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Not a Victim: Challenges of Providing Services to Sexually Exploited Youth

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Not a Victim: Challenges of Providing Services to Sexually Exploited Youth

by:

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the

School of Social Work

St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas

St. Paul, Minnesota

In Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

The number of youth that have been sexually exploited continues to rise. In order to better understand the barriers sexually exploited youth may encounter when trying to seek services, this study explores social workers' perspectives on why these barriers exist. Qualitative interviews were used to gather the experience of social workers who have worked with sexually exploited youth. Six themes consistent with research emerged; these themes are: characteristics of the girls, victim status, lack of awareness, support services, systemic responses and Minnesota responses. These themes show the various reasons youth may not seek services. Implications for clinical practice and future research are discussed.

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to give my purest gratitude and sincere appreciation to my children for their patience and support. You two were my inspiration throughout this long process. Secondly, to my parents and brothers, thank you for the continuous encouragement and support, I am forever grateful to all of you. To all my friends, that you for the continued encouragement throughout the years. Last but not least, to my committee, thank you for your dedication and support over the last nine months. Your insight, encouragement, and support kept me going and got me to the finish line. There are not enough words to express my sincerest appreciation to everyone who has supported me on this journey. To everyone, thank you, for helping shape the social worker I hope to be.

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Introduction

Human trafficking is a social problem that occurs in all parts of the world. Nearly twenty-one million men, women and children worldwide are victims of human trafficking. Approximately 4.5 million of these people are victims of some form of sex trafficking, generating an estimated 32 billion dollars a year both internationally and domestically (Elrod, 2015; Hom & Woods, 2013). In the United States alone, there is an estimated 50 thousand women and children trafficked into the country each year; also an estimated 100,000 to 300,000 American minors are at risk for commercial sexual exploitation making it the second largest trafficking destination (Hom & Woods, 2013). Human trafficking is defined by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 by the following: the 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 that person induced to perform sex acts is under 18 years of age" (www.state.gov).

An extension of human trafficking is sexual exploitation, more commonly known as "sex trafficking", which is sexual abuse through the exchange of sex or sexual acts for the purpose of basic needs such as food, shelter, protection or money (National Network to End Domestic Violence). Sexual exploitation of youth often happens during the childhood years. According to The Women's Foundation of Minnesota, the national average age of girls sex trafficked is between 12 and 14 and 50% of victims are classified as runaway youth (Women's Foundation of Minnesota). Prostitution is commonly related to sexual exploitation and shares a similar definition.

In Minnesota specifically, the FBI identified the Twin Cities as one of 13 U.S. cities with a high incidence rate of prostitution (Women's Foundation of Minnesota). Moreover, a November 2010 study done by the Schapiro Group reported that each month in Minnesota, at least 213 girls are sold for sex an average of five times throughout the day through internet and escort services; this number does not include hotel or street activity, which means this number is most likely substantially higher (Center for Health and Justice).

Online sexual exploitation of youth is also common. For example, a news article from the Pioneer Press reported that Minnesota arrested two men that responded to an online ad as part of a child sex sting. The undercover officers posed as children and placed online ads seeking sexual services from young girls; the men that responded to those ads were arrested for child-solicitation (Kather, 2015). A last fact that shows prevalence of trafficking in Minnesota is that in 2010, investigators from three states determined that Minneapolis was the home base of a large sex trafficking ring comprised of three generations of one Minnesota family that was trafficking mostly young girls across the United States (Women's Foundation of Minnesota). As confirmed by the above listed facts, trafficking is not only a problem in countries abroad, as many people assume, but there are reports of this type of abuse on a daily basis in the United States. These numbers do not include every person that has been sexually exploited as there is no formal way to keep track; however, studies show that the numbers continue to rise.

When thinking of sexual exploitation, many people often first think about the violence that is associated with it. While it is true that violence plays a significant role in these acts, there are also more times than not mental and emotional factors that last much longer than the physical nature of the abuse. Victims and survivors of sexual exploitation have increased mental health issues such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as an increased

chance of substance abuse as a result of being sexually exploited (Gerassi, 2015). In two multi-country studies that examined issues of depression and PTSD among sexually exploited victims, it was found that more than half of the 204 victims interviewed met the criteria for depression and 77% had symptoms of PTSD (Gerassi, 2015). The correlation between mental health issues and substance use issues is also significant among women and girls. One study showed that 75% of respondents indicated having used drugs, while 26% had used alcohol during and after the period of being trafficked (Gerassi, 2015). The severity of mental health and substance use issues can depend on the length and intensity, as well as the cyclical nature, of being exploited. From the statistics above, it is apparent that the issue of people being sexually exploited is one of grave concern for social workers and professionals of the like simply because of the increasing numbers, as well as the mental and chemical health issues that arise as a result.

Since the passing of the Victims Trafficking Act in 2000, federal, state, and community efforts in identifying and providing services for victims of human trafficking have improved; however, most research and resources for victims have been directed towards adults rather than children (Fong & Cardoso, 2010). While research shows that the number of sexually exploited children continues to grow, there are still few programs that focus on the uniqueness and special needs of this population (Fong & Cardoso, 2010).

Usually, the resources that are provided to sexually exploited youth come from youth shelters or safe homes which focus on rehabilitation and reintegration. While rehabilitation and reintegration are integral parts of providing treatment, areas of focus such as crisis intervention, safety planning, educational support, mental health services, medical, family support and employment services are also important; many of these programs often do not provide these services specific to sexually exploited youth (Fong & Cardoso, 2010 , Gibbs, Walters, Lutncik

Miller & Kluckman, 2015). These are some of the services that youth may need after being sexually exploited. However, for different reasons, these children may not have access to them; this paper seeks to explore that area further.

The literature that explores the services needed and barriers to these services are few. The focus of this study will be to gain in-depth perspectives of licensed social workers that have or are currently working with youth that have been sexually exploited. The research focused on factors that may have increased the likelihood of the youth being sexually exploited, as well as the barriers the youth may experience when trying to get services. The researcher interviewed social workers that identify themselves as working with youth that have reported being sexually exploited and have sought supportive services. The study was qualitative in nature and focused only on the perspectives of the professional. For the purpose of this study, youth were minors under the age of 18 years old.

Literature Review

The complexities surrounding sex work and sexually exploited youth are many. The review of the literature will begin with an exploration of the risk factors of youth being involved in sex work, as well as the challenges they face when trying to get out. Next the literature examining the reasons that a young person may get involved with sex work will be discussed, including the influence of family, sex work as a means for survival and the ways of recruitment. Finally, the lasting impacts, such as the violence, and the consequence to emotional, mental and physical health will be discussed.

Risk Factors

Many youth that are involved in sex-work come from abusive childhoods and disadvantaged backgrounds, which can predispose them to a greater likelihood of being sexually exploited than those without these conditions. Instability and multiple placement moves, such as foster care, are factors that are associated with the young people being sexually exploited (Coy, 2009). Other factors that contribute to the likelihood of being a victim of sexual exploitation include family breakdown, low self-esteem and poor educational achievement; young women who have these backgrounds are also significantly over-represented in many major cities (Coy, 2009). African-American girls are particularly more susceptible to a life in sex work. A news story reported by National Catholic Reporter in 2007 stated that women of color enter the life at an earlier age and stay in longer than white women, while one study showed that African American girls made up 40% of those in street prostitution, 55% of those are arrested and 85% go to jail; this same study showed that African American women that do go to jail spend almost twice as much time in custody than white women (National Catholic Reporter, 2007). Difficult situations at home may also be a risk for youth becoming sexually exploited. Often-times youth that run away from home because of difficult situations have a high risk of being sexually exploited; they are often targeted by adults that take advantage of their circumstances (Smeaton, 2013).

