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# Estimating Sex Trafficking in Sacramento County

## Final Report



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**Disclaimer:**

*Stock photos used in this report are for illustrative purposes only and any person depicted in the content is a model.*

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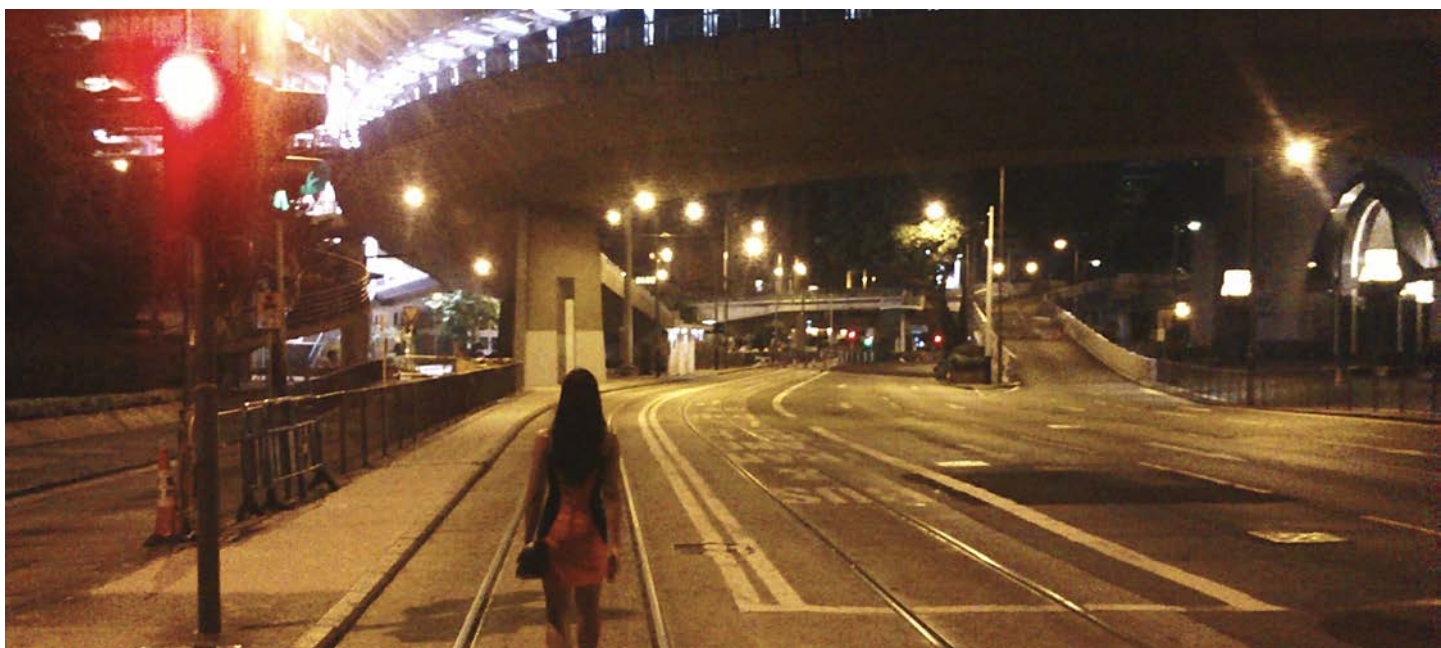
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## CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

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The marketplace for commercial sex is complex, dynamic, and varied. Like all economies, the commercial sex market operates on the principles of supply and demand. While almost all individuals who contribute to the demand for commercial sex do so willingly, there is significant variation in the voluntariness of engagement in the sex industry for those who sell sex. The spectrum of willingness and personal agency among sex sellers in the United States is wide—from those working as voluntary sex workers to those who sell sex through limited or constrained circumstances to those engaging in survival sex to victims of sex trafficking. These experiences are also dynamic, as people can move from one to another of these experiences (and back again) throughout their time in the sex industry.

