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Child welfare characteristics in a sample of youth involved in commercial sex: An exploratory study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Homeless, runaway, and youth exiting foster care are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, but little research has parsed the societal, community, and individual factors that contribute to their risk.

Objectives: (1) To estimate child welfare characteristics in a sample of homeless young people who engaged in commercial sex (CS); and (2) To compare young people who were sex trafficked (ST) to those who engaged in some other form of CS.

Participants and setting: This study includes 98 homeless young people in Philadelphia, PA, Phoenix, AZ, and Washington, DC, who were interviewed for a larger study of ST and endorsed engagement in CS.

Methods: We used a non-probability, purposive, maximum variation sampling procedure. Interviews were recorded and responses were simultaneously noted on a standardized interview form. Data were analyzed through means, frequencies, and bivariate tests of association.

Results: Average age of the full sample of 98 homeless young people was 20.9 years; 48% were female and 50% were Black/African American. Forty-six percent of the full sample was sex trafficked. The full sample and the victims of ST differed significantly in three child welfare characteristics, with the ST group more likely to have been maltreated as children, more likely to have had family involvement with the child welfare system (CWS), and more likely to report higher rates of living someplace other than with their biological parents as children.

Conclusions: ST victims differ from those who engaged in other forms of CS in histories of maltreatment, involvement with the CWS, and exposure to residential instability while growing up.

1. Introduction

Commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of domestic minors occurs when an array of societal, community, relationship, and individual factors coalesce to create an ecology of risk. The ecology is multifaceted and interconnected, and contributes to initial and continued exploitation and trafficking. Understanding these factors is a first step toward effectively tackling exploitation and trafficking of minors.

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A 2013 Institute of Medicine report highlights this fact: “Although a modest amount of research and noteworthy practice and programs have emerged, far more needs to be known if commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors in the United States are to be adequately addressed” (p. 19). Moreover, despite passage of Safe Harbor laws in nine states in 2012, which mandate that youth who are commercially sexually exploited or sex trafficked should be treated as vulnerable children in need of services and not as criminals (Barnert et al., 2016), there remains little guidance regarding how to put the mandate into practice. Therefore, research is needed to better understand this ecology of risk that results among vulnerable and marginalized children and youth becoming victims of commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. Gaining such insight will enable advocates, providers, and policymakers to better formulate how best to deliver services to these children and youth.

Commercial sexual exploitation of children is defined as “a range of crimes and activities involving the sexual abuse or exploitation of a child for the financial benefit of any person or in exchange for anything of value (monetary and non-monetary benefits) given or received by any person” (OJJDP, n.d.). Domestic minor sex trafficking is defined as “a commercial sex act induced by force, fraud, or coercion or when the person induced to perform the act is under 18 years old. Domestic minor sex trafficking is the commercial sexual exploitation of American children within the U.S. borders for monetary or other compensation (shelter, food, drugs, etc.)” (Shared Hope International, 2019).

To date, little research with victims of commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking has been conducted that can facilitate our understanding of the diversity that exists in the population of victims (Kotrla, 2010). Some previous work revealed several individual level factors as correlates of sex trafficking, including being female, a sexual minority, identification as Latinx, and dropping out of high school (Greeson, Treglia, Wolfe, & Wasch, 2019), but the correlation with child welfare characteristics is more understudied. Research on commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors needs to attend to a wide range of issues, including the characteristics of victims (Rafferty, 2013). Due to the growing awareness of commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of young people, human services agencies must rethink old policies and develop new ones for identifying and serving victims. More specifically, knowledge of child welfare characteristics can help providers, researchers, and leaders in child advocacy better address the issues faced by victims of commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. For example, little is known about the role of child maltreatment, system involvement, and out-of-home placement as factors that may play a part in later victimization from commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. Additionally, there may be important differences in child welfare characteristics between youth who are sex trafficked compared to those who are victimized through some other form of commercial sexual exploitation.