Recruitment

Much of the research on sex work focuses on the risk of working on the streets; little research discusses the recruitment process for street prostitution, which often happens among sexually exploited youth (Kennedy, Klein, Bristowe, Cooper & Yuille, 2007). Many of the recruitment techniques include the pretense of love, threats of being in debt to the pimp, drug addiction, manipulation and violence (Kennedy et al., 2007). These techniques often leave the

sexually exploited feeling like they have few alternatives to working on the street. The 2007

study done by Kennedy et al. described 16% of their forty-four respondents being emotionally

attached to their pimps. The respondents described being "turned out" by their pimp who

pretended to love them, which was especially true for the minor victims; the pimps were able to

play on the girl's vulnerabilities and insecurities, skewing their sense of right and wrong

(Kennedy et al., 2007). Buying gifts and paying attention to girls are other ways pimps use

seduction to lure girls; making sure the girls knew how much money he had spent on her makes

her feel responsible to "help" what she thinks is her boyfriend, and the money the pimp spends

on her ultimately becomes debt that she has to repay by working for him (Kennedy et al., 2007).

The recruitment process usually takes from three to six months; however, the respondents of this

study reported that in some cases it took as little as 24 hours, describing the pimps as being

charming, intelligent and good judges of human nature (Kennedy et al., 2007). Girls that find

themselves in this situation often feel too embarrassed or ashamed to call home for help; there is

also the chance that the pimp has threated the girl or her family with violence, which makes her

afraid to leave (Kennedy et al., 2007).

Role of Family

Childhood experiences are impacted by experiences that happen within the family and

often continue to shape people's behaviors, decisions and identities throughout their adult life

(Orchard, Farr, Macphail, Wender & Wilson, 2014). Involvement in systems such as foster care

and child welfare services, as well as the juvenile justice system, is not uncommon in victims of

sex trafficking. According to a study done by Gibbs et al. in 2015, an estimated 85% of girls

involved in sex trades come from homes involved in the child welfare system. It is also not

uncommon for there to be incidences of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, as well as child

neglect. Reports of parental alcohol and drug use and ineffective parenting styles have also been related to incidences of girls becoming homeless or getting involved in sex work (Gibbs et al., 2015). Additionally, young people are more at risk if they run away from home or reside in a child welfare placement like foster care (Gibbs et al., 2015).

In regards to abuse, it often persists over time (Murphy, 2010). The perpetrators often use threats or other means of manipulation tactics to keep children from telling others about the abuse. Unfortunately, the most common perpetrator of sexual abuse is a father or other male family figure; however, abuse by other figures such as teachers, child care workers, close family friends and neighbors is also common (Murphy, 2010).

While child sexual abuse is a well-studied area, the research is lacking in the area regarding sexual exploitation within the family. In a qualitative study done by Jody Raphael and Brenda Myers-Powell (2010), twenty-five ex pimps and madams describe their experiences of how their families were a critical part of them being involved in sexual exploitation. One respondent described how she was sexually abused as early as six years old by "whoever [her] mother wanted to sell [her] to" (Raphael & Myers-Powell, 2010, p.2). Another person described how she created her own family out of the people she exploited because she was attracted to the pimping lifestyle. A third respondent described how her mother was a prostitute that physically and sexually abused her (respondent), and also was her first pimp; she sold her to the landlord and other men who wanted a young girl. This same respondent also described how she thought being held captive by men was normal. A last respondent described how both of her older sisters and her mother sold their bodies in prostitution, and how that later informed her decision to exploit women because that's what her mother did to her. (Raphael & Myers-Powell, 2010).

Some of the males that participated in the study described how they admired the men in their neighborhoods that had lots of money, nice cars and nice clothes because of their pimping lifestyle and they wanted the same, these material things also came with respect from others. Of the total respondents, 60% said they had family members involved in prostitution and over half (53%) of those same respondents said that their mothers were prostituting and/or pimping (Raphael & Myers-Powell, 2010). While this study had a small sample size and few statistics to support research directly related to sexual exploitation within a family, it still adds to the body of research and the need of more research.

In another qualitative study done in 2011 by Karandikar, Gezinski and Meshelemiah (2011), 48 female prostitutes from Mumbai, India were interviewed in order to understand their experiences related to their entry into sex work. The role of the family and acquaintances were the focus of the research. The findings showed that four themes emerged related to poverty, marital abuse, history of childhood sexual abuse and the death of a parent or husband (Karandikar et al., 2011).   While these examples come from different parts of the world, it is important to note that there are similarities in how family dynamics can play a role with getting involved in sex work regardless of where it happens. Within the research that looks at family dynamics and involvement of sex work, there are few studies; however, the research that does address this issue focuses on locating sources of trauma that predicate sex work or in the casual relationship between traumatic early life events and child prostitution (Orchard et al., 2014).

Gender and Age

Researchers have consistently identified more girls and women being sexually exploited through sex work than boys and men. Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth make up 20% to 40% of

the homeless adolescent population and are more likely to be exploited. In addition, the rates for

transgender youth were found to be as high as 67% (Edinburgh, Pape-Blabolil, Harpin &

Saewyc, 2015). It is also common that entry into prostitution occurs before the age of 18; studies

have shown an estimated 100,000 to 300,000 American minors being at risk for sexual

exploitation, with the average age being between 11 and 14 years old (Nixon, Tutty, Gorkoff &

Ursel, 2002; Hom & Woods, 2013). In spite of their young age, minor sex trafficking victims

have typically been treated as adult prostitution offenders or juvenile delinquents, both of which

resulted in being involved in the criminal justice system (Mir, 2013).

Education and Social Skills

Inappropriate social skills is an additional risk factor for becoming involved in sexual

exploitation as well as a result of being sexually abused (Twill, Green & Traylor, 2010). Poor

social skills have also been linked to low self-esteem, peer rejection, social maladjustment and

mental health problems. As a result of these deficits, girls often turn to people, generally older

males, which would accept or exploit their behaviors and ultimately recruit the girls in sex work

(Twill et al., 2010).

Education level and poor school performance has also been linked to being involved in

sexual exploitation; however, there is not strong consensus on the strength of such link (Twill et

al., 2010). One study did show that approximately 24% to 27% of girls that were sexually abused

needed some form of special education, these girls also demonstrated poor judgement and a

lower intelligence level. (Twill et al., 2010). The correlation between lower academic

performance and being sexually abused increase the likelihood of a young girl being sexually

exploited.

Sex as a Means for Survival

When homeless girls are on the streets, there are few legitimate ways of supporting themselves. Many sex workers end up engaging in survival sex or are forced into sex work by pimps in order to survive on the streets (Walls & Bell, 2011). These authors also note that being on the street is associated with being offered money, drugs, shelter, or food in return for sexual favors. The estimates of prevalence of survival sex among the homeless population vary widely and is based on a number of factors; however, it is known that the behavior of survival sex is not uncommon and evidence supports the fact that most women do not engage in these behaviors before becoming homeless (Walls & Bell, 2011).

