"The Spectrum of Slavery": from Housing Instability among Youth to Sex Trafficking

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Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2011

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“THE SPECTRUM OF SLAVERY”: FROM HOUSING INSTABILITY AMONG YOUTH TO SEX TRAFFICKING.

A Thesis

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

May 2011
Abstract

“The Spectrum of Slavery”: From housing instability among youth to sex trafficking.

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In the United States, the majority of youth who become victims of sex trafficking are U.S. citizens. Most “at-risk” are those involved in the foster care system, the sexually abused and/or those surviving without stable housing—otherwise known as the homeless. Through in depth interviews with homeless teenage mothers, this study analyzed the connection between housing vulnerability and sex trafficking. The major finding of this study suggests that young girls are pushed into homelessness and sexually exploitative situations when they experience a loss of familial support. Without familial support, young, homeless girls are forced into a patriarchal street economy that limits their options for economic opportunity: men sell drugs, women sell their body. Participants also discussed the perceived effectiveness of structural interventions, including welfare, housing shelters and educational programs.

By exploring the intersection of homeless teenage mothers and domestic sex trafficking, this study adds to a stronger dialogue between the homeless and human trafficking fields. Additionally, this study brings attention to the fact that young, American girls are just as vulnerable to sex trafficking as the international victims highlighted in most of the popular media and literary
scholarship. Lastly, several interventions are proposed for working at the intersection of homeless youth and sex trafficking.
Introduction

In the United States, the majority of minor sex trafficking victims are U.S. citizens. Most “at-risk” are those involved in the foster care system, the sexually abused and/or those surviving without stable housing- otherwise known as the homeless (Estes & Weiner, 2001; Kotrla, 2010). Historically, the homeless population has been comprised almost exclusively of single, adult men. Though single, adult men continue to experience homelessness at higher rates than other demographics, homeless families now make up thirty to forty percent of the homeless population (Fertig & Reingold, 2008). These homeless families are overwhelmingly led by single, young women- this is where my story begins.

I witness the repercussions of this change in homelessness daily, when twelve young girls and their very small children walk through the doors of our homeless shelter with everything they own in a couple of black, garbage size trash bags. Hired as a case manager, my official role was to help these young mothers achieve educational success and attain jobs that ensured financial stability. However, their emotional lives often defined and constrained their ability to move forward- their paths often blocked by troubled relationships and traumatic pasts.

Working in the foster care system had prepared me for stories of child abuse, maltreatment and/or neglect, but not the high levels of sexual violence that continuously emerged within the narratives of my clients. For the
last sixteen months I have listened to stories of childhood molestation, of rape, of multiple pregnancies as a result of multiple rapes, of past and current boyfriends who forced clients into prostitution, of family members who insisted that young women pay their share of rent by sleeping with multiple men, or of “someone they knew” who engaged in sex work in order to care for their children.

Academically, I was already aware of the fact that sex trafficking occurred in the U.S., but listening to clients recount numerous instances of forced sexual exploitation changed the way I understood *domestic* sex trafficking. These girls weren’t defined as human trafficking victims; their sexual indiscretions weren’t washed away by vocabulary warranting them innocent and they weren’t beneficiaries of the government funds awarded to foreign-born counterparts.

They were just young, poor American moms- who had been sexually exploited on a level unrecognized by popular media and/or literary scholarship. In contrast to the global context of most sex trafficking narratives, these local accounts unveiled a rarely explored connection between the vulnerability of young American youth, specifically homeless mothers, and their susceptibility to commercial sexual exploitation.

Selling the female body is a multi-billion dollar business (Aronowitz, 2009; Bales, 1999; Kara, 2009). According to the U.S. Department of State’s Trafficking in Person’s Report, human trafficking in general is estimated to be a 32 billion dollar industry and is the fastest growing business within the black market (2008). In fact, after the sale of drugs and guns, human trafficking is the third most lucrative activity for organized crime (Aronowitz, 2009; Bales &
Soodalter, 2009). Conservative estimates suggest that out of the fifty thousand human trafficking victims surviving in America, approximately half of them are sexually exploited, most forced into prostitution (Bales & Soodalter, 2009). There are at least 100,000 American minors who are currently victims of sex trafficking (Estes & Weiner, 2001).

In the United States, sex traffickers are able to disguise themselves as pimps. As proposed by Donna Hughes, author of Enslaved in the USA:

Sex traffickers have avoided scrutiny of their criminal activities by operating under the social stigma of prostitution. Few people realize the brutal control these predators exert over their victims; instead, people believe myths popularized by Hollywood movies and TV documentaries about empowered sex workers, or they condemn women and girls for their “immoral” behavior and have little sympathy or understanding for the conditions of their lives (2007).

In the United States, “sex trafficking victims” are socially constructed through an “othered,” global lens. Popular television shows, movies, and news headlines portray “traffickers” as vicious criminals operating within the international market, while simultaneously presenting “glamorous” American pimps as operating within a market of “free and willing” prostitutes (Kotrla, 2010). If you’re born in Thailand and forced into prostitution in the U.S you’re a victim of sex trafficking, but if you’re born in the U.S and forced into prostitution, you remain just a “ho.” By framing commercial sexual exploitation as an issue primarily effecting “other” countries, society ignores the fact that there are more domestically-born girls sexually exploited in this country, than those who enter the U.S through organized “trafficking” schemes (Hughes, 2007).
Like traffickers, pimps are the primary catalyst to sexual exploitation—luring poor, young women into “the life” with whispers of financial security and trinkets of conspicuous consumption. According to one study, pimps control seventy-five percent of homeless youth involved in prostitution and within the United States, the inability to keep safe and/or stable housing accounts for sixty percent of all children who are at risk for becoming victims of commercial sexual exploitation (Estes & Weiner, 2001). Pimps purposely shop for potential victims from the lowest economic strata, in places that indicate vulnerability, like bus stops, public spaces like malls, homeless shelters, foster care facilities and schools (Lisa Goldblatt Grace, 2008). They are hunting for American girls.

In an effort to explore this domestic narrative, I conducted interviews with five homeless mothers about their experiences of homelessness and the connection between housing vulnerability and sex trafficking.

Without housing security and with limited options for legitimate, formal forms of employment, runaways, throwaways and homeless youth are often forced to work within the black market—engaging in criminal activities such as dealing, prostitution, robbery, pan handling, stripping, and reselling stolen goods to purchase food and secure shelter (Gwadz et al., 2009; Tyler, 2006; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997). In the underground world of survival, the so-called “street economy, powerful gender inequities push homeless youth into pre-determined street professions. According to the homeless, young mothers in this study, the street economy offers two gender-based options for informal employment: men “choose” to sell drugs and women “choose” to sell their bodies.
However, the “choice” to engage in sex work is often marked by “sex trafficking” instances of force, fraud, and coercion. Young women are not just falling into the world of prostitution by economic default, but are also being preyed upon by violent pimps. Though a significant amount of work has been done to understand the experience and survival decisions of homeless youth, less academic attention has been paid to the powerful, violent, and manipulating relationships that influence those experiences and survival decisions.

As a result of this study, I have been able to provide a better picture of the teenage mother’s experience of homelessness and its connection to sex trafficking. The participant’s narratives helped me revise the standard definition of homelessness, illustrating the importance of emotional support and its connection to sex trafficking. Although most of my participants didn’t integrate the term “sex trafficking,” into their experiences of commercial sexual exploitation, much of their experience with prostitution parallels the trafficked experience. Similar to the explanations of sex trafficking within the global context, in the U.S, poor, young women are at risk of becoming sexually subordinate to violent, dominating men within the patriarchal street economy. This research calls attention to the shared experiences of domestic and international sex trafficking victims- highlighting the similarities between poor, vulnerably women (and children) worldwide. Specifically, the study: 1. Provides an in-depth examination of the context of sex trafficking within the US borders, 2. Extends the academic discourse on homeless youth by adding the vulnerability of homeless teenage mothers and their susceptibility to sex trafficking.
Literature Review

The background for this study combines existing literature on homelessness at large, homeless youth, homeless teenage mothers as well as a brief review of how American society understands the terms “sex trafficking” and “prostitution.” Historically, homelessness has been discussed as the individual choice to defy social norms, coupled with various drug addictions and/or mental illnesses. However, in recognition of the fact that homeless youth typically leave home due to abuse and/or a dysfunctional family, scholars have begun to pull away from the personal defect explanations of general homelessness. Homeless youth are left without the financial and/or emotional supports that families typically provide and are thus, responsible for their own survival. Without access to formal employment or legitimate options for earning a self-sufficient income, homeless youth are forced to risk good judgment for basic necessities. Although various studies have connected youth homelessness to the “survival choice” of trading sex, the connection between housing vulnerability and domestic sex trafficking (forced sexual exploitation) is rarely discussed. The ability to survive homelessness while avoiding sexual exploitation is further complicated by the overwhelming female responsibility of motherhood. In this case, decisions are made to protect, feed, house and provide for not just one body, but two. Society views “sex trafficking” victims as worthy of financial support, whereas teen mothers are typically viewed as irresponsible and undeserving of public assistance. However, without structural and financial sources of support in place
to help young mothers transition from state dependency to independent living, the number of very young girls susceptible to sex trafficking will increase.

Within the human trafficking literature, sex trafficking is typically positioned through a legal, victim-perpetrator and international perspective. Victims are always innocent, perpetrators are always guilty and all come from other countries to taint the United States with criminal behavior. In contrast, this paper uncovers the continuum between homeless teenage mothers, who are citizens of the United States, and domestic sex trafficking. Prostitution is placed in the middle of this continuum because it functions as both a survival method enacted by the homeless and as an entry point into domestic sex trafficking. The literature reviewed includes 1) how adult homelessness is generally framed, 2) the unique set of circumstances that distinguish homeless youth from their adult counterparts, as well as how those circumstances dictate the survival choices available, 3) homeless teenage mothers and their particular susceptibility to sexual exploitation and 4) an overview of how the terms “sex trafficking” and “prostitution” are generally discussed in the United States.

Section 1: Homelessness: From Skid Rows to Rows of Babies

Throughout history a small but significant proportion of American citizens have lost their ability to maintain safe and stable housing. This is the technical meaning of homelessness. However, “homelessness” is most often associated with images of soiled street beggars-badgering hard-working Americans for the change in their pockets. Until recently, “personal defect” theories, such as mental illness and/or drug addiction, heavily contributed to
society’s perception of the homeless as financial nuisances and public eye sores.
This particular understanding of homelessness dates back to the 1890’s, when Skid Row communities emerged, comprised of primarily unemployed, “street-dwelling” men. These men purposefully chose to rely on each other rather than accept the conventions of traditional social services (Cronley, 2010). In response, society constructed them as deserving of the “homeless” condition, and as a result, the longstanding argument that homelessness is the natural punishment for living outside of social norms was born. In her article, “Unraveling the Social Construction of Homelessness,” Cronley argues:

For most Americans, success and failure become matters of individual responsibility…Here the individual’s ability to locate and retain housing becomes a matter of individual-level factors and personal choice. Those without homes are either deviant or dysfunctional (2010).