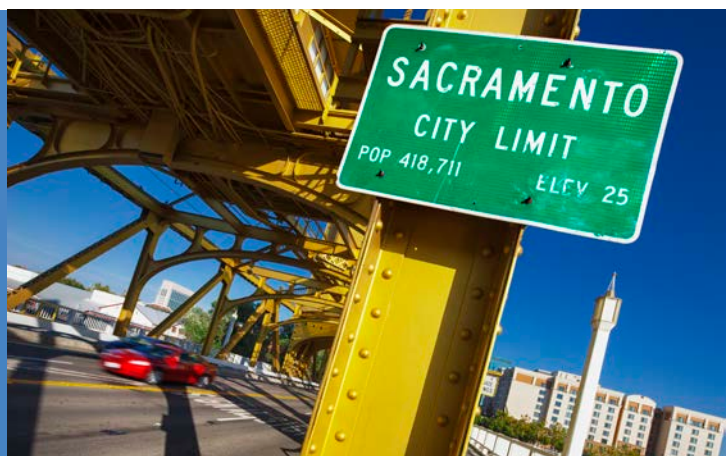
**This study focuses exclusively on the nature and prevalence of sex trafficking, not other forms of violence or exploitation that may be experienced by those involved in commercial sex. Estimating the prevalence and understanding the experiences of people who meet the legal definition of sex trafficking victims has important implications for policy response. However, the authors wish to acknowledge that many other people involved in selling sex have experienced other forms of violence or exploitation related to their experience in the commercial sex market that are equally abhorrent and worthy of study and prevention.**

Understanding the prevalence of sex trafficking among the broader population of those involved in the sex industry has been a perennial data challenge with profound consequences. Specifically, our limited understanding the magnitude of the problem hampers efforts to appropriately create a strategic, coordinated, multisystem response. Without empirical data, efforts to disrupt trafficking or meet the needs of its survivors will be driven by public opinion—often either sensationalizing or disregarding—resulting in either too little intervention or too much. Data are also needed on the nature of exploitation, recruitment and entry into commercial sex, networks of victims and traffickers, and survivor experiences with services, among other issues. Anti-trafficking efforts are stymied by this lack of data to guide any strategic public health or justice approach to effectively tackling this issue.

Sex trafficking is defined, according to U.S. federal law, as circumstances in which “a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age” (106th U.S. Congress, 2000). Distinguishing sex trafficking exploitation from other sex selling experiences can be difficult for law enforcement, first responders, health care providers, laypersons, and researchers, and the distinction is important for the development of adequate and strategic responses that are aligned with the actual scope of sex trafficking. Preliminary research on strategies for estimating the prevalence of human trafficking has found that micro-level studies, focused on a specific target population in a clearly defined geographic region, are likely to be the most feasible for calculating robust estimates (Barrick & Pfeffer, 2021; Weitzer, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to estimate the prevalence of sex trafficking exploitation among adults who trade or sell sex in Sacramento County. Additionally, this study is intended to better understand the nature and the scope of sex trafficking in Sacramento County and to collect data capable of informing a strategic, coordinated, multisystem response to sex trafficking that can be useful for both prevention and intervention efforts.

**The purpose of this study is to estimate the prevalence of sex trafficking exploitation among adults who trade or sell sex in Sacramento County.**





## CHAPTER 2

# OVERVIEW OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING PREVALENCE RESEARCH

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Since the passage of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act in 2000, sex trafficking has received growing attention from policymakers, practitioners, researchers, philanthropic foundations, and the media. Although scholarly research on trafficking has grown, relatively few studies have attempted to estimate its prevalence. This scarcity is likely due, at least in part, to methodological challenges in estimating the prevalence of hidden crimes. In the absence of empirical data, journalists and scholars may report on nonempirical findings or inappropriately extrapolate findings about a specific population (e.g., homeless youth) that were not intended to provide a general prevalence estimate (Bales et al., 2020; Fedina, 2015; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2022). This practice is problematic because unreliable and inconsistent estimates lead some to question whether sex trafficking is a myth, or at least whether estimates are greatly inflated (Fedina, 2015; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2022; Weitzer, 2010). For example, Weitzer (2014) states, “The glaring evidentiary problems are so severe that even rough estimates of the worldwide magnitude of this hidden enterprise are destined to be fatally flawed.” Doubts about the reliability—or even credibility—of trafficking estimates undermine the efforts of community-based organizations that work with this population. Understanding the scope of sex trafficking is critical for strengthening local and national anti-trafficking responses. Reliable prevalence estimates can be used to inform the development of adequate and strategic responses to trafficking that are aligned with the scope of the problem; reliable estimates can also inform the appropriate allocation of resources.