A study done by Cobbina and Oselin (2009) analyzed adolescent versus adult entry into prostitution. In comparing the different pathways into entry, they found that many young girls that have experienced childhood abuse find that the only way to escape the violence in their home is to run a way. In turn, these girls were found to rely on survival strategies such as street sex work in order to survive. Some women that were interviewed stated their entry into the life as an adolescent was a way for them to normalize their sexuality and regain control of their lives. A commonality among the women that entered as an adolescent (eighteen years or younger) was childhood victimization, including sexual molestation, rape, incest, and physical assault, which resulted in running away to flee these situations (Cobbina & Oselin, 2011).

Another theme they found was that women that entered before the age of eighteen thought prostitution was normal. Some of the respondents stated that prostitution was normal and even glamorized in the neighborhoods that they grew up in and as a result, they viewed prostitution as a viable option for income (Cobbina & Oselin, 2011). One respondent said that

her father was a pimp, so she was always around prostitutes as well as another way for her to be around her father. Another respondent described prostitution as a way of achieving status, a way to get nice clothes, and to make money (Cobbina & Oselin, 2011).

For older women, the survival strategy presents itself in a different way; entering into the life of prostitution is often connected to economic necessity (Cobbina & Oselin, 2011). The authors continue to state that women that have lower socioeconomic status (SES) often have fewer educational opportunities as well as employment opportunities making it challenging to avoid poverty (Cobbina & Oselin, 2011). In Cobbina and Oselin's 2011 study, some women that described their entrance into sex work said that it was to sustain a drug habit. In addition, over 65% of the women that entered over the age of eighteen said that they had been addicted to drugs or alcohol and that they came from a family or environment where drug use was prevalent (Cobbina & Oselin, 2011). Another 35% of the women described that sex was a necessary survival strategy in order to earn money and maintain housing.

While the pathways to entry differed among the two groups, it is evident that structural factors make prostitution a practical option for lower-class women; some women described their work as glamorous and others described their involvement primarily for income (Cobbina & Oselin, 2011). The findings of this research are important to consider as it speaks to the different pathways that lead to younger girls and women into prostitution.

Impacts of being involved

Violence.

Sex workers are typically at high risk for numerous types of violence including assault and rape as well as other types of physical violence including murder (Surratt, Inciardi, Kurtx &

Kiley, 2004). These forms of violence are perpetrated from people such as customers, pimps and

drug dealers. Surratt et al. (2004) suggests that the violence experienced by sex workers has been

contributed to a number of social problems like gender inequality and discrimination; however,

in most women's situation it is the attempt of the pimp trying to exercise control over the

woman. Coercion and exploitation of these women also increase the potential for mental and

physical health problems (Roe-sepowitz Hickle & Cimino, 2012). In a 2002 qualitative study

done by Nixon et al., the team interviewed 47 women that had been involved in prostitution,

their results showed that half the women reported violence or threats of violence from their

pimps and more than half the women experienced the same violence or threats from their

customers (Nixon et al., 2002). Many of these women reported not seeking medical services or

services from the police for fear of being hurt further; additionally fear of being judged or

harassed were reported as reasons for not seeking help (Nixon et al., 2002).

Emotional impact.

Although most news accounts of human trafficking focus on the violence endured by the

victims of human trafficking, the powerful effects of psychological coercion play a key role in

entrapment and continued enslavement (Logan, Walker & Hunt, 2009).Victims of sexual

exploitation often experience a wide range of negative emotions while performing sex acts that

include feelings of sadness, worthlessness, anger, anxiety and shame. Less common are

emotional feelings related to sex work described as excitement or desirable (Kramer, 2004). Data

from a 2004 survey that examined the emotional experiences of women that worked in escort

services as well as street sex work revealed that women feel more negatively about themselves

after entering sex work and would prefer to leave the lifestyle for a different job with similar pay

(Kramer, 2004). Some of the words the respondents of this survey used to describe their

emotional state while providing sex services are detached, fearful, painful and degraded. The results from this survey also found that 73% of the respondents (119) indicated that performing sex work involved pushing away their true emotions and 75% of the respondents indicated that performing sex work involved acting. This same survey found that 52% of the respondents indicated that sex work involved physical pain and 76% of respondents stated that sex work involved emotional pain (Kramer, 2004). In contrast, 19% of the respondents indicated that their involvement in sex work was physically pleasurable and 13% said that it was emotionally pleasurable (Kramer, 2004).

Another study found a strong relationship between prostitution and emotional distress when compared to a non-prostitute control group. Women in the prostitution group scored higher than the control group on measures of psychological distress including depression, anxiety and paranoid ideation (el-Bassell, et al., 1997). Other research has suggested that women involved in sex work use drugs to increase feelings of confidence, control and closeness to others and to decrease the feelings of guilt and sexual distress. (Kramer, 2004).

Physical and mental health consequences.

Victims of sexual exploitation often report high rates of health problems and infections. Sexually transmitted infections like syphilis, trichomoniasis, and chlamydia in addition to urinary tract infections and yeast infections are among the highly reported health issues (Macy & Johns, 2011). There is only a small amount of published research on the health consequences of any form of human trafficking as well as a small amount of the mental health consequences. Mental health consequences that are common include PTSD, depression and anxiety. Most

health related studies have focused on sexually transmitted infections among those have been sexually exploited, mainly HIV (Hossain, Zimmerman, Abs, Light & Watts, 2010).

Responses

Support and aftercare services.

Best practices suggest that aftercare services for victims of sexual exploitation must be provided in a trauma-sensitive way in which the professional understands complex trauma including symptoms and behaviors, possible outcomes, reasons for silence as well as victim's thoughts, beliefs and feelings (Johnson, 2012). The term aftercare refers to the services provided to survivors of human trafficking. Johnson 2012, suggests that these services need to be comprehensive and provided in a trauma-sensitive manner, stating those providing aftercare services should have a foundational understanding of the impact and possible symptoms of trauma (Johnson, 2012). If there is no foundation, Johnson further suggests, there is the possibility that the survivor will be re-traumatized or discontinue services. Aftercare services should first meet the basic human needs such as food, clothing and shelter. Other service needs may include legal, medical, physical safety and economic assistance. Comprehensive services also take into consideration of the individual's needs such as language skills, gender, age, housing situation as well as the type of trafficking situation. Another consideration should be that children who have been sexually exploited may have different needs that an adult that has been sexually exploited (Johnson, 2012). Emotional needs is another area in which survivors of sexual exploitation will need services. Many women feel a sense of betrayal, abuse, bodily threats and fears (Johnson, 2012). Assistance for the emotional aftermath and traumas as well as the feelings of shame and guilt related to their abuse will be important for their future planning.

Trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy has been suggested for survivors of sex-trafficking. This therapy is based on "learning and cognitive theories, strives to reduce negative and emotional and behavioral responses and correct unhealthy beliefs and attributions" (Johnson, 2012, p.383). The authors of this model, Judith Cohne, Anthony Mannarino, and Ester Deblinger state that "TF-CBT has proven to be effective in improving PTSD, depression, anxiety, externalizing behaviors, sexualized behaviors, feelings of shame and mistrust" (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, TF-CBT Fact Sheet, 2012). It should be noted that this model is suggested for youth up until the age of twenty-one.

A a systematic review done in 2011 by Rebecca Macy and Natalie Johns, found that survivors of sex trafficking needed a continuum of care to address the changing needs as they move from freedom to recovery and independence. The research also found a consensus that survivors have numerous needs that are addressed through comprehensive services and these needs change over time. An example of an immediate need that the research found was safe and secure shelter, this need may later turn into the need for long-term permanent housing as survivors try to rebuild their lives (Macy & Johns, 2011). Once the immediate needs are met, survivors need assistance with recovery from the trauma and stability in their lives which can include physical health, mental health, substance abuse problems, legal issues and safety (Macy & Johns, 2011).