Until the 1980’s, the discourse on homelessness continued to be characterized by “personal defect” studies, which typically tied homelessness to adult, single homeless men with individual problems such as mental illness and/or drug addictions (Fischer & Breakey, 1991; Gould & A. Williams, 2010; Phelan & Link, 1999).

However, a departure from this view emerged in the fiscally conservative 1980’s, when social service programs and affordable housing funds were slashed from the federal budget (Cronley, 2010; Varney & van Vliet, 2008). The reduction in services, coupled with the economic recession, forced many who were struggling in secret to display their impoverished condition on neighborhood street corners and in inner city alleyways. During this national crisis, scholars
noted a shift in the demographics of the homeless – from skid-row adult men to single women with dependent children.

Today, families make up over thirty percent of the homeless population (Fertig & Reingold, 2008; Nunez, 2000; Rog & Buckner, 2007; The National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2007) and are primarily led by young, single mothers (Axelson & Dail, 1988; Nunez, 2000; Rog & Buckner, 2007; Tischler, 2008). However, because women are typically more vulnerable to physical and sexual assaults then men, they often find ways to survive homelessness hidden from street view. Thus, the publicly acknowledged number of single, female led, homeless families is considered by some in the field to be significantly underrepresented.

In response to the changing face of homelessness, scholars, advocate organizations and select government agencies have worked to extend the definition of homelessness to include those hidden from street-view. For example, The FEANTSA defines homelessness on four counts: *Rooflessness:* those who survive without any form of shelter; *Houselessness:* those who survive by living in temporary situations like homeless shelters and/or institutions; *Insecure Housing:* those who survive on the brink of housing loss, like those who are dealing with evictions or domestic abuse situations; and finally *Inadequate Housing:* those who survive in places which are deemed humanely unfit, for example, living in an apartment which is excessively overcrowded (Sikich, 2008).

Under this broader understanding of homelessness and with the
inclusion of more families with young children, it became increasingly difficult to blame the individual and relate homelessness exclusively to deviant behavior. As a result, scholars began to focus on the structural conditions impacting homelessness, such as, decreased economic opportunities, welfare reform and a reduction in affordable housing (Cronley, 2010; Fertig & Reingold, 2008; Gould & A. Williams, 2010; Nunez, 2000; Rog & Buckner, 2007). For example, in roughly the last thirty years, the ability for low-income renters to secure reasonably priced and stable housing has declined- due to rising inflation, gentrification, and the loss of potential revenue for builders of low income properties (Lee, Price-Spratlen, & Kanan, 2003). Several studies conducted in the nineties argued that the reduction in low-income affordable housing had a direct effect on a person’s and/or family’s vulnerability to homelessness (Bassuk & Rosenberg, 1988; Elliott & Krivo, 1991; Mansur, Quigley, Raphael, & Smolensky, 2002; Tucker, 1990). For example, a quantitative study conducted by Mansur, Quigley, and Raphael and Smolensky revealed that a small housing market contributes to an increase in homelessness (2002).

Lack of affordable housing continues to push families on the brink of homelessness into shelters and/or doubled up with family members or friends. In the last decade, rents have continued to rise and low wage incomes have decreased- leading hard working Americans to face overly demanding rent burdens. Whereas, historically, housing assistance worked as a gap-reduction measure to prevent low-income wage earners from becoming homeless (when rent costs increased), today, only a small portion of the needy population is able to
attain assistance (The National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). As Cronley suggests:

The idea that homelessness is the result of individual problems has dominated the U.S public opinion and public policy. Housing is a privilege in our country, not a right. A historical and critical analysis reveals that the ideas of individual responsibility, conservative government and privatized social welfare approaches consistently have eclipsed empirical evidence, suggesting that homelessness is the result of structure-level factors such as employment and access to affordable housing...(2010).

In 2009, the National Alliance to End Homelessness reported that a staggering 1.5 million more Americans were on the brink of becoming homeless within the next two years. Gould and Williams propose that between fifteen to twenty percent of the United States current population is vulnerable to housing loss (2010). Additionally, The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development estimate that, in a single night, there are 643,067 Americans living on the streets or residing in shelters (2010) and The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty estimate that the nation’s homeless population reaches as high as three million (n.d).

This study will add to the literature on homelessness by continuing to highlight the changing face of homelessness- from single adult men, to this study’s focus on teenage mothers. The interviews conducted will help move beyond the previously discussed personal defect models of homelessness, pushing instead towards understanding homelessness through the structural conditions that affect young mothers. Research reveals that to prevent homelessness, families need access to affordable housing, employment, living wages, domestic abuse
shelters, education, and housing vouchers. However, given their age and/or consequential lack of experience, homeless teenage mothers are often denied access to these structural supports. Thus, it is also important to discuss how the homeless youth experience differs from that of the homeless adult as well as how that distinction might effect youths vulnerability to sex trafficking.

Section 2: Homeless Youth: Devils to Angels

Similar to homelessness at large, the term “homeless youth” has transformed through various scholarly definitions- from adventure seekers to criminals to depression era vagrants to rebellious youth (Smollar, 1999). Historically, the discourse on homeless youth fell similarly in line with the social construction of adult homelessness and was considered to be the natural consequence for an individual’s “choice” to reject traditional norms and/ or societal expectations. Personal defect theories dominated the literature on youth homelessness until, roughly, the 1970’s (Hyde, 2005; Smollar, 1999) when several reports surfaced indicating youth were not only running away from their homes, but were also forced out by their caregivers and/or living on the streets with parental consent (Smollar, 1999). This shift in blame- from the individual to the parent- brought attention to the fact that homeless youth were still children, regardless of the grown up decisions they faced living on the streets. Thus, scholars began to pull away from the conventional explanations of adult homelessness and in the 1980’s focused their attention on the “absence of proper contacts or links with adults in the family home and in society” (Panter-Brick, 2002).
Stemming from this question, many scholars have explored the association between homeless youth and their family structures (McManus & Sanna Thompson, 2008; Smollar, 1999). Pointing to variables such as family substance abuse, physical and sexual trauma, neglect, and/or basic family rupture, many homeless youth scholars identify family dysfunction as the primary precursor to youth homelessness (Smollar, 1999). For example, Alvi, Scott and Stanyon discovered through interviews with fifteen homeless youth that a family’s intolerance of transgression and significant familial/interpersonal violence were precursors to youth homelessness (2010). Likewise, from her study with twenty-eight homeless youth, Ferguson concluded that, “…home environments were largely characterized by instability, including lack of parental structure and protection; physical and mental abandonment by parental figures; and alcohol drug abuse among caregivers” (2008). In addition, according to Hyde’s study of fifty homeless youth, participants reported intense familial conflict and physical abuse as the primary reasons influencing their decision to leave home (2005). In contrast to the idea that homeless youth are seeking adventure or rebelling against social norms, these studies show that most often, young people are running away from dysfunctional families and/or physical or sexual abuse.

As a result of their age and consequential lack of experience, youth are additionally disadvantaged in terms of economic opportunity. Homeless youth are typically denied access to legitimate, formal forms of employment are
therefore, dependent on informal means of survival. Karabanow, Hughes, Ticknor, Kidd and Patterson’s work on homeless youth illustrate that:

…young people cannot very easily engage in formal work. There is not much available, nor is there much economic incentive to engage. As such, they are left with informal labor that provides them with survival money, pride, self-worth, and accomplishment, despite the belittlement, harassment and mockery that comes with such activities. It is a rational survivalist decision on their part…What is troubling is that this labor continues to maintain street youth’s status of marginality and social exclusion at the same time as it allows them a means to survive (2010).

Though the Karabanow et. al research points to legal, informal work as a means of income, most academic attention focuses on the ties homeless youth have to criminal activity within the black market. In a 2008 study conducted by Gwadz and et. al , research revealed that diminished options for formal employment, social control/bonds, emotional benefits, active recruitment by veteran adults and peers, and a critical need for income contributes, if not forces, homeless youth to search for financial opportunity within the “street economy” (2008). Though the “street economy” includes survival methods such as, theft, mugging, reselling stolen goods, conning, selling drugs and etc. (Alvi et al., 2010; Gwadz et al., 2009), youth who engage in the sex market warrant particular consideration (Tyler & Johnson, 2006; Tyler, 2007; L. Williams, 2010).

Homeless youth use sex as a way to survive- trading their young bodies for food, shelter, drugs, protection, and sometimes, small sums of money. Unlike the common understanding of prostitution, trading sex is not regarded as a steady form of “deviant” employment. Often, it is the only temporary option available to those who have been denied access to legitimate forms of formal
and/or informal work and who have exhausted all other avenues for economic support (Tyler, 2007). In addition, histories of physical and sexual abuse, recruitment by other homeless peers, mental health conditions, age, and length of time spent living on the streets effect the likelihood a young person using sex as a survival method (Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1999; Mallett, Rosenthal, & Keys, 2005; Tyler, 2007). For example, a quantitative analysis of 144 homeless youth revealed they were five times as likely to trade sex if their friends did, roughly five and a half times more likely if they were propositioned to trade sex, and eleven percent more likely to trade sex for every one unit increase in depressive symptoms (Tyler, 2007). In a qualitative study involving forty homeless youth, all but one participant who had direct experience with trading sex reported being physically or sexually abused as a child (Tyler & Johnson, 2006). Similar to the Green et. al study, Tyler and Johnson also pointed to the fact that six out of the seven women who admitted to trading sex for survival reported they were coerced or pressured to do so by friends or boyfriends. In a recent study, interviews with sixty-one prostituted or potentially at-risk teens revealed that:

…coping and survival is a key theme for these high risk runaway homeless teens. The nature of their survival is complex and to some outsiders may barely resemble ‘survival’. But, based on their own reports, they see themselves as having ‘survived’ the extreme difficulties that violence in their natal homes and on the streets have presented and as having negotiated life at a very young age to deal with hunger and poverty (Williams, 2010).

Working within the street economy, some homeless youth trade sex to gain small subsidies for survival. These studies connect a youth’s engagement in the sex market with histories of abuse, social networks, and mental health conditions.
Though seemingly obvious, it is important to note that the young men and women who make up this subgroup of homeless youth are not just baby-faced versions of homeless adults. Though forced to face the same harsh realities of homelessness that adults do, homeless youth are not developmentally advanced enough to navigate homelessness unscathed. As Hughes, Clark, Wood, Cakmak, Cox, MacInnis, Warren, Handrahan and Broom point out:

Adolescence is a time when youth need a strong support system and a feeling of helpfulness to face the complex and often troubling developmental tasks of creating a stable identity and becoming productive and autonomous adults. Yet, an increasing number of adolescents find themselves dealing with an unrealistic test of independence- that of homelessness” (2010).