1.1. History of maltreatment

Children with trauma histories, including a history of maltreatment, are considered common targets for commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking (Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Grace, 2009). Landers, McGrath, Johnson, Armstrong, and Dollard (2017) surveyed 87 young people (Mean age = 16 years, 94% female) who were commercially sexually exploited as part of a study of a specialized treatment program for youth involved with the child welfare system in Miami, Florida. The majority of them reported extensive trauma histories, including physical abuse ($n = 79$), neglect ($n = 82$), emotional abuse ($n = 74$), and sexual abuse ($n = 75$).

Similarly, Fedina, Williamson, and Perdue (2016) examined associations between multiple risk factors and domestic child sex trafficking among 115 individuals (aged 16+; 73% female) in five cities in one Midwest state currently involved in the commercial sex industry. Childhood sexual abuse was experienced by almost one half of the sample, childhood physical abuse was experienced by one third of the sample, and childhood emotional abuse was experienced by almost one half of the sample. Additionally, childhood emotional abuse and sexual abuse were significantly associated with domestic minor sex trafficking.

Roe-Sepowitz (2012) assessed the nature and extent of childhood emotional abuse among 71 adult women in a residential prostitution-exiting program. Results showed a high prevalence of childhood physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse among the sub-sample of participants who entered prostitution prior to age 18, a form of commercial sexual exploitation of minors, compared to those who entered after age 18. Results also showed the sample’s childhood emotional abuse was significantly associated with their experience of commercial sexual exploitation as girls.

Ahrens, Katon, McCarty, Richardson, and Courtney (2012) evaluated the association between history of childhood sexual abuse and having transactional sex, a form of commercial sexual exploitation, among 732 adolescents in foster care, using Waves 1 and 2 of the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, a longitudinal cohort study of youth transitioning out of foster care from Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin. Exposure to childhood sexual abuse was common among all the participants. Moreover, history of childhood sexual abuse was significantly associated with increased odds of having transactional sex, both ever and in the past year.

1.2. System involvement & out-of-home placement

Children and youth who have been involved with child welfare services are also considered common targets for commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Administration for Children, Youth & Families, 2013; Rafferty, 2013). Such targeting can be due to this vulnerable group’s unmet needs for family relationships and inadequate supervision (Landers et al., 2017). Fedina et al. (2016) found that both child welfare involvement and placement in foster care were prevalent among individuals involved in the commercial sex industry. One quarter of the child-trafficked sample was involved in the child welfare system as minors, and 15% were either currently or previously in foster care. Coy’s (2009) qualitative study of 14

women aged 17–33 corroborates out-of-home placement as one of the most common contributors to involvement in commercial sexual exploitation as minors, with six women directly linking their involvement in prostitution to their care experiences. For example, one woman in Coy's study stated, "the street prostitution community is the family I never had" (p. 262).

This study builds on previous work by quantifying and describing individual-level factors contributing to the commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of minors in the United States. We assess child welfare histories and individual characteristics in a sample of homeless young people who engaged in commercial sex in three U.S. cities. Secondly, we compare the histories and characteristics of young people who were sex trafficked compared to those who engaged in some other form of commercial sex in order to better understand risk factors for that particular type of victimization. Thus, this research contributes to the knowledge base on the commercial sexual exploitation and domestic sex trafficking of minors with the intent to improve our understanding of the contribution of child welfare characteristics to the victimization and exploitation experiences, and make child welfare practice and policy recommendations for how to prevent and intervene related to such experiences.

2. Methods

2.1. Design and overview

Data for this study come from a larger study of sex trafficking among youth seeking shelter services in Philadelphia, PA, Phoenix, AZ, and Washington, DC ($n = 270$). A full description of the study design, sampling, recruitment procedures, and data collection is detailed in Greeson et al., 2019. The present study includes 98 young people who were interviewed for the larger study and, having engaged in commercial sex, including sex trafficking, answered a set of questions about their child welfare experiences.

2.2. Measures

To detect commercial exploitation and sex trafficking victimization, we used The Human Trafficking Interview and Assessment Measure (HTIAM-10; Bigelsen and Vuotto, 2013). The HTIAM-10 is described in depth in Greeson et al., 2019.