Supportive relationships are also important for youth trying to leave sex work. Friends that are involved in sex work or other illegal activities and pimps may normalize the prostitution lifestyle, reinforce it with violence or emotionally manipulate women into staying (Roe-Sepowitz, et al., 2012). The stigma of having been involved in prostitution may also be a barrier

for women that want to have positive relationships with family and friends that may be able to provide support (Sepowitz, et al., 2012).

Systemic response.

More often than not, victims of sexual exploitation are penalized rather than the person(s) that have victimized them. In some states, victims are often charged with crimes due to the criminal laws that prohibit prostitution and solicitation (Dempsey, 2015). This situation is beginning to change in some states; however, there is still work to be done for the decriminalization of victims of sex trafficking. Two ways that specifically help young victims of sex trafficking are the Safe Harbor Laws and the No Wrong Door Act.

The Safe Harbor Laws are meant to protect children rather than prosecute them; treating youth as victims and survivors rather than criminals (Minnesota Department of Health). In 2011, Minnesota implemented the Safe Harbor Laws; this law added the definition of sexually exploited youth to the Minnesota's child protection codes, increased penalties against commercial sex abusers or purchasers and aimed to increase the statewide response for sexually exploited youth (Minnesota Department of Health). In 2014, the state excluded sexually exploited youth from the definition of a delinquent child and implemented the state service model called No Wrong Door, which makes resources available to sexually exploited youth such as regional navigators, housing and shelter, comprehensive services and training and protocol development. Regional navigators are the main points of contact for sexually exploited youth that are responsible for connecting youth with services, as of now, the state has eight. No Wrong Door aims ensure that agencies across Minnesota will have the knowledge, skills and resources to identify sexually exploited and at-risk youth (Minnesota Department of Health).

While these steps are in the right direction, they do not solve the issue of human trafficking and sexual exploitation for several reasons. The first being that only eighteen states to date have enacted the law, which means that there are thirty-two states that still do not protect sexually exploited women and children. Secondly, some Safe Harbor states do not regard all sexually exploited children under the age of eighteen as victims, some states have lower age requirements for a child to be considered protected under the law. Lastly, these laws do not protect adults, even though the majority of sexually exploited adults were once sexually exploited children (Dempsey, 2015).

Gaps in the Literature

The negative impacts of sexual exploitation on human rights, social and health issues have been well established. Even so, the research is lacking in some areas. One being the little amounts of research on boys and men that have been sexually exploited. Along with gender, the LGBTQ population is also an area that warrants more research; these populations are more vulnerable to being sexually exploited. There is also more research needed in the area of mental and physical health impacts. This study seeks to explore the barriers of sexually exploited youth from the perspective of social workers by addressing the primary research question: What are the Barriers of Providing Services to Sexually Exploited Youth?

Conceptual Framework

Critical Theory is the conceptual framework that will guide this examination of the problem of sexual exploitation. Critical theory, also known as emancipatory theory is the merge of the classical Marxist approach with new empowerment theories (Forte, 2007). The intention of critical theory is to raise society's awareness regarding issues of oppression and to help them

further understand these issues. In practice, social workers that align with this theory examine how society's patterns and preferences undermine the delivery of social services and welfare in general. Critical theorists take a critical stance and challenge social forms such as slavery and indentured servitude that hinder human development; they investigate the values and meanings sustaining quality in social institutions (Forte, 2007).

A subgroup of critical theory is structural theory. Structural theory focuses on the relation of oppressive structures in society that make life difficult for some members and the unjust ways society is organized. Some members of structural theory may include feminist, Afrocentric and queer theorists (Forte, 2007).

One of the main beliefs of this theory is that the "social work profession has a responsibility to protect members of oppressed groups from exploitation by dominant individuals, groups, and organizations and to empower those oppressed peoples so that they can protect themselves" (Forte, 2007, p. 509). Critical theorists assume that social workers should fight injustices in all its forms: injustice referring to "coercively established and maintained inequalities, discrimination, and dehumanizing, development-inhibiting conditions of living (slavery, poverty and homelessness) imposed by dominant classes and people" (Forte, 2007, p. 509). This theory recognizes that while fighting injustice social workers are challenged with a number of issues such as trying to uphold their commitment to their client but having to comply with and defend agency and government policies; or creating programs to serve clients that have problems caused by the exploitation of the powerful groups, yet depend on these groups for funding (Forte, 2007). However, according to this theory, the social worker should be able to recognize these challenges and continue to work with them.

One of the reasons that critical theory fits with this study is because of the emphasis it places on social justice. Due to the hidden nature of sex work that is often a result of childhood sexual exploitation (CSE), getting victim's perspectives and experiences are often difficult and ethically challenging. It is social workers who are therefore situated to address these challenges and give voice to victims (Hodge, 2014). Getting the clients perspective is also a social work value (NASW, 2008).

Structural factors are also a reason this theory fits this study. The theory states that problems are inherent aspects of societies that are structured in unjust ways and are not caused primarily by the characteristics of the individual (Forte, 2007). The barriers that sexually exploited youth may encounter are directly related to the services that are available to them. Scott and Harper, 2006, states that identifying young people at risk relies on awareness of the issues and the preparedness of service providers to work with these situations of exploitation (Scott & Harper, 2006). They go on to state that recognizing CSE as a local problem before taking actions to address it leads to inaction, ensuring that sexual exploitation will remain less recognized (Scott & Harper, 2006); in order to take action, one must first understand the many ways that CSE are oppressed.

Agencies will need to be able to identify sexually exploited youth in order to expand services to meet the demand. While the Victims Protection Act deemed minors performing commercial sex as acts victims of human trafficking rather than as criminals, there are still some states that charge minor offenders with crimes instead of treating them as sexually exploited youth. These charges continue despite the oppressive conditions these children have experienced including child abuse, neglect, lack of education and poverty (Mir, 2013). Social workers that

align themselves with this theory have the interest of those that are oppressed at heart; society as a whole will need to recognize and respond to this issue.

Racial and economic disparities among CSE and women that have been involved in prostitution are other reasons that critical theory was chosen for this paper. Oppressions such as race and class as well as poverty and homelessness are factors that increase the likelihood of minority women being involved in criminal activity and deviant behavior such as prostitution (Kramer & Berg, 2003). These authors further state that the failures of social institutions such as the family and educational system may also be reasons that some enter the life of prostitution, as these women may be dislocated from their families and from schools, which is where many forms of support stem from; these women, -mostly women of color- are often left to live a life with limited opportunity characterized by struggling for economic survival (Kramer & Berg, 2003).

Despite the fact that much research has shown that minority women suffer substantial social, educational, and economic disadvantages, there are few studies that consider the effects of race in combination with factors such as physical and sexual abuse (Kramer & Berg, 2003). Many studies have focused on the intersection of social variables such as class and gender or race and gender, but few have looked at all three (Kramer & Berg, 2003). Critical theory provides a framework to pull these together when examining the experiences of sexually exploited youth as well as the barriers the youth may experience when trying to get services.

Methods

Research Design/Instrument

This study was completed using the qualitative form of research. Padgett, 2008 states that qualitative methods should be used when "you wish to capture the 'lived experience' from the perspective of those who live it and create meaning from it" (Padgett, 2008, p. 16). Given the nature of the topic and the data that was intended to be gathered, the qualitative method was best suited for this study. Through the use of qualitative interviews, this study gave insight to social workers' perceptions of barriers that sexually exploited youth have may encounter when trying to obtain supportive services such as housing and mental and physical health services. Additionally, these interviews gave first-hand insight to the educational and training needs of service providers that work with this population.