The assumption remains that when adults experience homelessness, they have already benefitted from the safety nets in place to protect and nurture adolescents into successful adults. In contrast, homeless youth are thrust into the world of homelessness without equal ability to navigate the delicate balance between risks and consequences. In theory, homeless adults face the same amount of street violence and/or sexual exploitation as homeless youth, however youth are at a severe developmental disadvantage and therefore lack the skills necessary to survive street dangers successfully. In essence, homeless youth are left to the streets, forced to endure “an unrealistic test of independence,” without the tools or maturity level to handle such experiences.

Though several studies have looked at the survival methods employed by homeless youth, this study will add to the literature by focusing on the perceived level of “fraud, force, and coercion” involved in the “choice” to engage in sex work. In addition, because homeless teenage mothers are also
responsible for protecting and providing for dependent children, their need for financial stability is seemingly more imminent. However, homeless youth literature rarely focuses on this particular population. The limited scholarship suggests that homeless teen mothers are more susceptible to sex trafficking then other homeless populations.

Section Three: Homeless Teenage Mothers: The ignored population

Though there is a significant amount of research focused on homeless youth, minimal academic work is dedicated to the homeless teenage mothers that constitute a considerable proportion of the homeless youth population (Meadows-Oliver, 2009; Meadows-Oliver, Sadler, Swartz, & Ryan-Krause, 2007; Scappaticci & Blay, 2008). For example, a 2003 study conducted by the Institute for Children and Poverty reported that teenage mothers make up fifty percent homeless families in New York. Homeless teen mothers are comparable to homeless youth in areas such as, poverty, substance abuse, and mental health problems, lack of economic opportunity and affordable housing (Rollins, Saris, & Johnston-Robledo, 2001; Scappaticci & Blay, 2008). However, qualitative research conducted by Rollins, Saris and Johnston-Robledo suggests that homeless women are additionally challenged because of factors such as, single motherhood and gender discrimination (2001). Kennedy, Agbenyiga, Kasiborski, and Gladden propose that multiple conditions, like the ones listed above, attribute to a “chain of risks” which eventually lead young mothers into vulnerable housing situations and/or homelessness. In their qualitative study of fourteen homeless teen mothers, Kennedy et al. argued that:
Each of these negative experiences or circumstances confers heightened risk for poor outcomes... Though the details varied somewhat from participant to participant, each of their lives was characterized by a series of interconnected risks such co-occurring victimization, chronic poverty, and loss that compounded over time. Taken together, these cumulative adverse conditions and events are almost impossibly challenging, particularly for a still-maturing adolescent with parenting responsibilities... (2010).

Teenage mothers are not only challenged by the daunting “chain of risks” impacting all young people’s susceptibility to homelessness, but are additionally expected to overcome these obstacles while protecting and providing for dependent children. Furthermore, unlike housed teenage mothers, homeless teen mothers must simultaneously survive homelessness and raise children without any kin support. According to a study by Thompson, Bender, Lewis, and Watkins, homeless teen mothers experience longer instances of family strife than non-pregnant, runaway youth (2008). Additionally, in a study exploring the views teenage mothers have on housing, participants indicated that housing needs were caused by either a breakdown in or absence of family supports and networks (Cooke & Owen, 2007). Thus, unlike housed teenage mothers or homeless youth without children, homeless teenage mothers must survive within a difficult maze of conflicting identities and responsibilities. They experience homelessness as both a child without any emotional and/or financial support from caregiver and also as an adult/parent without the ability to adequately care for their children. Similar to all homeless youth, in the absence of familial care and economic opportunity, homeless teenage mothers often turn to the street for financial and emotional support. According to a study conducted by Scappaticci and Blay, homeless teen mothers typically leave unstable family environments and
unsupportive feelings about their pregnancy in search of “a magical place where anything could happen” (2008)- otherwise known as the street. Drawing from their study’s findings, Scappaticci and Blay argue:

Given the difficult family conditions presented here, living on the streets is something that takes on a character of solution and relief against an unsustainable situation. The streets being a sense of self-protection, a survival strategy in the light of the neglect and abuse caused by unstable family context…

Within the street economy however, the choices available for emotional and financial supports are marked with violence and/or criminal activity. In general, homeless youth are forced to weigh black market risks against financial benefits, however, for homeless teen mothers, the ability to choose rationally is hindered by the overwhelming responsibility of motherhood. As a result of trying to parent within the high-stake world of homelessness, homeless teen mothers often suffer from mental and emotional exhaustion. As evidenced by Meadows-Oliver’s 2009 study involving homeless teenage mothers living at a shelter:

These were tough and troubled times for adolescent mothers… They felt encumbered with parental responsibility while living under adverse conditions. It did not take long for these adolescent mothers to become fatigued and overwhelmed…Compounding the tough and troubling times of living in the shelter, these homeless adolescent mothers were overwhelmed with trying to balance multiple roles as well as caring for their children….

Though virtually no literature exists examining how street-dwelling homeless teenage mothers cope with multiple roles, it can only be assumed that mental health issues are exacerbated without the safety and stability of a shelter. In addition, according to a study conducted by Meadows-Oliver, Sadler, Swartz and
Ryan-Krause, homeless teenage mothers report having more negative experiences and higher rates of depression than teenage mothers who are able to maintain stable housing (2007).

Facing the immediate need to provide for their children, without stable shelter or familial support, homeless teenage mothers are left with minimal opportunity to successfully navigate the risks and benefits embedded in the street economy. The additional stress of caretaking leads to emotional breakdowns, which may significantly impact a young mother’s decision-making ability. As previously mentioned, young women are often directed to sex work as a means of surviving the streets, however, this last-resort option is assumingly, often expedited by a mother’s need to feed her young and hungry child.

A limited amount of research has been conducted regarding the survival methods enacted by homeless teenage mothers. In light of this gap, this study will expand the understanding of youth homelessness by exploring the connection between the survival choices available to homeless teen mothers and their susceptibility to sex trafficking. From the perspective of five homeless, teenage mothers I hope to provide a more in-depth understanding of how and why young women move from losing stable shelter to sexual exploitation. The interviews will portray a better picture of the reasons teenage mothers become homeless, the choices young mothers feel are available to young women, and the impact motherhood has on the “choice” to engage in sex work.

Section 4: Those that are “victims” and those that are “ho’s.”

Technically, sex trafficking is defined by The Trafficking Victims
Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA), as two situations, 1) recruitment, harboring, transporting, supplying or obtaining a person for labor or services through the use of force, fraud or coercion, for the purpose of involuntary servitude or slavery; or B. sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud or coercion, or in which the person is under 18 years of age (U.S. Department of State). According to this definition, *any minor*, engaging in sex work should be classified as a victim of sex trafficking. In addition, regardless of age, those who are forced, tricked and/or manipulated by a third party (a pimp or trafficker) are considered victims of sex trafficking.

In the United States however, the “sex trafficking victim” is framed within an international context- as an issue originating from some other country “over there.” Typically, the literature focuses on those who were brought into the United States through international routes. Though the individual countries tend to change over time, the general flow of trafficking remains the same: victims are recruited from the third world and deposited into the first. In addition, sex trafficking victims are almost always portrayed as young females, from poor countries, who are tricked and/or forced into relocating to a foreign country by a violent trafficker. Clearly, because of it’s hidden and illegal nature, a definitive number of sex trafficking victims is difficult to ascertain, but conservative estimates suggest that there are an average of 600,000-800,000 human trafficking victims in the world today, and eighty percent of those are women. Out of that eighty percent, seventy percent are trafficked into prostitution, which means there are approximately 392,000 sex trafficking
(female) victims worldwide (Hodge, 2008; Kara, 2009). Unfamiliar with the language, untrusting of authority figures (like the police), and unable to return home because of cultural views about prostitution, international victims remain “working” as U.S.-made-sex-slaves. This international focus however, can often obscure the fact that domestic sex trafficking operates with similar processes.

In almost all of the research on human trafficking, poverty is cited as the number one indicator of victim vulnerability. In contrast to the media’s popular portrayal of sex trafficking victims as white middle class girls, who are abducted from their safe homes and transported half way across the world, traffickers actually lure the majority of victims through simple promises of financial stability:

In story after story, a trafficker, often a known member of the community, a friend of the family, or sometimes a relative, offers a better life in America. He or she promises steady work …a good home…in short, all the things we as Americans assume as our birthright (Bales & Soodalter, 2009).

Scholars have also tied sex trafficking to globalization, young age, war/conflict, a history of abuse or violence, single parenting, unemployment, migration, gender inequalities, racial discrimination, poor education, social instability, government corruption, and etc. (Aronowitz, 2009; Bales, 1999; Bales, Trodd, & Williamson, 2009; Gajic-Veljanoski & Stewart, 2007; Kara, 2009). By explaining how women from “other” countries become susceptible to traffickers, these various influences contribute to the social construction of a foreign, “blameless” sex trafficking victim. Because international victims face a seemingly unique set of conditions, those in the first world/western countries regard them as “innocent.” Most sex
trafficking literature supports this idea of foreign innocence by highlighting the conditions that make it virtually impossible for international women to forego the economic opportunities traffickers present. Though clearly, these conditions influence the “choices” available to international victims, they are not as limited to the countries “over there” as the popular discourse might suggest.

There are poor women in the United States. There are young, American born, impoverished, single parenting, poorly educated, racially and sexually discriminated against, unemployed, sexually and physically abused women who are vulnerable to sex trafficking within American borders. Society just calls them “ho’s”. Despite the TVPA’s legal recognition that pimps “traffick” American born minors and frequently, adult American women, (Rand, 2010), society continues to construct the pimp-prostitute relationship as one of the prostitutes “choosing.” Prostitution literature typically centers on the female sexual agency debate and ignores the pimp’s initial recruitment tactics including force, fraud, and coercion. This is in contrast to the sex trafficking literature, which places the recruitment strategies of pimps front and center- against their will, “sex trafficking victims” are violently forced into prostitution, while American “prostitutes” choose to engage in sex work and therefore run the risk of male violence. As April Rand, author of “It Can’t Happen in My Backyard: The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Girls in the United States, states:

Calling children prostitutes conjures up stereotypes and misconceptions about who these children are and how they should be treated. Labeling a girl as a prostitute in the United States implies that she willingly sold her body for money and made a conscious choice to do so. Rather than being viewed as an innocent victim, she is frequently blamed for making the choice to engage in sex for
money. The reality is that most of these girls have not even reached the age of consent before being arrested for the crime of prostitution. Indeed, the victims are punished, not the perpetrators or pimps who coerce and force these girls to engage in commercial sex acts (2010).

