings and to the court, but since I'm trans I go from jail to court, but since I play that off . . .

Interviewer: . . . Do you present [according to the gender aligned with your sex assigned at birth] or do you present [as transgender]?

P66193: Oh no I always dress like this . . . I guess like a boy, but they can't tell me who I am.

Discussion

This study examined how a diverse group of SGM youths described and understood the victimization that they experienced during two distinct periods: before and after becoming homeless and engaging in survival sex. In addition, we explored the ways that these youths manifested resilience while living on the street. Findings demonstrate that participants were exposed to numerous stressful and traumatic events and that for many these experiences were prolonged. Participants grew up in home environments where they were exposed to poverty, parental substance abuse, and abuse and neglect. At the same time, the majority of the participants experienced stress and trauma related to their SGM identities, describing experiences in which they had been abused by caregivers, denied financial and emotional support, and kicked out of their homes because of their identities. Overall, participants spoke about growing up in environments where they felt unsafe and unsupported, requiring them to take care of themselves. Findings are consistent with the literature on SGM homeless youth who engage in survival sex (e.g., Tyler, 2008). And similar to previous studies (Andersen & Blosnich, 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2012), findings underscore the need to understand not only SGM youths' experiences of stress and trauma precipitated by sexual orientation or gender identity but also those related to adverse childhood events and dysfunctional home environments. Findings also draw attention to the needs of SGM youth dealing with intersecting issues related to race/ethnicity, social class, and abuse unrelated to their SGM identities. Similar to previous studies (Craig et al., 2017; Goldenberg et al., 2019), this study also suggests the need for more research that examines these intersections with trauma and stress related to SGM identities and how cumulative stress impacts well-being.

Once on the street, participants identified specific barriers that prevented them from achieving stability. Participants frequently spoke about the difficulties of the shelter system, which was often not affirming of their identities and once again left them feeling as if they were not safe. Bisexual and transgender participants in particular described the challenges of finding affirming housing. Participants also struggled to find employment, commonly reporting that they had completed numerous applications with no success. Part of the problem was that many reported that they did not have the education or work experience needed to compete for jobs. As findings also demonstrate, continuing to engage in survival sex meant that participants were at risk for victimization from multiple actors, including customers, pimps, other sex workers, and police. What most surprised the participants was that they could not rely on the police for protection and support, reinforcing the feeling that they would not be able to obtain the assistance that they needed in difficult situations. Participants who identified as transgender and as youth of color in particular reported situations in which they believed they were targeted because of their intersecting identities. Transgender participants also described situations in which their identities were not considered and they struggled to assert their gender identities in a criminal justice system that ignored them. These findings aligned with previous research on SGM interactions with police, which showed that discrimination was often underreported and that secondary victimization by police was common (Wolff & Cokely, 2007). However, negative interactions were not universal, and some described positive interactions with police. Although being less likely, participants who reported such sometimes felt as if they had somewhere to turn.

While struggling on the streets, participants reported unexpected opportunities for resilience. Many spoke about the benefits of living authentically and being able to finally be themselves, something they could not do living at home. Participants also expressed that they developed close connections with people on the street. These individuals provided support and protection from the potential harm of engaging in survival sex. These newfound supports functioned as the promotive factors that were lacking in their family environments or particular social service agencies. Participants were also at times able to stand up for themselves when they felt oppressive systems were disrespecting them. Although their ways of standing up for themselves were not always considered prosocial, it was a way for participants to reclaim when they believed their rights were not being respected. This aligns with previous literature, which suggests that, for SGM populations, resistance of hetero- and cisnormativity and self-advocacy are expressions of resilience (Johns et al., 2018).

Limitations

This study had certain limitations. First, the use of qualitative methods does not allow us to generalize findings to all SGM homeless youth or those living in other urban contexts. In addition, although we aimed to elucidate participants' victimization experiences before and after becoming homeless and engaging in survival sex, the methods we used did not enable us to determine specific causal processes for entry into and exit from the sex trade. Future studies should consider using a grounded theory approach to identify such processes. It may also be beneficial to use quantitative methods to identify the social and behavioral factors underlying the relation between SGM youth homelessness and engagement in survival sex.

Second, although the RDS method was helpful for recruiting a large sample of SGM homeless youth engaged in survival sex, this method does have the potential to introduce bias. One way to assess for such bias is to compare the RDS sample to the population from which participants were recruited (Heckathorn, 1997); however, no sampling frame for SGM homeless youth exists, as they are a hidden population. Thus, representativeness is uncertain. Future studies on SGM homeless youth would benefit from employing social network analysis, which would allow for the identification of subgroups of SGM homeless youth that may not have been included (e.g., non-English-speaking SGM youth, transgender men of color), and better understanding of how they are connected (Knoke & Yang, 2008). Finally, since participants in the initial study were recruited, terms such as pansexual, demisexual, and gender nonbinary have become more common. Although it is possible that participants who identified their sexual orientation or gender identity as "other" may represent these categories, we have no way of knowing if this was the case. Future studies of SGM homeless youth should include participants who represent a number of SGM identities, so that their distinct experiences are captured.

Implications

This study has implications for practice and policy. First, SGM homeless youth require viable and reliable alternative sources of stability, particularly housing and employment. Because many SGM youth experience homelessness due to discrimination and unsafe home environments, an increase in both temporary and permanent housing options is needed. Some temporary housing services do exist, but they are limited and may exclude transgender and bisexual youth and SGM youth with criminal records (Durso & Gates, 2012). Thus, temporary housing providers need to

examine their policies to ensure that they are inclusive of all SGM homeless youth. Another temporary housing solution would be to recruit and equip foster parents to support and care for SGM youth experiencing homelessness. In addition to housing, SGM homeless youth experience difficulties securing employment due to discrimination and limited opportunities, an issue that is particularly salient for transgender youth. Although protections against discrimination based on gender identity have recently passed in some cities (e.g., New York; Allen, 2019), it is important for employers to adhere to these protections.

This study also has implications for police policies and practices. Because many SGM youth have histories of prolonged victimization, sometimes by police, it is imperative for police to gain a better understanding of the power dynamics shaping their interactions with youth. System-wide training on culturally competent policing with SGM homeless youth would be an essential starting point. This training should include education about sexual and gender identities and the developmental sequelae of these aspects of youth identity. Finally, what was remarkable about these participants is that they managed to find opportunities for resilience, highlighting that even those with the most risk still managed to exhibit strength. Mental health practitioners and social service providers must keep this in mind as they attempt to intervene with SGM homeless youth, as this may lead to improved collaboration and enhanced treatment planning.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study was supported by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice (Award No. 2016-MU-CX-K011). The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this presentation are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice. Data collection was funded by a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, awarded to the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C. (No. 2011-JF-FX-0001).

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