The study consisted of 9 interviews that were audio recorded with the participants' permission. The interview consisted of 10 open-ended questions (see Appendix B). The interview questions were based on social workers' perceptions of barriers that providers may encounter when trying to provide services to sexually exploited youth.

Sample

Interviews were conducted in the Twin Cities Metro area with people that identify as licensed social workers and have worked with sexually exploited youth. Snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants for the study. According to Monette, Sullivan, Dejong and Hilton, 2013, snowball sampling starts with a few types of cases you want to research which will lead to more cases and the sample will build up as cases are added (Monette, Sullivan, Dejong & Hilton, 2013). Respondents that agreed to interviews were asked to pass recruitment information along to other social workers that may be interested in participating. The researcher contacted agencies such as youth shelters, county agencies, healthcare providers and community

agencies that specifically work with this population. Participants were contacted via email or phone to identify if they would be interested in participating in the study.

Protection of Human Subjects

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Saint Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, prior to data collection. Each respondent received a consent form which was reviewed with them by the researcher. The consent form provided information regarding the purpose of the study as well as procedures to participate in the study. Risks and benefits were discussed as well as privacy and confidentiality. Identifying information was not used in any transcript or portion of the written report as to protect anonymity of each respondent.

Data Collection

Each respondent agreed to participate in the study by signing the consent form (Appendix A). The interviews were semi-structured in format and were guided by a set of interview questions (Appendix B) that was pre-approved by the research chair, Dr. Melissa Lundquist, as required by the IRB. The questions were developed as a result of questions that arose from the literature review and the conceptual framework of Critical Theory. The questions addressed challenges that youth may encounter when trying to seek services. The questions were open-ended to encourage honest feedback and minimize influence from the researcher. The questions began generally, seeking information about how the participant defined sexual exploitation and identified sexually exploited youth. Next, questions were asked about services that were typically available and if youth were seeking them on their own. Then the questions explored caregiver involvement. Finally, questions were asked regarding systemic responses regarding sexually exploited youth.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using grounded theory methods which allowed for the meanings, concepts, and theories to emerge from raw data rather than being suggested from the researcher (Monette et al., 2013). In using grounded theory, open coding of the interview transcripts was done which allowed the researcher to do a comparative analysis of concepts and then come up with themes (Padgett 2008). A line by line comparative analysis was used to identify codes within the transcripts. Once this analysis was complete, specific themes were developed based on content.

Findings

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of nine social work professionals who work with sexually exploited youth. Eight of the respondents were female and one was male. Two of the respondents worked for Child Protective Services, one respondent was a Coordinator for Sexually Exploited Youth, one respondent worked for a Minnesota government agency, two respondents were Regional Navigators, and three respondents worked for agencies that provide services specific to sexually exploited youth, girls in particular. Additionally, four of the respondents worked in rural settings and five worked in urban settings.

Themes

Each theme and subtheme discussed below are related to the barriers that sexually exploited youth may encounter when trying to get services. These themes emerged from the participant's responses to questions regarding barriers to sexually exploited youth seeking or receiving services.

The themes related to the characteristics of sexually exploited youth was multi-layered, and included the age of the youth, where they lived, mental health issues, and their perception of being involved in a system.

Age.

The first question related to characteristics was: What age range do you think of when discussing sexually exploited youth and does age make a difference in the services that are available or offered? Eight of the nine respondents said that they thought that the age at which people are identified as youth should be increased to be more inclusive of older people that have been exploited beginning when they were minors. These same eight respondents also said that age made a difference in the services that were available. The following quotes illustrate this theme:

> "In terms of how much the system is able and willing to work with kids, age is a huge
> factor. If you are 17 when you get into the system, there is not a lot of services available"
> (Respondent 1).

Respondent 5 stated:

> "I definitely think it (age) should be increased, I think anyone that has to do anything
> sexually for money or a place to stay or because they are being exploited deserves to be
> given services and should be treated as a victim."

Respondent 6 stated:

> "It (exploitation) can go beyond 18, it doesn't look different, things aren't magically
> different when you turn 18, I think its young adults as well."

Highly mobile population.

A subtheme of characteristics was that this population is highly mobile. Many of the youth that end up in exploited situations are youth that have run away from home or some sort of temporary placement. Each respondent stated that these youth have run at some point and may continue to do so without services that are effective.

> "The reality is that these kids are highly mobile and all over the place, they are running. I think that people think that you can just rescue them and save them and everything will be great, that's not the case at all"(Respondent 7).

Respondent 9 stated:

> "It is very common that the youth will run again, use again, and connect with other individuals and crowds again."

> **Mental health.**

Another subtheme was the prevalence of the mental health impact on victims after being exploited. A few of the respondents in the study described the lasting mental effects that exploitation has on youth that they have worked with such as depression and anxiety. Often times, youth may not get the mental health support they need for some of the very same reasons they do not seek support services, stigma and lack of awareness and support. In describing at what stage a respondent encounters a victim and the issues they help provide support around, respondent 8 stated:

> "A lot of girls have different issues or struggles or anger, impulsivity, grief, depression, anxiety, a ton of different things…we work on coping skills to help manage their emotions if they don't have those."

Another respondent stated:

"There are quite a few girls that come from really difficult lives and growing up in

families where there was abuse and chemical dependency and mental illness, so most of

them don't have healthy families to take care of them and to go home to." (Respondent

6).

Not wanting to be involved in a system.

The last subtheme of characteristics was not wanting to be involved in a system. Seven

of nine of the respondents stated that runaway and homeless youth that have also been exploited,

are generally in a homeless situation due to not wanting to be involved in a system such as foster

care or child protection:

"What does Minnesota need to do to step up, why are youth choosing to be homeless than

wanting to be in a system or wanting to be in foster care?" (Respondent 5).

Respondent 1 stated:

"The vast majority of girls are opposed to being in the system, they aren't going to ask

for help if they think it's going to put them in a database somewhere."

Victim Status

Not a victim.

The next theme was youth not identifying themselves as victims. All nine respondents

stated that one of the biggest challenges of providing services to sexually exploited youth, or of

youth seeking services on their own is that they do not see themselves as victims. The general

consensus surrounding this was that youth often see their exploiters as someone that loves and

cares for them, or as a boyfriend or they typically do not understand that what is happening to

them is exploitation. The quotes below illustrate this theme:

"Some girls view their exploiter as their boyfriend or friend, a male figure that was never

there for them personally prior to them being in the life, it's harder for them to see other

options because it becomes normal to them" (Respondent 3).

Respondent 9 stated:

"Many don't see themselves as victims, no matter their age, so why would they see?

They get their needs met, they feel loved, they make money, it takes many years to break

the cycle and start the healing process."

Basic needs.

A subtheme of youth not considering themselves to be victims of sexual exploitation is

that their basic needs of clothing, food, and shelter are being met by their exploiters. Also,

because of the lack of available services or long waits, youth are often left with no choice, their

being exploited is often times the only way they can survive in that moment. The respondents

described that exploited youth get comfort and assurance knowing that there was someone that

cared to provide them with the things they needed to survive. The quotes below highlight factors

related to this theme.

"If this is all they know, if they can't get food or housing any other way, how else as a

society can we expect them to proceed, if they've tried to get services and they've been

denied or it's not happening fast enough, what are they supposed to do" (Respondent 3).