2.2.1. Commercial sexual exploitation

Commercial sexual exploitation is defined as answering "yes" to the following question: *Sometimes young people who are homeless or who are having difficulties with their families have very few options to survive or fulfill their basic needs, such as food and shelter. Sometimes they are exploited or feel the need to use their sexuality to help them survive. Have you ever received anything of value, such as money, a place to stay, food, drugs, gifts or favors, in exchange for your performing a sexual activity?*

2.2.2. Sex trafficking

Sex trafficking is defined as a commercial sex act induced by force/fraud/coercion, or when a person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age. Commercial sex act is defined as any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person. Sex trafficking is considered present (coded as "yes") if the young person recounted a story of engaging in a commercial sex act due to force/fraud/coercion or if the young person had not reached 18 years of age when this act took place.

2.2.3. Child welfare characteristics

Child maltreatment is defined as an answer of "yes" to the following question: *Sometimes young people are harmed or maltreated by one or more than one adults at different points in their lives. When I say harmed or maltreated, that means that a parent or someone else responsible for your care neglected to meet your basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, medical care or supervision, or physically abused you by any means that resulted in your being injured other than accidentally, or sexually abused you by forcing or coercing you to engage in any sex act, view or participate in pornography, or communicating with you in a sexual manner, or failed to protect you from maltreatment.* Neglect is defined as an answer of "yes" to a parent or someone else responsible for your care harming you by not meeting your basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision, or by failing to protect you from maltreatment. Physical abuse is defined as an answer of "yes" to a parent or someone else responsible for your care harming you in a way that resulted in you being injured other than accidentally. Sexual abuse is defined as an answer of "yes" to parent or someone else responsible for your care harming you by forcing or coercing you to engage in any sex act, view or participate in pornography, or communicating with you in a sexual manner. Residential instability is defined as an answer of "yes" to living any place other than with a biological parent. Placement setting is defined as answer of "yes" to living any place other than with a biological parent *and* being placed in (1) group home, (2) foster care, (3) residential treatment facility, or (4) supervised independent living. System involvement is defined as an answer of "yes" to the following question: *Some young people or families work with a case worker or social worker, either while the family lives together or while a child is living somewhere other than with their biological family. To the best of your knowledge, were you or your family ever involved with the local child welfare system?* Number of placements in out-of-home care (i.e., group home, foster care, residential treatment facility, supervised independent living) is a continuous variable and the sum of all placement settings.

2.2.4. Demographics

Current age is a continuous variable measured in years. Gender is measured as male, female, transgender, or other. Race and ethnicity are measured in a single categorical variable, allowing for answers of White, Black, Latinx, American Indian or Alaskan, Asian, Native Hawaiian, Multiracial, Other, and refused to answer. Highest level of education is measured as a categorical variable

and assigned one of six values – High School (HS) Diploma received; some college, GED received, still attending HS, dropped out of HS, received college degree. U.S. Citizenship is a binary variable coded as either yes or no. Parenting status is a categorical variable with five values – no, yes, pregnant or expecting, don't know, and refused to answer.

2.3. Human subjects protections

The research team received human subjects' approval from the team's university. Given the nature of the information shared by the young people, the research team also obtained a Certificate of Confidentiality from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development, which protected the identity of research participants, such as through disclosure of information in legal proceedings.

2.4. Data analysis

Advanced year MSW students entered each completed interview protocol into SPSS. When needed, the students consulted the printed transcripts of interviews. Following entry into SPSS, data were analyzed through means, frequencies, and bivariate tests of association like t-and chi-square tests.