However, by itself, a prevalence estimate does not provide any information about what types of exploitation are experienced, how individuals were recruited for and entered commercial sex, whom they interact with, and what their experiences with law enforcement and service providers are. Empirical data on the experiences of sex trafficking victims and survivors are needed to prevent victimization, identify individuals who are being victimized, and ensure that the proper services and support are available to effectively meet the needs of survivors.

## Why is prevalence estimation difficult?

Numerous factors make human trafficking prevalence estimation difficult. Human trafficking is difficult to define and operationalize for research purposes. Most crimes, such as burglary and sexual assault, are defined by individual incidents; however, human trafficking may involve a series of incidents over time. Yet, there is no standard threshold for determining when these events become trafficking (National Academies of Sciences, 2020). Human trafficking is often a hidden crime, and those being exploited may be hard to reach with traditional survey sampling methods (Franchino-Olsen et al., 2022; Global Fund to End Modern Slavery, 2021). Probability samples, such as those used in household surveys, may not be feasible or appropriate for estimating the prevalence of sex trafficking, which is difficult to capture in the general population. The National Crime Victimization Survey, an annual household survey conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, does not include questions about trafficking victimization. Moreover, exploited individuals may not see themselves as victims; even when they do, for a variety of reasons they may not disclose their victimization to law enforcement, service providers, or researchers (Franchino-Olsen et al., 2022; National Academies of Sciences, 2020). Although identification of trafficking victimization by law enforcement and service providers has improved over time, there is a recognition that additional training is warranted (Farrell et al., 2019; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2022). Thus, official crime figures from local law enforcement agencies and the Uniform Crime Reporting system represent undercounts of victimization (Durgana & van Dijk, 2021; Farrell et al., 2019; Tueller et al., 2021).

To overcome these challenges, researchers have applied innovative survey sampling and analytic methods to estimate the prevalence of human trafficking. For example, respondent-driven sampling (RDS) and other forms of link-trace sampling rely on peer recruitment and chain referrals rather than an existing sampling frame. These methods involve identifying a set of initial study recruits, often referred to as “seeds,” from the population of interest, who then refer additional people, who then also refer others, and so on. These methods are feasible only when the population of interest is socially connected and able to invite other eligible individuals. Another survey option is time-location sampling, which relies on approaching the population of interest at specific locations and times where they congregate. Time-location sampling does not rely on “seeds” or other participants for recruitment; however, it assumes that the population of interest is likely to frequent or congregate at the same venue for work, errands, socialization, or some other activity. Other researchers have applied multiple systems estimation (MSE; also known as mark-recapture modeling), which is not a sampling strategy but rather examines the extent to which individuals are identified more than once in a primary data collection effort.

Because sampling and surveying individuals is resource intensive and because MSE is a viable alternative that uses secondary data on known trafficking victims from multiple sources, MSE is growing in popularity (Durgana & van Dijk, 2021). In short, a researcher using MSE compares two or more different samples of individuals (in this case, of those who have experienced trafficking) and examines the extent to which individuals are captured in more than one data source to estimate the total number of victims. However, because MSE relies on overlapping data sets of individuals who have experienced trafficking, it assumes that vulnerable individuals are likely to be in contact with agencies or organizations that are aware of, and systematically maintain, their status as having experienced trafficking. Each of these approaches has strengths and weaknesses, so researchers must carefully consider which method is most appropriate and feasible for a given context (Barrick & Pfeffer, 2021; Global Fund to End Modern Slavery, 2021).



## What do we know about the prevalence of sex trafficking in the United States?

Given the complexities in research design, it is not surprising that there have been only 12 studies in the United States that have estimated the prevalence of sexual exploitation or trafficking to date (**Table 2-1**).