In the United States, the average age of entry into prostitution is 12-14 years old. Like “traffickers,” pimps often steal prostitutes identification, strip them of any familial support, rape them as a form of initiation, order them to service a particular number of men per night, and keep them captive through various forms of physical, sexual and emotional abuse (Bales & Soodalter, 2009). Rather than being categorized as “prostitutes,” these young and manipulated girls should fall under the “victims” category, however, because the idea of “choice” is so embedded in the explanation of how local “prostitutes” come to be, society denies them the “innocent” labels afforded to their foreign-born counterparts. Clawson and Goldblatt-Grace suggest that society remains so hesitant to incorporate themes of innocence into their ideas of the American prostitute that they fail to recognize prostituted minors as victims:

Perhaps the greatest challenge was the lack of recognition of these minors as victims. It was reported that many law enforcement, child protective service workers, and shelter providers believed that these girls had “chosen” to become involved in prostitution and therefore should be held accountable for their “criminal” actions. The stigma associated with prostitution was evident across many of the respondents in this study, including the minors themselves…Viewing these minors as victims of domestic sex trafficking instead of “criminal” or “prostitutes” represents a huge paradigm shift that has occurred in statute but not in practice” (2007)

While the majority of sex trafficking literature focuses on the young girls from “over there,” who are trafficked into the United States, this study will bring attention to the fact that young girls from this country are equally at
risk for becoming victims of sex trafficking. By asking young, impoverished mothers about the choices girls have to survive homelessness, this study will examine the concept of “choice.” In contrast to the idea that “prostitutes” are willingly engaging in the sex market, this study will explore what “choices” exist for young homeless mothers and whether or not those choices are made freely.

Methods

Gaining Access and Ethical Considerations

I began working with homeless teenage mothers in September of 2009. Technically, I was hired to move the young women ahead in their school/work programs, maintain their benefits, assist them in their housing search and help them develop necessary independent living skills. While this was my expected job title, most of my hours were spent listening to their life story. As they struggled to survive without permanent housing and/or adequate support systems, the girls in our care depended heavily on us to sustain them emotionally.

By responding to this emotional vulnerability, I had unknowingly gained inside access to the everyday lives of a very marginalized population—despite the apparent differences in race, class and educational experience. Having naturally built trust as a case manager, I was provided with a unique academic opportunity to empower young, homeless mothers by giving voice to their experience. Marginalized on several counts, all of these young mothers were under the age of twenty-one, were deemed “homeless” by multiple state agencies, and, in one way or another, had all been stigmatized by society as deviants, primarily for their dependency on government assistance but additionally because
of their perceived sexual promiscuity. Initially their vulnerability to scholarly
exploitation (several agencies and researchers had randomly swept in and flew out
of their lives) and the obvious power dynamics associated with my position as a
case manager, led me to believe I could not ethically incorporate the girls into any
academic work I conducted. However, Corbin and Morse argue that when
qualitative studies are conducted with sensitivity, participants are transferred
power and agency- dictating what they believe to be an important part of the story
(2003). In addition, in contrast to most qualitative studies in which researchers
are present for only brief, momentary episodes, I had been working with some of
these clients for over a year- shared in their daily successes, laughed with them,
played with their babies, and held them when they cried. In this way, I
understood their stories on a deeper level then most researchers could, and with
this intimate lens, I hoped to tell their stories with richer meaning and purpose.

It was difficult however, to streamline the ethical dilemmas
apparent in my dual role as sociologist and case manager. To ensure I could
conduct this study without exploiting the trust I had naturally earned, I established
a clinical sounding board, consisting of the shelter’s assistant director and director
and had my study approved through the Institutional Review Board.

Though I had developed a strong connection to subset of clients, I
felt conflicted about what their sense of obligation to me. I didn’t want them to
feel as though they owed me an interview, and adjusted my original list to
accommodate this worry. I reorganized my initial list from those with whom I
was closest with, to those who I had worked with in chronological order. My
hope in creating this new list was that the girls who had left my care a long time ago would feel more comfortable accepting or rejecting my recruitment pitch than those who had just left me. If I started with the former group, I could possibly attain my five participants without calling on the latter group of girls- whom I imagined I still held some subtle power over.

I began recruitment calls through the very comfortable channels I had built throughout my sixteen-month tenure at the shelter. I included information regarding the purpose of this study, and was careful to include the words “sex trafficking” so the girls would be aware of the study’s focus on sexual exploitation. I also informed them of the proposed role they would play and how their experience with homelessness would be a focus of the study. To avoid overly-complicating their schedule I offered to meet them at a location of their choice, and provided a compensation of 25.00 for their time. Additionally, I stressed the fact that they were in no way obligated to participate in this study, and to ensure that I respected any hesitancy to participate, I only attempted to contact a girl twice.

Sample

From this initial list, I was able to confirm interviews with five young mothers who were homeless for a period of at least two weeks. Participants identified themselves as (1 and 2) Hispanic (3) African American (4) Haitian American and (5) White. Four of the girls were mothers to only one child, and the final mother was a mother of two. The age at which participants had their first child ranged from 13 to 19 years old and the women’s current ages
ranged from 19-20 years old. However, at the time of their placement in the shelter, participant ages ranged from 17-19 years old. Participant’s educational experience ranged from having less than a high school education to completing two years of college. The time spent in the shelter ranged from a couple months to almost two years.

*Interview Approach*

Four out of five times, participants chose their homes as the interview site. Only one of the participants decided to conduct the interview outside of her primary residence (which may have something to do with the fact that she is the only participant who continues to live in a homeless shelter), however, she interviewed in another participants home- who was a close friend, thus I was reasonably assured she would feel comfortable and safe while participating in this study.

Once arriving, I tried to engage in a short amount of casual conversation to help the girls feel comfortable with my presence. My intent was for them to talk as long they deemed necessary, essentially, I waited for them to initiate the interview’s start. In homes where no other people were present, participants chose the interview settings. If there were other people home at the time of the interview, I asked that we move into a more isolated part of the house, like a bedroom, to maintain confidentiality. Participant’s children ranged in age from three weeks to four years old and remained in the room if the mothers had no one to care for them, or just felt more comfortable with the knowledge that their children were close by.
Before I started the interview, each woman was read the confidentiality waiver, which included information about her participation, compensation, potential risks, potential benefits and etc. The women were not asked to sign this document. However, I did sign the release indicating that the participant was given a copy of the waiver and that they had verbally agreed to continue the interview. This release also included a list of local resources, so the girls would be aware of how to access help should the study produce any unintended side effects. I also included the name and contact information for my research advisor and informed the girls that either of us could be reached if they had any questions about the study. At this point, I turned on the digital voice recorder and recited a short blurb that reviewed the basic components of the study, with one final statement that let them know any criminal activity would remain confidential unless they were planning to hurt themselves or others.

By using a semi structured, open-ended technique I was able explore the areas that my participants felt were significant or held particular value to them. I began interviews one and two by following the interview guide strictly, occasionally probing participants about any responses that seemed particularly important. However, during interviews one and two, I found myself unable to follow this original design. It became obvious that although the interview guide focused on questions surrounding housing vulnerability, for participants, this was not an important part of the sex trafficking story. Following the ideas of exploratory research, I decided to probe participants in a way that supported their
ideas about how young girls become involved in risky situations—regardless of whether or not their focus was on housing.

Language around trafficking also became an issue. Though, I began this project by assuming the girls would fundamentally understand what I meant by sex trafficking, it became clear that their definition of trafficking could be substituted for the more common definition of prostitution. Again, though this time a little more disheartened, I resolved to let go of the conventional framing of sex trafficking in an effort to focus on their experience/knowledge of prostitution. Instead, I searched for new ways to probe their understanding of the possible difference between “choice” and forced forms of prostitution. As the girls were extremely knowledgeable about prostitution, I continued this project in line with their experiences.

By altering a few of the original objectives, interviews 3-5 flowed much easier and I was able to draw out richer data. Interview length ranged from approximately 45min-and an hour and a half. Participants were granted the twenty-five dollars compensation at the end of the interview and I typically remained in the house to “visit” for a few more minutes before leaving. Interviews took place over roughly a three-week time period, from January 09, 2011 to January 27, 2011.

Analysis and Coding

During the analysis stage, I used a grounded theory, inductive approach to coding. The main codes that emerged from this initial process were: severing of familial ties, “choices,” education, welfare, sex work, a
mother/mother figure as the number one emotional support, abusive relationships as a form of replaced care, and male dominance/female submissiveness. I also coded for demographic information, such as the age at which their first child was born, and added less numerous but meaningful codes (such as references to sexual or domestic abuse) to the master code list. However, since I was also interested specifically in the relationship between homelessness and sex trafficking, as well as whether shelters played a role in preventing sexual exploitation, I also analyzed the data for specific mentions of homelessness, housing instability, pimping, shelters, and cases of forced prostitution.

**Findings**

I began this work with the intention of showing how homelessness is connected to sex trafficking. However, as a result of the girl’s limited understanding of the term “sex trafficking” this study became, organically, more about the experiences of young girls involved in “risky situations” – identified by participants as stripping, prostitution and or remaining in abusive relationships. In addition, I had originally understood homelessness to mean the point at which physical shelter became unstable and suggested that without the protection of structural supports, young girls would be more vulnerable to traffickers and/or pimps.

By far, the most intriguing finding in this study was the way in which homeless mothers transformed the meaning of “homelessness” from a
loss-of-physical-shelter definition to the severing of familial support. In addition, loss of familial support was also referred to as the catalyst for most young girls involvement in “risky situations.”

Furthermore, as a result of the gendered way homelessness is experienced, opportunities for economic gain are minimal for young, homeless girls. Through various forms of violence and control, men are able to monopolize the market on drug sales, leaving emotionally compromised girls with the impression that selling one’s body is the primary, if not only, way to survive homelessness.

When my analysis turned to understanding the role of structural supports, such as welfare and stable housing programs, what I found also differed from expectations. These structural supports are typically framed as mechanisms for upward mobility and a means to self-sufficiency. To the contrary, the participants reported that welfare assistance often hinders financial success and that homeless shelters are primarily important because they replace familial support and foster independence—not because they provide economic stability or access to resources. Lastly, for these young, homeless mothers, educational programs appear to be the most important intervention available to young girls at risk for sex trafficking—both a means to escape and avoid “risky situations.”

Using the major findings above, I will summarize the findings in four sections, providing a picture of how housing vulnerability affects sexual exploitation and how this connection could be targeted through specific interventions. The findings section begins with an analysis of participant’s
insistence on redefining homelessness as the loss of familial support and then moves to how the impact of this loss affects the survival choices available to homeless youth. I then profile the male-dominated street economy and the female-dominated responsibility of motherhood as it relates to survival choices, and finally I will summarize participants’ views on proposed interventions.

1. **Redefining Homelessness**

“I’ve never felt like I was going to be homeless till I… I still didn’t feel homeless when I left. Like, I had nowhere to stay, cause I was having another baby, but I didn’t feel homeless. Like she would always support me.”

- Emma, 20 yrs. old

From this participant’s viewpoint, homelessness is not defined by the inability to secure stable housing but rather, by the severing of familial support. Families, more specifically mothers, are representative of a day-to-day sense of safety that cannot be disrupted by tumultuous housing. If working from the traditional definition of homelessness, the majority of respondents should have been deemed “homeless” long before they were willing to self-identify as such. For them, homelessness instead marked the point at which their families were no longer willing or capable of providing emotional support. Essentially, participants redefined homelessness to mean a period of transition- from the child to the adult, from part-of-the-family to head-of-the-family, from together to alone.