Respondent 5 stated:

"Even if they are seeking services, if those basic needs aren't being met by some type of

provider, they have to find a way to get those needs met, they will do whatever they have

to in order to meet those. Think about if you are hungry, you will do what you have to so

you can eat" (Respondent 5).

Respondent 5 identified herself as having a victim of sexual exploitation and stated:

"I wanted to be with him and the family because it was consistent, I knew what I got with

them. With this life and most of these exploiters, you know what you are going to get,

you know when you're going to get food or shelter, you know they won't throw you

away no matter what you do. I think a lot of them stay because they have no alternative."

Lack of awareness.

The theme of lack of awareness and the need to create awareness about sexual

exploitation through education was also highlighted in this study. Respondents discussed three

layers of creating awareness by educating parents, educating youth, and educating the

community.

Educating parents.

All nine respondents stated that from their perspective, most parents or caregivers

wanted to be involved with the prevention of their child being further exploited as well as in the

healing process. The respondents also stated that for the parents that did want to be involved,

they did not know how to be.

"The struggle is how do we get to parents, how do we reach them? A lot of time in

schools, they don't want to talk about this issue, so it's really about how do we reach

parents so we can start talking about this, it's the prevention part of educating youth,

parents, and caregivers (Respondent 4).

Respondent 5 stated:

"Some of the parents that end up in these situations care about the services, I've had

some parents reach out wanting to know what to do, how do I keep my child safe, how do

I get them out of this lifestyle?"

Educating youth.

Most of the respondents suggested that if there were a way to do prevention education, for instance in school settings, that it could help in reducing the number of youth that are exploited. In response to the question: At what stage of exploitation do you encounter these victims, and how significant is the difference if you meet them earlier rather than later? Respondent 8 stated:

"I think it is better if we can get to them when they are being groomed or haven't been yet, being able to catch them before the psychological and emotional damage is done. It's important for kids to learn about these things before they happen and from what we find, the majority of girls are in denial that it ever happened to them and one of the main reasons is because they don't understand it. The more they understand it, they more they can recognize it."

Respondent 7 stated:

"To be able to get in schools, that would be huge. Even just teaching kids about healthy boundaries and what a healthy relationship looks like would be helpful."

Educating the community.

In response to the question: How do you see education of professionals playing a role in providing services, all of the respondents agreed that having more education for professionals would be beneficial in order to reduce stigma, create awareness through trainings, and to provide trauma informed services? The quotes below support this theme:

"We are at competition with exploiters, they use our theories and the way we work with individuals, and they are doing them in a better way than we are. That's why exploitation continues to grow because there is more demand…so as service providers we have to say

what can we do as an agency and what are we doing wrong. For there to be change, it's

about training and putting time into services…we have to gain trust with these clients,

show them that we are dependable (Respondent 5).

Respondent 9 stated:

"I noticed the more places I go and start to talk about what this is, the more phone calls I

get. It's like once people know what to look for, it goes from we don't have this problem

to can you come and train us because we are starting to see this…communities need to

have awareness throughout Minnesota about what exploitation looks like, and it's not just

trafficking."

Respondent 7 stated:

"Counties aren't getting funding, and on top of that, counties don't know how to identify

sexually exploited youth in order to get them the help or care that they need, it makes it a

huge problem to serve clients in any type of way, because they aren't even being

identified, I think that's one of the biggest barriers, communities want numbers or stats,

but if it's not being reported, I can't give you that."

Support Services.

The forms of support that respondents described for sexually exploited youth included

informal support such as caregiver involvement and formal support such as professional

emotional support.

Caregiver involvement.

While many studies report on the negative instances of caregiver involvement in their

child's exploitation, only two of the respondents mentioned instances where the parent may be

directly involved in the exploitation of their child or does not believe that this has happened.

While all nine of the respondents stated that they have had instances where the caregiver wanted

to be involved in further preventing their child being exploited and helping them through their

healing journey. This theme is illustrated below:

Respondent 3 stated:

> "There are instances when the parent is extremely involved, every single visit, she was
>
> there, the mom was there coming to make sure her kid was ok, and she was there for her.
>
> I've had parents bring their kid in, they go to all their counseling sessions with them.

Respondent 2 stated:

> "Most of the parents don't believe that their child is being exploited or often times
>
> blames the child."

Professional emotional support.

Another theme that emerged from the study was the importance of supportive services.

While there was not an interview question related to supportive services or support in general

from caregivers or providers, it was a theme that came up multiple times. Support was also

described as providers being trustworthy and dependable.

> "Emotional support, really just building trust and relationship with them is important,
>
> being a listening ear and not being judgmental or shaming. Really looking at things from
>
> their perspective is key. Just the little things that some people take for granted"
>
> (Respondent 2).

Respondent 4 stated:

> "My approach to working with youth is that I treat them like adults in the sense that I
>
> value their opinion, I value their experience and I really work with them and what their
>
> needs are."

Systemic.

Not enough services available.

A subtheme of services was that there are not enough services available to serve sexually exploited youth. More than half of the respondents highlighted several factors related to lack of accessibility of services, as highlighted in these quotes:

"…some of these counties don't have certain victim services, they are lacking service providers to help them meet the need, and Minnesota doesn't have a lot of specific places for sexual exploitation whether that be for youth or adults…" (Respondent 5).

Respondent 8 stated:

"There is a lack of housing for exploited youth and adults, there are only a couple of places in the cities that have independent living for youth that have been exploited…I've had some girls get into apartments, but the waiting lists were really long, almost a year."

Respondent 5 also stated:

"They need places that are specific for them, it gives them a chance to deal with real issues instead of just locking them up and putting them in a place where they can possibly be exploited and learn more criminal behaviors."

Not enough trained professionals.

 The next subtheme that emerged was the fact that there are not enough trained professionals to work with this population. As research suggests, having people that are trained in trauma informed care would be the ideal form of treatment for these youth. Six of the nine respondents made mention of the importance of having professionals that are properly trained:

"Whether a professional has the intention of working with victims of sexual abuse or exploitation or trafficking, I would encourage them to receive training in these areas,

unfortunately, there are not enough professionals in the therapeutic world that are trauma

certified and educated in the area of exploitation and trafficking" (Respondent 9).

State response.

The last theme that emerged from this study were the systemic responses related to The

Safe Harbor Law and Minnesota's No Wrong Door Policy. In response to the question: How

have systemic responses such as Safe Harbor Law and No Wrong Door impacted services? All

nine respondents stated that they felt like the implementation of these policies have made

changes in the services that have become available. All nine respondents also stated while there

has been effective change, there is still a lot of progress to make in these areas. Respondent 8

stated:

> "It's definitely improving services that are available and creating new services, it's
>
> helped us get some funding. It is making a difference and there is still a great need for
>
> more services. It's opening doors for victims because people know about more services
>
> and are able to refer girls. But, the overall awareness piece is spreading faster than the
>
> financial piece and the more aware people become the more finances and services there
>
> will be. I'm really proud of Minnesota."

Respondent 7 stated:

> "There has definitely been an increase in reporting with the passing of Safe Harbor, an
>
> increase over the last two years, but there hasn't been an increase in manpower, so not an
>
> increase in workers."

Respondent 1 stated:

> "I think it's increased the types of services available because I think people look a little
>
> bit differently at these kids, it's seen as more of a safety issue rather than just youth being

homeless, which is unfortunately not seen as the emergency it should be, but I do think services are improving. There is still a lot of work to be done and a lot of things still being figured out."