3. Results

3.1. Demographics – full sample of commercially sexually exploited youth

Of the 270 homeless youth interviewed as part of the larger project, 98 (36%) met the criteria for having engaged in commercial sex and are included in these analyses. Table 1 shows the demographic and child welfare characteristics of both the full sample of commercially sexually exploited youth and the subsample of these youth who experienced sex trafficking. Among the full sample, 48%, 43%, and 7% identified as female, male, and transgender, respectively. Black (50%), White (16%), Multiracial (16%), and Latinx (11%) were the most common racial and ethnic identities among the full sample. Earning a high school diploma (28%), dropping out of high school (28%), or completing some college (21%) were the most frequent levels of educational attainment. Fourteen percent of the full sample was still attending high school at time of interview. The average age of the sample was 20.9 years (*S.D.* = 2.1 years), and ranged from 18 to 25 years old. Regarding parenting status, the majority (61%) of the sample reported that they were not parents and were not pregnant or expecting, while 29% reported having at least one child, and 8% stated that they were pregnant at the time of the interview. Nearly 100% of the sample reported they were U.S. citizens. Regarding sexual orientation, most of the full sample reported being straight (65%), 17% reported being bisexual, 7% reported being gay/lesbian, and 7% reported being pansexual.

3.2. Demographics – subsample of victims of sex trafficking

Forty-five (46%) of the 98 participants were sex trafficking victims. Among the subsample of sex trafficked young people, 56%, 31%, and 13% identified as female, male, and transgender, respectively. Black (44%) and Latinx (20%) were the most common racial and ethnic identities. Some high school/dropping out of high school (44%) and earning a high school diploma (22%) were the most frequent levels of educational attainment. Sixteen percent were still attending high school at time of interview. The average age of the sample was 20.1 years (*S.D.* = 2.1 years), and ranged from 18 to 25 years old. Thirty-eight percent reported having at least one child, and 11% stated that they were pregnant at the time of the interview. Nearly 100% of the sample reported they were U.S. citizens. Most of the sex trafficked subsample reported being straight (60%).

3.3. Child welfare characteristics – full sample of commercially sexually exploited youth

Eighty-three percent of the full sample reported being maltreated as children. A little over half of the sample experienced sexual abuse (54%), 40% experienced physical abuse, 28% experienced neglect, and 13% experienced more than one type of abuse. Most (61%) of the full sample also reported family involvement in the child welfare system. Eighty-nine percent of the full sample experienced residential instability during their childhoods and/or adolescence. Forty-one percent of the full sample was also placed into some kind of out-of-home care during their childhood and/or adolescence, such as foster care, a group home, or kinship care. The average number of placements in out-of-home care was 6.4 (*S.D.* = 6.4).

3.4. Child welfare characteristics – subsample of victims of sex trafficking

Ninety-three percent of the sex trafficked sample reported being maltreated as children. Sixty percent of the sex trafficked sample reported being sexually abused as a children, 36% reported being physical abused as children, 26% reported being neglected, and 17% reported having experienced more than one type of abuse. Most (67%) of the sex trafficked sample also reported family involvement in the child welfare system. Nearly 100% of the sex trafficked sample experienced residential instability during their childhoods. Forty percent of the sex trafficked sample was also placed into some kind of out-of-home care during their childhoods, such as foster care, a group home, or kinship care. The average number of placements in out-of-home care was 6.1 (*S.D.* = 6.1).

Table 1
Sample Characteristics.

	Sex Trafficking Victims (n = 45)		Full Sample (n = 98)	
	#	%	#	%
Gender*				
Female	25	56%	47	48%
Male	14	31%	43	44%
Transgender	6	13%	7	7%
Other	0	0%	1	1%
Race				
White	5	11%	16	16%
Black or African American	20	44%	49	50%
American Indian & Alaska Native	1	2%	2	2%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1	2%	1	1%
Latinx	9	20%	11	11%
Multiracial	7	16%	16	16%
Other	2	4%	2	2%
Refused to answer	0	0%	1	1%
Parenting Status				
Yes	17	38%	28	29%
No	22	49%	60	61%
Pregnant/expecting	5	11%	8	8%
Don't know	1	2%	2	2%
US Citizenship Status				
Yes	44	98%	96	98%
No	1	2%	2	2%
Highest Level of Education**				
HS diploma received	10	22%	27	28%
Some college	4	9%	21	21%
GED completed	3	7%	6	6%
Some high school/Still attending	7	16%	14	14%
College completed	1	2%	3	3%
Some high school/Dropped out	20	44%	27	28%
Sexual Orientation				
Heterosexual/straight	27	60%	64	65%
Homosexual/gay/lesbian	2	4%	7	7%
Bisexual	12	27%	17	17%
Pansexual	3	7%	7	7%
Refused to answer	1	2%	3	3%
Maltreated as a Child*	42	93%	80	83%
Sexual abuse	25	60%	43	54%
Physical abuse	15	36%	32	40%
Neglect	11	26%	22	28%
Emotional abuse	0	0%	4	5%
Experienced more than one type of abuse	7	17%	10	13%
Involved in the Child Welfare System*	30	67%	56	61%
Experienced Residential Instability as a Minor**	44	98%	84	89%
Out-of-Home Placement	18	41%	39	41%
Mean		SD	Mean	SD
Age	20.1	2.1	20.9	2.1
Number of Out-of-Home Placements	6.1	6.1	6.4	6.4