As indicated by Emma’s statement above, the causal link between having “nowhere to stay” and “homelessness” is overlooked. In fact, Emma is referring the two years she survived without stable housing prior to entering a homeless shelter- at this point in her story Emma’s feels cared for by her mother.
In fact, Emma cannot label herself as homeless until she reflects on a period of mother daughter tension:

…at the end of everything I had nowhere to go. I was having another baby and I didn’t want to be living at my mom’s house- our relationship wasn’t working out, we was constantly arguing, I was constantly leaving the house. Um, my baby’s daddy’s mom kicked me out her house, even though I could have went back if I would have fought my way in there but it’s just like “Why?” At the end of the day what if she does kick me out when I have my two kids, where am I going to go? Like, I’m not allowed to live at my moms house no more.”

Another participant, Olivia 19, reported:

… when I found out I was pregnant and my aunt said I could no longer stay here … I didn’t have anywhere to go- my sister couldn’t do anything for me, my other sister couldn’t do anything for me, my mom couldn’t even do anything for me because she was living in a one bedroom with her boyfriend and it was bad enough, she was tryin to make things, you know, work for herself, cause she has to pay for her car you know and… you know? And um it was basically when I found out I was pregnant and I had no where to go... That’s when I felt like that.

Though I know that for a period of four-six months prior to entering a homeless shelter Olivia stored all of her belongings in her car and consistently moved to and from various family members homes, this is not the homeless story she tells. At that point in her story, Olivia’s family worked as a single entity- all sharing the responsibility of her care. Operating as a stabilizing mechanism- Olivia’s family kept her from feeling “homeless” long after the old definitions of homelessness were present. As evidenced by the quote above, the beginning of Olivia’s homeless story is the point at which her family is no longer willing or able to care for her.

When Sofia, 19, was asked to identify the first time she lived
without stable housing, she responded, “Um…Unstable? Like…I would say when I moved to JASH [the homeless shelter] cause even though my mother moved around a lot, I don’t think it was unstable.” Prior to this question, Sofia had admitted to moving every year for a seemingly large portion of her childhood, however, because Sofia’s mother was able to keep the family unit together, it was not recognized by Sofia as a period of instability. In fact, despite multiple moves, Olivia did not pursue independent, permanent housing until her feeling of safety was destroyed by an instance of familial abuse. Again, Sofia’s understanding of homelessness did not begin with poor financial conditions but rather, with the deterioration of her family unit.

Ava moved into and out of around fifty housing placements, before the time she was twenty. If we continue to use traditional definitions of homelessness, Ava has been “homeless” for the brunt of her entire life. However, as she reflects on surviving multiple moves, her sense of worry piques when describing the point at which her surrogate mother cut off support, “And I was just like, ‘I legit, have no where to go.’ Because Tricia [surrogate mother] said she wouldn’t take us back in and so then, I was like “What the hell am I going to do?” To Ava, regardless of how many times she was technically “homeless,” Tricia’s support served as a barrier to what she understood “homelessness” to mean. Again, as Ava’s story indicates, regardless of the technical housing conditions experienced by young girls, the severing of familial care, not the loss of physical-shelter and/or financial security is what defines their understanding of “homelessness.”
Stemming from this redefinition of homelessness, it is clear that young girls feel less vulnerable when their families are consistently willing and capable of providing emotional support. To this group of participants, family and more specifically mothers, serve as a shield that guards them against the realities of being alone- in their world, “homeless.”

2. **Diminished Choice: From Mommies to Men**

Although the intention of this study was to highlight the connection between sex trafficking and housing vulnerability, participants did not immediately link pimping and prostitution to homelessness. Most participants argued instead, that young girls enter into risky situations (identified by participants as primarily stripping, prostitution and/or remaining in abusive relationships) because familial support is no longer present. Participants explained that the loss of familial support attaches itself to a sense of diminished choice. In much the same way as familial support barred feelings of homelessness, it also acts as a mechanism for removing “risky situations” from the list of available options. Once disconnected from the family unit, however, young girls are seemingly stripped from their “safe” choices and as a result, risky alternatives appear to be the only options left. As Emma explains:

> Some people don’t have a choice, they really don’t have no one to support them, some people they only have their mom and their mom is just not bein there for them so they’ll go and do what they need to do…And it’s pretty hard for everybody. I met a couple people…they don’t have no support, so they go to like whatever they can do…be with a guy that’s always beatin the crap out of them (Emma then pauses for a long time)...cause none of her family cares so…
In one-way or another, many of the participants indicated that girls “do what they need to do” and “go do whatever they can do” in the absence of familial support. Again, in contrast to what we assume the important factors influencing a young girl’s vulnerability to sexual exploitation and/or physical abuse to be- participants propose that familial support plays a larger role in the fall from grace.

For example, note that, as Emma reveals her friend’s transition into stripping, she all but ignores the role played by structural supports like housing, and overemphasizes the mother’s decision to terminate care:

“Well I know a situation of a girl who, she doesn’t have any type of um…like housing, and she has a studio, her and her baby daddy and she works at a strip club. Like she went to her mom for help- her mom wouldn’t help her, her mom’s real, like her mom doesn’t care. She thinks like cause she had a baby at so young, that’s her problem, wouldn’t at least help.”

When I asked Sofia what it would take for her to go from becoming a lawyer to getting mixed up with a pimp she responded, “Um, a lot. I don’t know, I would have to be like, living on the street with no way to even consider going to school and no family, no support at all, I think I could live with being broke but I guess it’s the support, like that a pimp would give- a pimp is some type of support even if its negative support…” Sofia suggests that pimps replace the role of familial support by emotionally sustaining young girls.

Though Sofia is aware that financial concerns (“living on the street” and “being broke”), and structural conditions (“no way to even consider going to school”) play a role in her hypothetical demise, neither variable appears to outweigh the impact of familial support. From Sofia’s point of view, her own susceptibility to pimps and/or prostitution is based on having “no family, no support at all”- she
can “choose” to stay away from prostitution while “being broke” but then reconsiders the option when she contemplates life without emotional support. For young girls battling homelessness, pimps are, in effect, a much more realistic way to replace emotional support than say, finding access to a therapist or accessing mentoring programs. Though instinctually Sofia knows that finding support in the arms of a pimp would be “negative” attention, she continues to draw on this idea of replaced emotional care- later on associating pimps with the idea of a “security blanket.” In another example, Sofia shows us how tied pimps are, symbolically, to mothers. Logically, she knows that she is not supposed to like pimps and tells me “…they’re just as bad as drug dealers, they just make the community worse off than it already is.” However, unconscientiously, Sofia can’t help but explain the benefits of a pimp through a maternal lens, “…their housing you, their clothing you and their feeding you, their essentially paying for your lifestyle so I don’t think no one would turn it down…” It appears then, that young girls become involved in risky situations as they search to fulfill the emotional support lost by the severing of familial care.

Interestingly, the continuum of support appears to shift most often from mothers to men. Participants were able to recall a plethora of stories, both their own and others, that include a young girl’s transfer from mother to boyfriend and/or pimp. When discussing homelessness, the process of transferring care appeared to cross through several points of prevention- extended family members and friends were used on the way to a final dependency on external institutional supports. However, in terms of sexual exploitation and/or partner abuse,
participants suggested that the transfer of care from family to, in this case, an abusive or exploitative male, occurs without many protective stopping points. As Olivia states:

“I went to go visit her and she was going out with this guy that was abusing her... [then you] start going out with a guy that’s beatin your ass again...What’ wrong with you?...Like okay, you don’t have anybody helping you, you know, she’s not like me...her mother is a heroin addict and her dad doesn’t give a fuck about her so she really doesn’t have anybody to support her- but you have friends!...But, you want to settle for less and let this boy run your life...”

Sofia tells us that a friend of hers “…got pregnant and her aunt kicked her out...her mother died in Trinidad, I think her father is in jail...now she doesn’t have a place to live, like whoever she’s sleepin with, that’s who she’s livin at and that’s how she gets her money too and now she’s stuck...” From this view, without familial supports in place, young girls seek to replace emotional voids by engaging in sexual relationships with men- homelessness appears to only expedite the process.

In the same way, Ava suggests that without an authority figure present, i.e. an effective parent, young girls without a stable place to stay are more likely to seek out mates who forcefully dominate them:

…you tend to seek like older people, like as your mate, and then that get’s them into trouble because like with me I was 14 and he was 18 and I was still a virgin and he wanted sex and I didn’t and it still happened because...you know, they’re stronger, they have more control and I think that’s part of the thing is that girls that grow up without a safe place need somebody to control them because they’ve never had control over their life so how are they going to have control over themselves? they want somebody else to I guess. But, I mean not in all situations, but that’s what I feel.

For Ava, having strong familial support represents order and
safety- leading young girls to feel as though they have agency and “control over their own life.” Without that structured support, Ava suggests young girls will seek out order in dangerous and unhealthy ways, such as finding an older mate who will dominate them sexually.

Again, in all these examples, the primary and most significant emphasis is placed on the effect of familial loss, not traditional understandings of homelessness. Though participants acknowledge the fact that housing instability complicates survival, the sexual exploitation story they want to tell is one of diminished choice through severed care.

3. Gender Issues: Pimping versus Parenting

“...guys have it easier, like an easier way of making money. “

-Isabella

Sofia: “I don’t know how true this is, but this guy...he works for the health center and he was telling us about how his friend used to be a pimp- like his name used to be Gorilla Black right, and one of his like, his main whore went to get some money and she never came back so he put out like a...um...reward out for her and they found her and he like beat her and kept her in a closet and fed her bread and water. When she was finally ready to be good...he let her out...then she stabbed him in the eye...she stabbed him and killed him. The knife went through and it got stuck in the mattress...”

Interviewer: I’m not really feeling bad for him...

Sofia: I’m not either...it could have happened the opposite way, after He found her she could have been the one dead.

In both indirect and direct ways gender issues surfaced several times throughout the course of this study. For instance, stereotypes of masculinity appeared to limit the survival choices available to young women while expanding
those open to young men. Participants indicated that in terms of access, street professions are dictated by the perceived ability to enact violence. In creating a physically dominating “thug” image and by doing so, dominating the drug market, men are able to survive homelessness as well as increase excess revenue. This monopoly leaves women to experience homelessness with one less, highly lucrative means for income and in doing so, thrusts them towards “risky situations.”

*The Male monopoly on the drug and sex trade- “Pimps Up, Ho’s Down”:* Most participants identified women as too “weak” to earn incomes through narcotics- a big money maker within the street economy. Without the ability to equally assert themselves into the drug trade, most participants felt as though stripping and prostitution were the only remaining options available for homeless females. When asked what choices there are for young girls surviving homelessness, nearly all of the participants responded with some version of “there’s really none…basically only prostituting yourself…” (Isabella).