Discussion

This study set out to answer the question: What are social workers' perceptions of the barriers to providing services to sexually exploited youth? Through the use of qualitative interviews, six themes related to providing services to sexually exploited youth emerged: Characteristics of the girls, victim status, education through awareness, support services, systemic responses, and the state of Minnesota responses. This study was meant to identify possible reasons that sexually exploited youth may not get services, and create more awareness about this growing issue.

Micro-level Barriers

Micro-level barriers are those that directly influenced by the individual, in this study, sexually exploited youth. According to the participants in the study, there were two prominent barriers that prevented sexually exploited youth from seeking or receiving services. The first was that these youth did not see themselves as victims of sexual exploitation. From the perception of the minor, they are being provided with food and shelter and are loved and cared for by the exploiter, so they are not being exploited. The second prominent barrier is that this is a highly mobile population, they are often times runaways, it is hard to get them in a stable environment to provide services. Lack of parent's awareness that their child was actually a victim of sexual exploitation and lack of knowledge about how to help their child was also discussed as a barrier.

One of these barriers aligned with the literature was that this population is often running away from home. For instance, in a 2008 study done by Edinburgh and Saewyc, a pilot program

for runaway sexually exploited girls was evaluated and it was found that the younger girls were when they first ran away from home, the more likely they were to become involved in high-risk behaviors such as drug use, criminal activities and violence. This research further stated that some factors associated with the girls running away included a history of intra-familial physical or sexual abuse, mental illness of a parent, domestic violence, teen-parent conflict and social isolation, and were 40% more likely to run away from home than their peers (Edinburgh & Saewyc, 2008).

Mezzo-level Barriers

Mezzo-level barriers are those that are impacted by communities, schools and smaller local organizations. According to some respondents in the study, the lack of education for youth, parents, professionals, and the community was a mezzo-level barrier. Some respondents mentioned the need for education within the school systems around the topic of healthy relationships and boundaries. Being able to identify the difference between unhealthy and healthy relationships could be a way to help with prevention, create awareness, and as a way for parents to have conversations about this topic. Many of the respondents mentioned the fact that there are not enough trained professionals to work with this population as well as that there is no standard training for professionals. One of the respondents stated that [she] did not have a lot of knowledge about this topic, but she went to whatever trainings that were available to [her]. Pearce, 2006 described how the dominant perception is that some service providers suggest that the issue of child sexual abuse is the central responsibility for child protection, leaving out the importance of school staff and other social service providers these youth may encounter, to be able to recognize when abuse is happening (Pearce, 2006). Social service providers that overlook or that are not aware of the impact that these vulnerabilities such as truancy, behavior problems or emotional and

physical abuse have on interrupted education and disrupted home life add to the importance of needing trained professionals to work with this population.

Other respondents mentioned a similar experience related to training material in that there are no set standards of training. Educating the community as a whole was also mentioned. A few of the respondents mentioned that some communities, mainly in smaller and rural areas, still do not recognize that sexual exploitation of youth is happening, while there has been more news and media coverage in recent years, many communities still fail to acknowledge the problem until it is happening where they live.

Macro-level Barriers

Macro-level barriers are those that are impacted by larger systems and can lead to changes such as policy reform and implementations. Macro-level barriers related to this study were regarding funding. Specifically, the need for more specialized agencies and trained providers as well as the need for more housing services. Related to the Safe Harbor Law and No Wrong Door Policy, most of respondents mentioned that these were great implementations of policy, however there is still more work to be done. Several respondents mentioned the lack of funding related to these policies as a huge issue. For example, although part of the Safe Harbor Law was to add more funding for these services and populations, the release of funding has been slower than anticipated and not adequate to address the need.

Along with lack of funding, there is a lack of resources to actually provide the services that this population needs. As mentioned above, another barrier related to macro-level systems is lack of housing, there is not enough housing to fit the growing population. With the limited housing available, some of the waitlists can be years long, which often leaves the youth with no option but to go back into survival mode. Some of the respondents stated that this population was highly

mobile and homeless, which is part of the reason that they are vulnerable to being exploited. These barriers are also consistent with previous research done by Holger-Ambrose et al. 2013, which stated that being homeless for more than one month increases the risks for sexual exploitation. This same research also stated that a disproportionate amount of sexually exploited youth are "precariously housed in hotels, abandoned buildings or other inadequate shelter" (Holger-Ambrose, Langmade, Edinburgh, & Saewyc, 2013, p.27). This aligns with the perception of the social workers in this study who described the population of sexually exploited youth being highly mobile. There needs to be more housing resources specifically available to youth so that there is less chance of them being a victim of exploitation due to not having a place to sleep. (Holger-Ambrose, Langmade, Edinburgh, & Saewyc, 2013).

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

There were several strengths and limitations to this study. One specific strength was the use of qualitative interviews to gain a first-hand perception of how social work professionals view some of the challenges to providing services to sexually exploited youth. Another strength of this study is that all of the respondents were currently working with this population, so their views of the realities were directly related to what they see on a daily basis. A final strength of this study was even though respondents provided services in different geographical areas (Metro and rural MN), the challenges that they were seeing were consistent, regardless of location.

Limitations

While this study has several strengths, there were also limitations. One main limitation was that these perceptions did not come directly from victims of sexual exploitation. The way victims perceive barriers related to getting services may be different than how the people working with

them perceive them. Another limitation was the small sample size. While there were nine interviews that provided a great amount of information, this sample was limited when compared to the number of professionals that provide services to sexually exploited youth. A last limitation was that each respondent worked with sexually exploited youth in different settings, so it is possible the way that one respondent perceived barriers may have been different for another respondent that works in a different type of setting or has a different service role. Yet, that did not seem to be the case in this study.

Implications for Social Work

Consistent with previous research and the findings of this study, there are implications that can be made regarding the sexual exploitation of youth and the barriers that exist in terms of utilization of services. The awareness about this issue continues to grow and society and mental health professionals need to be prepared to embrace these individuals and provide them with the services that they need in order for them to have a chance to get out of this exploitive lifestyle.

Implications for Policy

A major barrier related to the systemic responses regarding this topic was the lack of funding necessary to provide effective services, such as appropriate housing for youth. Many counties do not have the funding to provide these youth with stable housing. There is also a lack of community agencies that are able to work with this specific population due to not having professionals that have specific training so that they can provide services. This barrier was highlighted as being very problematic in trying to provide services. It is the role of social workers and mental health professionals to advocate for changes in this area to support the clients that need to be served.

Implications for Practice

One of the areas of concern from the respondents in this study was the lack of training for professionals. People working in social service settings are sometimes the first line of help for this population. It is not only important to recognize and respond to risk factors associated with youth being exploited, but how to work with these youth and provide effective services such as prevention, education and support services to help them get out of the cycle. Having a standard for agencies to be able to provide trauma-informed services can have a lasting impact on the minor that receives those services. Additionally, having a standard of care may help create a sense of consistency for the youth that may see several providers over a period of time as well as improve the services that are being provided.

Implications for Future Research

While getting the perspective of those that work with this population is valuable, there needs to be more documented research that includes the perspectives of the people that are directly affected, the victims and survivors of sexual exploitation. Because this is a growing population, the research needs to be expanded to help understand ways of preventing sexual exploitation as well as expanding effective services so these youth can be better served creating greater opportunity for them to get out of this lifestyle.