* p < .05.

** p < .01.

3.5. Bivariate differences between groups for child welfare characteristics

Sex trafficked victims were significantly more likely to report experiencing maltreatment as children [$\chi^2(1, N = 98) = 6.8, p < .05$]. Sex trafficked victims were also significantly more likely to report family involvement with the child welfare system as children [$\chi^2(2, N = 98) = 5.7, p < .05$]. Residential instability as a child was also significantly different between the full sample and the subsample of sex trafficked youth [$\chi^2(1, N = 98) = 6.4, p < .01$], with the sex trafficked subsample reporting significantly higher rates instability compared to the full sample.

4. Discussion

Our findings suggest that child maltreatment and involvement in the child welfare system are associated with a higher likelihood of sex trafficking victimization among homeless youth that have engaged in commercial sex. Although the relationship between

childhood trauma and later involvement in commercial sex is supported by prior research (Ahrens et al., 2012; Fedina et al., 2016; Landers et al., 2017), this study highlights key differences between young adults experiencing homelessness who are involved in the commercial sex trade and those who are victims of sex trafficking.

There was no significant difference in rates of sexual abuse, physical abuse, or neglect between youth who engaged in commercial sex and youth who were sex trafficked. Previous studies have shown that exposure to childhood emotional abuse is associated with a younger entry into commercial sex. Roe-Sepowitz (2012) found that amongst female residents at a prostitution-exiting program, those who first experienced commercial sexual exploitation before the age of 18, and thus were victims of sex trafficking, reported higher rates of childhood emotional abuse than residents who entered the commercial sex trade after the age of 18. Comparing to our study, we only asked participants if the child maltreatment they experienced was physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, or more than one type. We did not systematically inquire about emotional abuse. Yet, without being asked a specific question, some participants included this trauma in their recounting of maltreatment and this endorsement of emotional abuse was noted on data collection forms. However, the small number of participants who mentioned emotional abuse in their interviews and the fact that we did not systematically ask all participants about exposure to emotional abuse limits our ability to reliably compare across groups.

All youth included in this sample were experiencing homelessness at time of interview, indicating a likelihood of an unstable family situation. Prior child abuse experience is well documented as a contributing factor for homelessness among young adults (Coates and McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Martijn and Sharpe, 2006), so it is not surprising that participants in our study reported high levels of child maltreatment. Our findings point to the need to tailor prevention and intervention services to children known to be experiencing maltreatment, as even within the population of homeless youth engaging in commercial sex, the rates of self-reported child maltreatment varied significantly between those who were trafficked and those who were not.

Two-thirds of the homeless youth in this study that were victims of sex trafficking reported family involvement with the child welfare system. Our findings are in line with previous studies indicating that most youth who are victims of any type human trafficking or who engage in commercial sex, have prior child welfare involvement. A 2002 study of 47 women in Canada involved in prostitution before age 18 found that 64% had been involved with the child welfare system as children. Three-quarters of the child welfare involved participants ended up in out-of-home placements (Nixon, Tutty, Downe, Gorkoff, & Ursel, 2002). A recent study in Illinois of over 400 children who were referred to the Department of Children and Family Services for allegations of human trafficking found that 61% had a prior investigation of child maltreatment and 28% had experience in out-of-home placement (Havlicek, Huston, Boughton, & Zhang, 2016).