However, as Isabella suggests, men are able to access alternative forms of making money and therefore, can stay away from prostitution and/or stripping “…guys have it easier, like an easier way of making money. I don’t know, like they can sell drugs, girls cant sell drugs because…people just find them [girls] like an easier target to like jump them for all their drugs or money…with guys its because they’re just guys…” Isabella recognizes that the homeless experience would be easier on girls should selling drugs become a viable option, however, her gender stereotypes perceive women as too weak to defend their product. In fact, Isabella
initiated this conversation by stating that female drug dealers would, “…probably end up getting killed or robbed or something.” Relying on the power they gain through violence, men are able to corner the market on drug sales and as a result, women are forced to survive homelessness with one less economic “choice” available to them.

In the same way that men dominate the drug trade, they also use violence as a way to maintain the gender divide within the sex trade. Though secondary to participants’ views on the loss of familial support, participants advocated that some girls are forced into prostitution by abusive boyfriends or neighborhood pimps. Essentially prostitution by pimp means something different than prostitution by “choice.” As Olivia argues:

…If you have somebody that’s bigger than you, someone that threatens you, someone that you’re scared of, it’s definitely a lot different that you by choice, by doing it- you want to, that’s by choice- you want to! But when you have somebody that’s like ‘if you don’t make such and such by a certain amount of time, you’re going to see what happens…’ and basically beats your ass, you’re scared! Basically, you have no control, it’s like, ‘okay I have no choice, I’m gonna have to do what I have to do.’

Though Sofia, who’s friend was a pimp, reflected more kindly on a pimp’s strategy for dominance, she also indicated that a pimp’s involvement changes a female’s ability to act independently within the sex market: “I think it does change, because with a pimp, then the decision’s no longer mine. It’s like this charismatic man is influencing me to do something that I’m not sure I want to do, whereas, if I’m by myself then there’s no one making the decision but me.”

Thematically, male violence and its association to sexual
exploitation emerged in other, less direct, ways as well such as partner abuse and sexual assault. Participants often included stories of violent boyfriends in their descriptions of a young girl’s fall into sexually exploitative situations. As Ava suggests, “…sometimes its even like a boyfriend that’s like forcing it, forcing them to do it because it’s like, quote on quote, “good money,” like they make good money but…the guy wants the money, you know what I mean, like not only does she have to pay the pimp thirty percent but she also has to give the rest to her boyfriend…” Sofia also connected the power a dominating and violent partner can have on a girl’s decision to begin prostituting, “…my friend with the three kids, right, well her most recent child’s father, he’s abusive, like he thought she lied to him one day and like pulled a gun out on her, like just ridiculous stuff and he has the control to, like I believe if he wanted to, whatever he told her to do she would do, cause she does it now, so I feel like if he tells her, ‘I need money so go sell your body because I need this…” then she would do it…

Furthermore, this male perpetrator/ female victim dichotomy emerged once again when participants discussed yet another layer of abuse, this time, sexual assault. From the participant point of view, some girls are able to engage in the sex market because they have been sexually assaulted and are able to distance themselves from the violence of sexual exploitation. As Olivia proposes, “A lot of people get raped and it makes them that way and they just don’t care about anything, they’re just like, ‘Whoop that happened to me and now I’m just going to whatever…” Sexual assault, also emerged in Emma’s interview
as an important part to this housing vulnerability/sex trafficking story. When I asked her what questions I should be asking young girls, she responded:

_I think the most important question is just how you feel about everything, like the situation you been through. Like some people are just not ready to face...anything. It all depends on how the person’s been brought up, since like they were a baby till now. A lot of people, like girls, been raped and they just don’t care about anything. Like something was taken from them and they just don’t care...”_

Interestingly, participants also drew a clear, gendered distinction between the reasons women and men engage in the risky situations of the street economy. Though men dominate drug sales and essentially push women to sexual exploitation, their monopoly on both markets does not necessarily derive from financial desperation. As Olivia proposes “..._girls have the choice to basically do anything for money, sellin ass, becoming a prostitute, and guys basically sell drugs...they would find some way to get money and start sellin drugs...and some of them, it’s not even because they need money or don’t have no where to go, some of it is just that “I’m cool...I sell weed” the wannabee, the “I’m a thug!”_” When I prompted Emma to explain why she thought young women get exploited while young men in similar situations don’t, she replied:

_It’s cause guys are money hungry. A lot of guys are money hungry. A lot of little thugs...a lot of people have a roof over their heads and even have a job, they even have no kids and they can support themselves cause, I have seen guys that have everything they want but they still want more money so they make that wrong choice like selling or stealing or whatever it is these days. They want to be a thug and they want to go around killin people or rapin girls just to make themselves feel better, make themselves feel like they really got it..._

From Olivia and Emma’s viewpoint, selling drugs and assaulting women appear to be nothing more than vehicles for increased street cred. Men who appear to be
financially stable and have “a roof over there head,” “a job,” who don’t have kids and “can support themselves” enact violence to dominate a lucrative profession for the grand purpose of becoming a “thug” and increasing surplus revenue.

Interestingly, though pimping was not directly accepted by participants, their gendered experience of physical violence coupled with the subtle indoctrination of gender-based stereotypes around sexuality formed a that’s-just-the-way-it-is hierarchy of street power. In discussing what choices young girls have, most respondents attributed stripping and prostitution to a matter-of-fact option of surviving homelessness. When prompted about her thoughts on why men don’t have to resort to selling their body, Sofia calmly stated, “I think men have this ego that needs to be stripped and them doing that [prostitution] would be unacceptable…and why do it if they could find a girl to do it?” Her response wasn’t cognizant of a satirical retort on gender inequality, but rather, a genuine response to apparently a very stupid question. In similar statements to Sofia’s, participants often indirectly supported gender inequality, unconsciously ignoring the level of female exploitation embedded in stripping and prostitution:

“ I mean it’s not a…I’m not…is it a bad business? …if she was using protection, it might not be a bad business!”

- Sofia

“ Most girls really do just think about selling their body, especially if you are pretty, there are a lot of guys out there that are willing to pay just to…you know.”

- Emma

The ability to be critical of a dominating system almost always relies on the privilege of being able to survive without it. It appears that, in
contrast to men’s introduction into selling drugs, women’s entry into prostitution
is typically tangled with financial necessity. Where as the participants often
explained that men didn’t have to sell drugs, and were just doing so to create a
particular image, prostitution was almost always seen as a source of necessary
income. In this way, young girls are not be able to reflect critically on gender
inequalities and sexual exploitation because, when no other options are available
to them, they depend heavily on that unjust system to survive. For example,
though Sofia instinctually knows that she is not supposed to support prostitution,
we see from her response below that because of it’s association to economic need,
she has trouble articulating why its wrong:

“She used to work at a strip club and every once in a while, when
she’s like down, she’ll you know, call a couple people and see if their
willing to pay for anything. I mean it doesn’t seem right, but she’s
broke.”

- Sofia

Interestingly, even when participants, like Emma, try to inform us that some girls
like sex work, subconsciously they still include information that suggests
economic need is at the root of all involvement:

“I met a girl who likes it, she makes a lot of money! She’s like, “This
is me, I don’t really care what people think about me-no one is
bringing food to my table!” It’s fine, if people want to do it, do it.
That’s your problem, that’s your body. Some people just strip, like
you know, they just be at the strip club- they wont let nobody ------
them but some people will. They look at it like the more money the
better.”

In another example, Sofia suggests that a friend of hers doesn’t mind stripping,
yet, and yet in the same breath accounts for that feeling by associating it to the
value and speed and which she derives income, “Yeah, I guess it wasn’t really a
strip club cause she got to keep on a bathing suit but um, she said she was okay with it because the money, it was good and it was like quick. She didn’t have to wait every week for a paycheck…” For this group of participants, economic need appears to hold greater significance for women involved in selling sex then it does for men in the decision to sell drugs. This may, in part, be due to yet another gender inequality- the overwhelming amount of women responsible for dependent children.

Parenting: “Have you ever been down to your last dollar and the baby needs milk?”(Emma) Parenting, and the role it plays in the choice to strip/prostitute, was the only category to widely divided participants. For some, dependent children operated as a catalyst for sexual exploitation. Without familial support, or perceivable alternative options, the pressure to provide for children often transformed stripping and/or prostitution into a legitimate survival choice. As Emma suggests, “…like a lot of girls would be like (mocking) ‘I would never sell my body, I’d rather drop dead!’ and then some girls would be like, ‘If it came to a point where I had to, I will…like for my kids…” Sofia tries to figure out how she feels about prostitution and in the process proposes, “I guess, if it takes care of your kids then who can complain…”

In contrast, some participants felt that children operated instead, as a protective barrier against sexual exploitation. For example, from the quote above we see that Emma clearly understands how some mothers come to prostitution, in fact, she seems to defend their decision since it is rooted in the need to economically provide for their children. However, later on in the
interview she reveals an argument that prostitution is not a good choice for mothers:

*I don’t feel like that’s good for people who have kids though, cause especially when you have a daughter. Would you want your daughter growin up and hearin that you was prostitutin? I wouldn’t. Then she’s goin think it’s okay for her to do it…I don’t think its good for people that got kids.*

Both Olivia and Ava adamantly opposed mothers becoming prostitutes and/or stripers- both citing the potentially harmful effect it could have on children. For example, in the excerpt below, it is clear that Olivia understands that poverty (“down to my last dollar”) and homelessness (“had no where to stay”) play a significant role in the decision to engage in sex work. However, neither of these variables appear valuable enough to sacrifice her daughter’s potential future. Though Olivia’s daughter is only three weeks old at the time of this interview, she has already provided Olivia with the motivation to never set a “low” enough standard for which her child to compare herself to:

Olivia: …*Cause a lot of times it aint even prostitutin- you can be a stripper too. Which is low too! That’s low girl! That’s low, that is not mmm-mmm, mmm-mmm (shaking her head no) I aint with all that! I don’t care if I’m down to my last dollar, and I had no where to stay, with my baby, I could never do something like that.*

Interviewer: So for you, living on the streets would come before selling your body?

Olivia: *Definitely, because I have another person to think about…god forbid if she didn’t have the support system the way I did and something like that happened to her, I don’t want her to think that it’s okay, “well, my mom did it…” …I don’t want her to think that, “Okay my mom did it, so…I guess it’s not that bad because she did it what she had to do…”*
Though Olivia is clearly worried about her daughter’s future, Ava suggests a more immediate danger as the basis for her argument against mothers working in the sex trade:

…it’s not, I don’t know, its not okay no matter what, whether you have to do it or not. I don’t think that any mother should be a stripper, I don’t think any mother should be a prostitute, you know what I’m saying, like no matter what you have to find something else…you have to think about your kids and if you’re doing that you’re putting your kid’s life in danger…People could stalk you, from a distance, and nobody knows and then they go to your house and they do stuff to you and then your kid sees something and then they hurt your kid…And then if you’re a prostitute, somebody could be a psycho and like, kill you or your kid, you never know, who you’re really dealing with…

Parenting adds to the gender story because it simultaneously appears to decrease and increase the perceivable options available for young mothers. While men can dissociate themselves from parenting, women are socially ingrained to take responsibility of their children. For some participants, the desperate need to provide for dependent children operates as a catalyst for sexual exploitation- for, there is little time by the watches of hungry children to find alternate solutions. However, for other participants, children represent instead, a saving grace- altogether, negating the option of stripping and/or prostitution.