In addition to having more survivor perspectives, future research should include studies regarding male victims and older youth. Age and gender were characteristics that were prevalent throughout the study however, when speaking about victims they had worked with, all of the participants referred to the victims as girls being under the age of 17 at the first encounter. None of the participants mentioned any male victims that they had encountered which is parallel to

research that often dismisses youth over the age of 17 and boys as victims. For instance, in a 2008 study, Lillywhite and Skidmore called the sexual exploitation of boys under the age of 17 the "invisible problem". These authors argued that there is a need for practitioners to look at why boys under the age of 17 can be especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation for reasons such as the majority of resources not addressing male sex work, the overwhelming amount of focus on women and girls and not enough information being known about those that purchase sex from men and boys (Lillywhite & Skidmore, 2006). The research further stated that young men are often not seen as at risk because of the societal expectation that they are to be strong and in control, and know everything about sex, and therefore can look after themselves, which in turn leads to male victims finding it hard to access services and admit inexperience (Lillywhite & Skidmore, 2006).

Understanding the barriers to sexually exploited youth getting services is essential for professionals in order to provide services that will be effective for them. The barriers that were identified show the cyclical impact of youth being involved in exploitation as well as provides implications for practice, policy and future research. As demonstrated by the increase of youth being sexually exploited, if they do not get the help or services that they need, it is highly likely that they will continue this lifestyle.

Conclusion

The overall purpose of this study was to gain the perspective of social work professionals regarding the barriers of providing services to youth that have been sexually exploited. The research examined the barriers that social workers encounter when trying to provide services. Several barriers that impact a youth being able to find or access effective services were identified.

These barriers included: lack of service providers specifically trained to serve sexually exploited youth, youth not identifying themselves as victims and lack of community and parental education, and lack of funding in addition to others. Some of the results from this study were consistent with research and some results emerged as issues that need further exploration.

All of the respondents were passionate about working with this population and identified the need of being able to provide more services to the growing population. Sexually exploited youth will continue to be a vulnerable population and there needs to be a focus on improved training for service professionals, funding to expand the available services, and ongoing education to create awareness throughout communities. This issue will need to continue to be researched in order to make the necessary changes in the lives of those who are affected by it.

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APPENDIX A

Consent Form

What are the Barriers of Providing Services to Sexually Exploited Youth?: A Social Work Perspective

840361-1

You are invited to participate in a research study about the barriers that sexually exploited youth may encounter when seeking mental health or support services.   You were selected as a possible participant because *you are a licensed social worker that has experience providing services to this population.* You are eligible to participate in this study because *you are a licensed social worker that has identified themselves as working with this particular population and are familiar with the challenges that may be encountered when seeking support.* The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by : *Chamaera Sowell, a graduate student at the University of Saint Catherine and the University of St. Thomas under the supervision of Dr. Melissa Lundquist, a faculty member at the University of Saint Catherine and the University of St. Thomas, in St. Paul, Minnesota.* This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to get perspectives of licensed social workers regarding barriers to services for sexually exploited youth. An exploratory qualitative study will be conducted to gain important insight about the barriers of providing services to sexually exploited youth from the perspective of professional workers who work directly with this vulnerable population.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: participate in an interview that will ask 10 open-ended questions regarding your perceptions about the barriers sexually exploited youth may encounter when seeking services. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. The location, time and date will all be chosen at your convenience. There will be 8-10 participants in the study. The interviews will be audio recorded on the researcher's computer and later transcribed in order to assist me in the data analysis process. There will be no follow up necessary after the initial procedure.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

Discussing your perceptions of the barriers that sexually exploited youth may encounter when trying to seek services may become emotionally distressing for you and may trigger thoughts about personal experiences. Recalling traumatic or distressing events is a risk of participating in this study. These risks are present due to the types of emotional experiences you may have encountered while working with sexually exploited youth. Describing these experiences may elicit emotional reactions. In order to minimize these risks, the interview questions do not ask about any personal relationships that you may have had with this population, do not ask any questions that may be related to one specific client of this population and do not ask about any specific events related to this population. The questions are more general to the topic with the goal of learning about potential barriers these youth have to accessing supportive services. The likelihood of these risks are minimal. Should you encounter these risks during the interview, you can choose to end the interview at any time by telling the researcher so.

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study.

Compensation

There is no payment for or cost to participate in this study.

Privacy

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study. As a participant, no personal information about you will be given to others. Any identifying information such as your name, agency where you have worked or currently work, and your contact information will be kept on a password protected computer and will only be available to me as the researcher. If this information is needed as I analyze the data, specific coding identifiers have been developed to further protect your privacy. The interview location will be a place of your choosing and the time and date will be convenient to your schedule. In order to ensure a higher level of privacy, I suggest the meeting location be somewhere such as your office, a meeting space at the University of St. Thomas or a meeting room at a library. The amount of information that you choose to share is at your discretion.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you. The types of records I will create include written transcripts of the interview, handwritten notes taken during the interview, master lists of information, and audio recordings. Each item will be stored in an electronic folder designated for the study. The folder will be on the researcher's laptop with password protection. Each file will be encrypted. The researcher will be the only person that has access to any information. Audio recordings will be transcribed as soon as possible, with an expectation of no more than seven days after the interview takes place and will be kept no longer than two days after transcription is completed. Should traveling be required for research purposes, the laptop and any handwritten notes will be kept in the trunk of the researcher's locked vehicle. All signed consent forms will be kept for a minimum of three years upon completion of the study in May 2016. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas reserve the right to inspect all research records to ensure compliance.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with myself or the University of St. Thomas. There are no penalties or consequences if you choose not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you *will not be used.* You can withdraw by *providing a statement in writing to the researcher stating that you no longer wish to participate, this written statement can be sent to* sowe5417@stthomas.edu*. You may also provide a verbal statement of wishing to withdraw at any point during the interview or by calling 612-250-6726.* You are also free to skip any questions I may ask*.*

Contacts and Questions

My name is Chamaera Sowell. You may ask any questions you have now and any time during or after the interview. If you have questions later, you may contact me at *612-250-6726 or email at sowe5417@stthomas.edu. Additionally, you may contact my Research Chair, Dr. Melissa Lundquist at 651-962-5813 or Lund1429@stthomas.edu* You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu with any questions or concerns.

Statement of Consent

I have had a conversation with the researcher about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I give permission to be audio recorded during this study*.*

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

_____   _____

Signature of Study Participant   **Date**

_____

Print Name of Study Participant

_____   _____

Signature of Researcher   **Date**

APPENDIX B

Interview Schedule

1. How do you define sexual exploitation?

2. What age range do you think of when discussing sexually exploited youth? (Should the range be decreased/increased) Does age make a difference in the services that are available/offered?

3. At what stage of exploitation do you encounter these victims? What is the impact on the services they may get if it is recognized early enough? (Does time frame make a difference ie: getting services immediately, postponing, not getting services)

4. In your experience, are victims seeking services on their own? (referred-by who)

5. What services/resources are they seeking? Are these services generally available? (Why/Why not?)

6. What role does the caregiver (for example a parent or foster parent) play in victims seeking services after being exploited?

7. Without the caregiver being involved, how likely is it that victims will or can get services? (ie: runaway youth, youth not in shelters)

8. If victims do not seek or get services, how likely do you think it is that they may turn to sex work for means of survival? (Connection between sexual exploitation & prostitution?)

9. How do you see education of professionals (therapists, law enforcement, advocates, shelters, centers) playing a role in providing services?

10. How have systemic responses such as Safe Harbor Law and No Wrong Door impacted

services available? (Any noticeable changes?)