Our study also compares the child welfare experience of sex trafficking victims and homeless youth who engaged in commercial sex as adults without the presence of force, fraud or coercion. For the latter group, only half reported prior contact with the child welfare system.

This study suggests that referral to child protective services or investigation by the child welfare system is not a strong protective factor for preventing future sex trafficking victimization. Sex trafficked participants reported higher rates of child welfare involvement. A referral to child welfare services may therefore be indicative of more pervasive or serious dysfunction within a family, and result in children who have high rates of maltreatment eventually experiencing both child welfare involvement and sex trafficking victimization. For example, previous work of Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, and Cauce (2001) found that among homeless and runaway youth, exposure to dysfunctional or disorganized homes as children placed youth on high-risk trajectories, including early independence and street life that increased their risk of sexual victimization. Additional research into the child welfare involvement of all homeless youth seeking services would improve our understanding of this issue.

There was no difference in the rates of out-of-home placements between the full sample and the subsample of sex trafficked young people. For the 41% of participants who experienced out-of-home care, including foster care, kinship care, and group homes, they averaged over six different placements. A 2009 study of young women engaged in commercial sex highlights how frequent placement moves while in foster care is profoundly destabilizing, and prevents healthy relationships, attachments, and healing (Coy, 2009). Our study corroborates these findings.

Formal involvement with the child welfare system, whether or not a child is placed into foster care, offers an opportunity to alter the course of a child's life after it becomes known that a child is experiencing maltreatment or is at risk of maltreatment. Service providers within the child welfare system may need to improve prevention and intervention services for children and adolescents with a focus on decreasing placement moves and increasing permanency. There is a growing need to have services available within the child welfare system that can meet the needs of youth who are engaging in commercial sex. For example, there are approximately 850 child advocacy centers (CAC) in the United States, including at least one in every state (National Children's Alliance, 2018). These centers have the potential to serve as an important resource for helping victims of commercial sexual exploitation become survivors. However, the level of knowledge within CACs about commercial sexual exploitation, including sex trafficking, and how to reach and serve these vulnerable children/youth is unclear. Additionally, although evidence-supported, trauma-informed treatment approaches are becoming more common, there are none that have been tailored to meet the specific needs of young people involved in commercial sex, including sex trafficking. As a participant in Casey Family Program's Addressing Child Sex Trafficking from a Child Welfare Perspective study stated, "We do well with identification victims, but what comes next?" (2014, p. 11). Although collaboration between multiple systems is necessary to make adequate impact, the child welfare system is best situated to take the lead in addressing the needs of this special population of youth (Brittle, 2007).

A final difference between the two groups in our study worth highlighting is residential instability. Nearly all (98%) of the trafficked participants lived with someone other than a biological parent, compared to three quarters (77%) of those who engaged in other forms of commercial sex. It is not surprising that a majority of respondents experienced a living situation that did not include a biological parent, as the sample is drawn from young adults seeking services at a homeless shelter. However, these results suggest that

consistency of caretaker may be a protective factor in determining a young person's risk for trafficking victimization.

4.1. Practice and policy recommendations

In light of the finding that a majority of youth in this sample were involved with the child welfare system prior to engaging in commercial sex or experiencing trafficking victimization, we suggest that child-serving systems use existing data to identify populations at the highest risk for trafficking and create targeted prevention services. Specific populations may include young women, young people who identify as sexual minorities, young people who identify as Latinx, and young people who have dropped out of high school (Greeson et al., 2019). Although services are needed for children and youth who experience all forms of maltreatment, tailoring services by abuse type may be warranted. The most frequent type of abuse experienced by both groups in this study was sexual abuse. Evidence-supported psychoeducational interventions need to be available to victims of sexual abuse, including those who are commercially sexually exploited. For example, Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) is recognized as a well-supported intervention for sexually abused children, and demonstrates significant improvements in the overall functioning of participants as compared to other interventions (Chaffin and Friedrich, 2004; Cohen, Deblinger, Mannarino, & Steer, 2004). The National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center (2004) evaluated dozens of interventions for childhood physical and sexual abuse and rated TF-CBT as the only well-supported, efficacious treatment with the highest rating available in their classification system. Access to evidence-based treatments like TF-CBT for victims of sexual abuse should be expanded to ensure that victims of commercial sexual exploitation, including trafficking, are reached.