Though participants had ample knowledge of other young women involved in “risky situations,” none of the participants had direct experience with sex work. However, this particular group of participants received financial assistance from several external sources, such as welfare, housing shelters, daycare vouchers, educational programs, food stamps, and healthcare. Examining
the perceived effectiveness of these interventions was the next step in understanding how young girl’s transition into sex trafficking.

4. Institutional Supports as Interventions

*I don’t even think that it’s the shelter, because you can live in the shelter and still sell your body. I think that there should be, there should be more than just the shelter. There should be people out there that are willing to help kids or encourage them that selling your body isn’t something that you have to do and um…basically…guiding them in the right direction. Like encouraging them to go to school. Because if you can sell your body you can do anything…*

- Olivia

Typically, participants centered their understanding of the institutional supports available to young, at-risk girls, in one of three ways: welfare assistance, homeless shelters, and school programs. Out of the three, participants often rejected welfare as a legitimate option, suggesting in fact, that welfare hinders success. Housing shelters were viewed with equal parts love and loathing- some participants credited shelters with providing the emotional care they desperately needed and/or the push to move forward on self-sufficiency goals. However, homeless shelters were seen simultaneously as stress inducing, freedom revoking institutions. School programs, however, strongly emerged not only as the best escape for young girls already involved in sex work but also as the best mechanism in place to prevent girls from entering the business at all.

*Welfare assistance as an Intervention in Homelessness:* When I asked participants about whether benefits, like welfare, helped them in their pursuit for independence, most argued that the stringent requirements set forth by welfare guidelines, as well as the dismal monetary value itself, hindered young
girls from being able to reach self sufficiency goals. In most cases, the primary goal was to attain independent, stable housing and welfare checks were not nearly sufficient enough to make a significant change in their homeless status, or in their dependency on living in a shelter. As Sofia explains, even after accepting welfare, young girls continue to struggle and have to find alternate ways of financially surviving. In Sofia’s case, her mother provided the necessary funds allowing Sofia to provide for her family, “…I wasn’t able to live on 491.00 a month, so anything else that I needed or I wanted…she got it for me. So, I guess she helped in that sense.” Olivia shared a similar experience, though in her case, the gap in welfare assistance and cost of living was decreased by a part time job:

…when I went into the shelter I was still working four or five days out of the week…I got cash benefits and it was still not enough cause I would still complain about how I don’t have gas in my car, I would have to pay car insurance, um I threw myself my own baby shower… so yeah, the money they were giving me was not enough. It was just another paycheck that I basically would have done in a week, not even…

From the participants point of view, four hundred and ninety-one dollars a month is not enough for young mothers to achieve financial independence. Even in terms of welfare at least working to maintain stability, welfare appears to act only as a complimentary source of income.

In addition, prior to entering the homeless shelter, participants were often already successfully supporting their family financially- with the exception of being able to afford market value rent. The majority of participants were either working, and/or had strong views against receiving “benefits,” like welfare, from the government. In order to secure stable housing, however, many
participants were forced to quit their jobs and accept welfare assistance. As Sofia explains, the choice eventually came down to finding a safe and stable place to raise her son, or being able to support her family independent of government assistance, “I don’t know, I didn’t feel like I had any choices, actually. I felt like I needed to be in a shelter but I didn’t want to be in a shelter. I had to quit my job, I had to make a lot of sacrifices to go into the shelter, but I felt like it was contradicting cause they want you to be in school, they want you to be working, but then they tell you to quit your job.” This cycle, where young girls have to prove they are “homeless” enough to deserve housing assistance, forced financially responsible girls to transform into state dependent statistics. Like Sofia, Isabella was forced to accept welfare in order to enter the homeless shelter, though for her, it was always only a temporary plan:

…like me, I’m not the type to want or need from anybody-like I never ask anybody for anything, so like collecting from the government, was like hard for me, like I didn’t think I would ever be on welfare- so like my plan was to just, like not use them, but basically, yeah use them until I can get on my own two feet…So that’s what I did. I just…and now I have a job, so I’m hoping they cut me off soon…so that I can just be on my own.

From the participant point of view, being “assisted” by welfare hindered their ability to independently survive homelessness. Though participants were clearly aware of the fact that they needed external supports in the form of housing subsidies and shelter programs, they believed that having to become welfare dependent in the process actually worked against their plans for moving beyond homelessness. As Ava argues:

Well…welfare itself I felt like hurts people, because I can’t work and be on welfare so therefore I can’t get daycare so therefore I can’t work
and then stuck on welfare and like at the shelter you can’t, you have to be on welfare in order to live there and its well, you’re screwing us because we can’t work to save money for our apartment...like you have to volunteer for twenty hours instead of working because you can’t work eight dollars an hour and twenty hours a week—you’ll make too much, you’ll get cut off, welfare itself I think screws people over.

Shelters as Interventions in Homelessness: According to participants, homeless shelters are important because they provide emotional support and push residents to achieve self-sufficiency goals. This finding, in contrast to what most would assume the structural benefits of a homeless shelter to be, ties back to the new definition of homelessness - the loss of familial support. It appears that shelters are significant, not because they greatly improved the financial conditions of young mothers, but because they offered a sense of security through emotional support. For example, when Isabella reflects on her time at a homeless shelter, she immediately states, “I feel like I had a lot of support there, like (long pause) emotionally…” In terms of participant’s ability to recognize shelters as a potential benefit or intervention, most cited having a “roof over their heads,” becoming a better parent and having someone to emotionally sustain them as reasons as to why the shelter was ultimately categorized as a “benefit”. Ava gushes over her time at the shelter, based primarily, on the emotional support she experienced while living at the shelter:

But, the shelter, like JASH, like I think it helped me so much! Because it...helped me to grow as a parent...and like staff...you guys, most of you are willing to listen to us no matter what the problem is, it could be about a guy and you guys could still sit there and listen, and it’s like a lot of us don’t have that outside of there so like I had a lot of support and I just felt once I left like my life crumbled because I didn’t have the support anymore, you know, like the full support, like live in support...
This perceived benefit however, only slightly outweighed the additional stress caused by entering a shelter program. Participant views were typically conflicted as a result of the program’s emphasis on behavior management, and/or their inability to connect residents to a permanent housing placement. For Olivia, the potential a shelter has to encourage young girls to move forward successfully is tainted with memories of the stress induced by program expectations:

…Ishelters are even going to encourage people like that. Like Just-a-Start House, even though I hated it, for the simple fact that I was under a lot of stress myself and I was going to school and I was working and then I had to deal with five mandatory groups…and a lot of things I wanted to say, I couldn’t cause there are rules and regulations you got to follow…I think that what you guys do there encourages kids to go to school and do the right thing for not only themselves but for their children, maybe if there were more Just-a-Start Houses…it probably wouldn’t help get everybody off the streets but I’m pretty sure…

The intersection between an increase in emotional support coupled with a decrease in personal freedom left a lot of participants with mixed feelings about the shelter’s impact on their ability to survive homelessness. Isabella recites a list of self-sufficiency goals she was able to achieve while living at a particular homeless shelter, but even as she recognizes it’s contribution to her current success, she can’t help but interject the fact that she also hated the experience,

“Like even though I didn’t really like JASH it still helped me in a way. I got my GED living at JASH, I enrolled in college living at JASH, I was learning how to be independent living at JASH…” Emma expressed having a similar experience, mixing stories of emotional support with complaints about amplified stress and the reduction in personal freedom:

…I don’t regret going to JASH. I liked it. I liked certain staff that
really sat there and tried to understand you... it made me more independent... sharing one room with two kids was even [more of a] stressor, cause I couldn’t help it, having curfew being 20. It was just ... UH! Anyone would hate it. It was a roof over my head. Sometimes I felt comfortable, sometimes I was dyin to leave... what made me stress more was the amount of time that I was there. It was just time...

In addition to the stress felt by participants while they lived at the shelter, responses like Emma’s above, show how temporary these young moms believed their homeless status to be. In several cases, participants would indicate that the shelter’s inability to connect them with stable and permanent housing was a source of disappointment. For example, as Emma concludes her reflection about shelter life, she states, “Towards housing? I didn’t like it... cause I feel like they were more towards parenting, there was always these parenting meetings, like there was never a housing meeting. Like, that’s what always made me dislike the shelter was, what about housing?”

Schools as an Intervention in Homelessness: For this group of participants, school served as both the way out of and the prevention to sexual exploitation. In traditional ways, participants discussed the “benefit” of schools as a chance for upward mobility and away from stripping and/or prostitution:

I would encourage them to stay in school... you have to think- what am I going to do to get by? Am I going to go to the lowest extreme or am I going to bust my ass to stay in school and do what I have to do and educate myself more and get a diploma and get all the things that I want cause I’m pretty sure every kid wants something for themselves and it isn’t going to be “I want to be a prostitute!”

-Olivia

Interestingly, participants also focused heavily on the school’s ability to provide stability and encouragement. Again, much like the shelter’s role, schools were
significant because they functioned as a surrogate family. This is an important finding since we know that a loss in familial support, leads young girls to feeling as though they have been stripped from all of their “safe” choices. As indicated by Ava, when a young girl’s home life is chaotic, school can replace that missing sense of order:

School has a really big part in it [going down the route of sexual exploitation] because if you don’t have school, you don’t have structure and you don’t have structure outside of school because of whatever situation is going on, so in school- there’s structure...So if you’re like the type of person who has a crazy life at home, or wherever you call home school is stable.

Schools therefore, have the potential to act as a stabilizing mechanism, and offer young girls a renewed sense of choice. It is important to note that participants were not blind to the fact that educational institutions positively effect financial outcomes, as Sofia acknowledges, “Yeah, I don’t think anyone could get, like now, could get very far without an education, some type of education and like, a high school diploma is not that sufficient anymore…” However, this didn’t appear to be as critical as the idea that schools, through stability, encouragement and hope, offered viable options against stripping and/or prostitution.

In terms of prevention, participants suggested talking to girls about the dangers of sex trafficking while they were still young- often represented by the period of time prior to motherhood. Sofia argues that schools should, “…make it part of like a high school’s curriculum…even before high school I don’t think I ever had a sex education class. If less girls get pregnant then...less girls will become homeless…I think because a lot of girls are homeless or kicked
out of their mom’s house because they are pregnant. If you avoid that then, that’s half the issue right there.” Through this response, it is once again made clear how important the loss of familial support and responsibility of motherhood variables are to a young sustainability to sexual exploitation. For Sofia, if schools provide knowledge around these issues, less girls will become pregnant, terminated from familial care and therefore, less girls will end up with no safe place to stay. When I followed up to Sofia’s response by asking her whether or not sex education classes should include information on pimps and prostitution, she replied, “I don’t know what people could tell them, but I guess if it was more open for discussion. I think no one talks about it at all, like they know what’s goin on but no one addresses it so…” Olivia expressed similar feelings when we talked about the impact of educating young girls about these issues might have on their ability to avoid stripping and/or prostitution:

Um…I think (long pause), I think it would probably be impossible, but I think that um, maybe in schools, like when the kids are young, they should have people that go through, maybe not sex trafficking, that’d probably be a little too extreme but maybe teen moms…somebody that would be willing to or like volunteer, like go in schools and like encourage kids to stay in school and not like go into sex trafficking and if something like this would ever happen what are their options, or what could they do. I mean it wont help the kids that are already in sex trafficking, clearly, but I mean, at least they’ll be kids out there that will be “Oh somebody came to my school one time and was like…”

To the participants in this study, financial assistance was not seen as a successful intervention to the risks that endanger young girls. Instead, participants argued that successful interventions targeted the emotional voids left by severed familial care.