Policies and programs that promote out-of-home placement stability for youth in the child welfare system must also be supported, as multiple and frequent moves places children at greater risk of victimization. For example, enhanced training for foster parents, which includes both a trauma focus as well as targeted information about commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking could potentially reduce placement instability. Foster parents receiving such training would then be able to understand behaviors that once led to placement disruption within the appropriate context of trauma.

We also suggest that youth who are exiting the child welfare system through emancipation are provided with transitional and aftercare services that truly promote not only a successful transition to independence, but also connections to supportive adult relationships, like a natural mentor (Greeson & Thompson, 2017). Evaluation of the federally funded independent living programming currently available to youth who age out of foster care showed little impact on outcomes associated with a positive transition to adulthood (Courtney, Zinn, Johnson, & Malm, 2011; Courtney, Zinn, Koralek, & Bess, 2011). Additional research also showed that these programs have little impact on youth's social support (Greeson, Garcia, Kim, & Courtney, 2015). Both independent living skills and relationships with supportive adults are potentially protective against commercial sexual exploitation. New approaches are needed that build both youth's skills for independence and supportive relationships for interdependence.

All services provided to young people who are victims of human trafficking or are engaging in the commercial sex trade need to stress that being trafficked is not the sole definition of who these youth are nor something that is wrong with them, but instead is something that happened to them. Such marginalized young people have likely experienced a series of traumas throughout their lives, and their commercial sex experience exists within the contexts of their prior experiences of maltreatment and family instability. With this in mind, all services provided to trafficking victims and young adults involved in commercial sex must be trauma-informed.

4.2. Limitations and future research

The participants in this study were obtained through a non-probability, purposive sample of youth seeking shelter services at five programs in three cities, limiting the generalizability of results to the entire population of young adults engaged in commercial sex. There are very likely differences in child welfare and child maltreatment histories among young adults who reside in homeless shelters and those who do not. Youth who are actively engaging in commercial sex for shelter or those who are currently being trafficked are unlikely to be represented in our sample of individuals seeking shelter services.

The sample for this study was part of a larger study on the prevalence and correlates of human trafficking among homeless and runaway youth (Greeson et al., 2019). Additional research is recommended among a known sample of youth involved in commercial sex in order to more thoroughly explore child welfare histories. This study only compared child welfare characteristics among groups involved in commercial sex, presenting a future opportunity to research the child maltreatment experiences and child welfare involvement of homeless youth seeking shelter services that are not involved in commercial sex.

All data for this study were self-reported by participants. Many of the questions about child maltreatment concerned distressing or traumatizing information, which may have influenced a participant's tendency to share information. The mandated reporting requirement of the interviewer may have limited some participants from sharing information about child abuse, particularly if there was still another child involved in a given situation.

Each youth in this sample disclosed involvement in the commercial sex trade, but even among this group there may have been a reluctance to share personal history with a stranger or describe involvement in illegal activities. Male respondents especially may have been more likely to report their commercial sexual experiences as consensual instead of acknowledging exploitation driven by shame, a fear of stigma, and/or perceiving themselves as having more agency and choice (Estes and Weiner, 2002; Curtis, Terry, Dank, Dombrowski, & Khan, 2008; Willis, Robert, & Friedman, 2013).

Our survey lacked a specific question about emotional abuse, although without prompting, some participants disclosed this kind of maltreatment during their interviews. However, due to not asking all participants about emotional abuse systematically, we have likely under-reported it.

This study underscores the need for prevention and intervention services related to commercial sexual exploitation and more specifically, sex trafficking, for children who experience maltreatment, particularly those who come to the attention of formal child protection systems. In our sample, nearly all sex trafficked participants experienced maltreatment and a majority had some child welfare involvement. By improving the services provided to children and youth who are already known to the child welfare system and therefore are at higher risk for sex trafficking, the system charged with ensuring safety, strengthening families, and achieving permanency can make a real impact in reducing victimization.

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