Limitations:
I was able to speak with five young, homeless mothers and although these interviews produced a deeper understanding of homelessness and sexual exploitation, the small number of cases makes it difficult to generalize to the public. In addition, because of the limited scholarly work, much of the work used to frame the domestic sex trafficking of youth stems from research on those under eighteen years of age. When they entered the homeless shelter participants were all defined as “teens” by the government, however, they were all over the age of eighteen by the time of this study. I imagine that their life experience with homelessness and prostitution/stripping includes knowledge attained before the age of eighteen, and that they are not too far distanced from that age to strongly affect the findings of this paper. Future studies can focus on a more focused age range with an expanded sample size.

Interviews were conducted with young women who I had worked with previously and although in the end I believe that this relationship helped me better access and interpret their stories, I also feel that some of the women may have shied away from discussing their own involvement in sex work because of my continued ties to the housing shelter. My dual position as a researcher and as a case manager may have influenced this study, for better or for worse, and is a variable to consider when interpreting these results. Also, these young women had ample knowledge of “friends” who worked within the sex trade and their narratives were often made from second-hand knowledge. Another study that focused on homeless teenage mothers directly involved in sex work would add to a deeper understanding of this connection. Furthermore, though participants often
spoke about girls who were not mothers, their own status as mothers might have biased their responses and therefore this study’s findings.

Finally, language around “sex trafficking” made it difficult to access specific information regarding forced prostitution or sexual exploitation. Though the participants had ample knowledge of sex work, their description of it more often mirrored the general “choice” models of prostitution. Once prompted, the young girls in this study were able to clearly identify instances in which the people they knew, or their “friends” were forced into sexually exploitative situations, however, future studies should spend preliminary time educating participants on the field’s specific jargon in order to generalize the findings to larger human trafficking issues.

**Discussion and Implications**

Drawing from the life experiences of homeless teenage mothers as well as from their knowledge of sexual exploitation, this study expanded the understanding of human trafficking as a current domestic problem. According to the participants of this study, when no structural, financial or familial supports exist, young women are at a higher risk for both homelessness and sexual exploitation. Out of these three factors, participants identified the *loss of familial support* as the most significant influence on a young girl’s vulnerability to exploitation.

In line with other studies on homeless youth, this study supports framing homelessness within a family dynamics context. However, in
contrast to the Alvi, Scott and Stanyon, or Hyde studies, which indicated physical abuse and/or extreme familial strife as primary factors in youth homelessness, only one of the five participants in this study reported becoming homeless as result of abuse. More often, participants reported less severe forms of family dysfunction, such as tension due to an unplanned pregnancy, as the primary factor influencing their “homeless” status. While there are policies already in place to promote family stability, the majority of services focus on families where extreme instances of abuse and/or neglect are present. New policy aimed at supporting families through less extreme instances of conflict, such as times of financial need, unplanned pregnancies, changing family dynamics (such as a step-parent), and etc. could possibly decrease the amount of exposure young girls have to homelessness and sexual exploitation by helping to keep families in tact.

In addition, most social supports are targeted towards reducing homelessness through economic and structural means. However, homeless teenage mothers recognize the loss of familial support as the most important variable in homelessness. Those specializing in homeless youth should push to redefine the understanding of “homelessness” as a loss of emotional supports and their direct attention to new ways of complementing and replacing familial care where needed.

Lack of familial support also played an important role in a young girl’s fall into sexual exploitation. When familial supports are severed, young girls turn to dominating, older men as emotional substitutes—believing this is the only option available. This finding supports Scappaticci and Blay’s argument that
the street offers homeless youth a viable, though often dangerous, means of replacing the dysfunctional family. Although Scappaticci & Blay’s study tied emotional contexts to homeless youth, this study brings similar findings to the field of sex trafficking. Participants argued that girls become engaged in sexually exploitative situations, like stripping or prostitution, when pimps and/or dominating partners step into a motherly or familial role. In contrast with programs aimed at lifting young women out of sexually exploitative situations through structural and financial supports, I suggest building mentoring programs that connect at-risk girls to older women. By providing young women with a positive, non-abusive form of replaced care, alternatives to dominating and violent men could be established.

Additionally, participants pointed to severe forms of gender inequality as secondary influences in a young girl’s “choice” to engage in stripping and/or prostitution. Though a significant amount of work focused on the survival decisions of homeless youth, most scholars frame sex work as a survival “choice” without closely examining the role of manipulative and forceful pimps/traffickers. This study is unique in that it attempts to strengthen the understanding of how dominating male relationships effect a young girl’s decision to engage in stripping and/or prostitution. In the end, terminology around “sex trafficking” made it difficult for these young women to independently identify situations of forced sex work, yet almost all understood prostitution, pimping, and partner abuse as a legitimate part of the “choice” story. This very vivid understanding of male violence and it’s connection to sex work pushes the
homeless youth field beyond understanding sex work as a survival “choice” and calls for a deeper examination of how men and violence influence the choices available to young homeless women. The language and jargon barrier also implies that workshops done to help young women name and understand aspects of the sex trade can help prevent coercion. These sorts of workshops are just starting to emerge as organizations, such as My Life, My Choice (Boston, Massachusetts), work to teach young, at-risk girls the dangers of sexual exploitation, as well as the realities of sex trafficking and the difference between healthy and unhealthy sexual relationships. To replicate the power of these existing workshops, similar programs should be invested in as a way and protect young girls from naively falling victim to sex traffickers and pimps.

Within the street economy, participants suggested that men use violence as a way to ensure a monopoly on the drug trade, limiting the options available to young girls for economic opportunity. Additionally, participants argued that young girls, more so than young men, engage in the street economy out of financial necessity- girls prostitute to survive destitution, boys pimp to play “thug.” Though finding effective ways to fight gender violence and inequality is a difficult task, I suggest primarily focusing on educating young men. Men are not only producers of the sex market, but are also the vast majority of consumers. By educating young men about the harms associated with prostitution, a reduction in demand may be possible. Sweden illustrates an effective example of this by working with those who purchase sex, called the “Johns.” “John” schools are offered as an alternative to criminal prosecution and operate much like driving
schools in the United States. If arrested for soliciting sex, men can sometimes avoid criminal prosecution by attending classes that focus on the realities of forced prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases, the extensive abuse histories of the young girls they buy, and etc. These classes have been credited with the reduction of sex trafficking victims enslaved within Swedish borders.

However, regardless of education, without offering legitimate ways to earn income, the street economy will always draw homeless youth into risky situations. Organizations serving homeless youth should form connections with local stakeholders to provide internships to at-risk youth. Though housing shelters can provide stability, homeless youth often trade sex in exchange for the basic necessities that shelters can’t provide. Internships would provide homeless youth with an opportunity to gain marketable experience while also providing them with small sums of money to purchase food, clothing and etc. Without much additional cost to the community (since internships with small stipends would not demand the pay or benefits that full time employees do) this intervention could also benefit the community by reducing the number of youth dependent on the black market for financial security- thus, reducing the amount of illegal activity, like selling drugs or mugging, occurring within the community.

Furthermore, though significant attention has been paid to the fact that teenage mothers make up a large percentage of poor women in America, there is virtually no academic work tying the choices available to poor teenage mothers to domestic human trafficking. This study suggests that, in terms of a mother’s vulnerability to sexual exploitation and human trafficking, children
served as both the reason for engaging in stripping and/or prostitution, as well as the primary reason for avoiding it. Though the human trafficking field often cites the financial demands of adult motherhood as a reason for entering “risky” situations, there is little academic work focused on how children may serve as a barrier to sex trafficking. This study is unique because it suggests children can also operate as a mechanism for preventing mothers from engaging in sexually exploitative work. However, to better understand how this finding could be used as an effective intervention, additional studies should explore how children specifically affect the risks young homeless mothers take.

Lastly, this study discovered that homeless teenage mothers have conflicting feelings about the services in place to help them attain self-sufficiency. For example, participants proposed that welfare assistance hinders young mothers efforts to move forward by setting unrealistic requirements on a very small sum of money. It is important to note that most participants had been working and were not welfare-dependent prior to entering a homeless shelter. Young homeless mothers clearly need assistance finding affordable housing, and should have homeless shelters available in times of need. However, forcing working moms to prove they are “homeless enough” by quitting jobs seems counterproductive to financial progress. Lifting the stringent requirements placed on welfare assistance and housing programs would encourage young women to gain and/or continue employment, thus, expediting their path to self-sufficiency and reducing their risk factors to sex trafficking.

In addition, housing shelters are seen as important interventions
primarily because they replace the emotional supports once provided by families. This is important since most housing programs focus on the structural conditions leading a young mother to homelessness and the tools necessary for upward mobility. Again, if the term “homelessness” was redefined as the loss of familial supports, housing interventions, like shelters, could refocus their attention to therapeutic services that assisted young girls in a healing process. By designing policies specifically around the idea of a “substitute” care network, shelters could possibly reduce the amount of risk taken by those without stable home environments.

Furthermore, this study found that educational programs are very important in the lives of young homeless women, because they offer believable alternatives to the street economy and can be used as a mechanism for transferring knowledge about pimps/prostitutes and sex trafficking. Although this is clearly a sensitive topic, schools should begin to build curriculum around sex trafficking that could be implemented in sex education classes. Schools could also serve as safe spaces to build mentoring programs for young, at-risk women and also educate young men about gender violence and inequality. In addition, schools should also collaborate with the human trafficking task forces in their community in order to learn how to identify victims of sex trafficking/forced prostitution as well as connect those victims with resources in the community.

Though the human trafficking field is just starting to emerge as a prevalent social problem, the predominately international focus draws attention away from the phenomenon’s impact domestically. This study is unique in that it
challenges the way human trafficking is understood- as a problem that originates 
within our borders. The everyday experiences that young homeless mothers have 
with pimps, prostitution, and gendered violence are highlighted in these 
participant’s stories, indicating that sex trafficking is not just an issue affecting 
poor women in third world countries. Rather than only focusing on the financial 
and structural conditions that combat widespread poverty, this study suggests 
finding new ways to emotionally support young women in their battle against 
homelessness and sexual exploitation. In the poorest countries of the world and in 
the poorest cities of the United States, sex traffickers are on the hunt. Young, 
homeless girls who are surviving without the protection of a family are their 
favorite prey.
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