**Table 2-1. Summary of United States–Based Sex Trafficking Prevalence Studies**

Author(s)	Trafficking Type	Geographic Scope	Victim Age	Population Sampled	Sample Size	Data Sources	Estimation Strategy	Prevalence Estimate	Other Topics Explored
Greene et al. (1999)	Sex only	Country	Youth only	Runaway homeless youth	640	Survey (primary)	Probability	9.5% in shelter sample	Correlates of survival sex
Edwards et al. (2006)	Sex only	Country	Youth only	Students, grades 7–12	13,570	Survey (secondary)	Probability	3.5% in sample (n = 471 victims)	Correlates of commercial sex
Curtis et al. (2008)	Sex only	City (New York)	Youth only	Youth involved in commercial sex	329	Survey (primary)	Respondent-driven sampling	3,946 victims	CSEC experiences and needs of youth involved in commercial sex
Williamson et al. (2010)	Sex and labor combined	State (Ohio)	Youth and adults	Foreign-born persons and American youth	None	Census, prior research	Other	783 foreign-born victims of ST and LT; 1,078 domestic minor victims of ST	Prevalence only
Busch-Armendariz et al. (2016)	Sex and labor separately	State (Texas)	Youth and adults	Presumed and identified victims, social service agencies	Varied	Administrative, survey (primary)	Other	78,996 ST victims; 234,457 LT victims	Economic impact of human trafficking
Phillips (2017)	Sex only	City (Kansas City)	Adults only	Persons arrested for commercial sexual exploitation–related crimes (victims, buyers, facilitators)	403	Administrative	MSE	2,830–3,275 adults involved in commercial sex	Prevalence only
Bales et al. (2020)	Sex and labor combined	City (New Orleans–Metairie)	Youth and adults	Known victims	185	Administrative	MSE	650–1,600 victims	Prevalence only
Farrell et al. (2019)	Sex only; sex and labor combined	City (1 northeastern, 1 western)	Youth and adults	Known victims	635	Administrative	MSE	650–1,000 minor sex trafficking victims in northeastern city; 2,000–2,400 human trafficking victims in western city	Law enforcement identification and classification of human trafficking cases
Anderson et al. (2019)	Sex and labor combined	State (Ohio)	Youth and adults	Known victims	1,032	Administrative	Other	1,032 victims	Prevalence only
University of Georgia (2020)	Sex and labor separately	City (Atlanta metro)	Youth only	Homeless youth	641	Survey (primary)	MSE	19.9% experienced CSEC ever; 16.05% experienced CSEC while homeless	Risk factors for trafficking
Martin et al. (2020)	Sex only	State (Minnesota)	Youth only	9th- and 11th-graders	71,007	Survey (primary)	Probability	1.4% (n = 5,009)	Prevalence only
Tueller et al. (2021)	Sex only	State (Florida)	Youth only	Children 10+ who had been investigated by child welfare agency for maltreatment	296,167	Administrative	MSE & mixture models for partially classified data	3.3%–7.16%, depending on method	Prevalence only

Note. CSEC, commercial sexual exploitation of children; LT, labor trafficking; MSE, multiple systems estimation; ST, sex trafficking.

## **Prevalence of Sex Trafficking Among Minor Victims in the United States**

Nine of the prior 12 studies have estimated the prevalence of sex trafficking among youth in the United States. These studies varied in terms of geographic levels (including national, state, and local estimates) and estimation strategies. Five of the studies relied on survey methods, variously using traditional probability-based samples (Edwards et al., 2006; Greene et al., 1999; Martin et al., 2020), RDS (Curtis et al., 2008), and MSE (University of Georgia, 2020); two used administrative data and applied MSE techniques (Farrell et al., 2019; Tueller et al., 2021); two used novel, but less rigorous, approaches (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2016; Williamson et al., 2010); and one used a novel application of a machine learning mixture models for partially classified data to estimate overall prevalence (Tueller et al., 2021).

Three studies administered surveys to samples of youth using traditional probability samples. Greene et al. (1999) sampled shelters included in the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse to survey runaway and homeless youth about their experiences engaging in survival sex. They found that 9.5% of youth in shelters in the United States had engaged in survival sex. Edwards and colleagues (2006), analyzing data from the of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, estimated that 3.5% of 7th- to 12th-graders had exchanged sex for money or drugs. In a triennial census of students in Minnesota schools (Minnesota School Survey), Martin et al. (2020) estimated that 1.4% of students in 9th and 11th grades in Minnesota had traded sex for money or something else of value.

Using RDS, Curtis et al. (2008) interviewed 329 youth in New York City about their experience with their involvement in commercial sex. They estimated that 3,946 youth in the city were involved in the commercial sex. A team from the University of Georgia (2020) interviewed homeless youth in metropolitan Atlanta over three 10-day data collection periods. Using an MSE approach, the sampled youth could complete the survey multiple times to “capture” duplicate respondents. Nearly 20% of the youth reported experiencing commercial sexual exploitation over their lifetimes, and 16% while they were homeless.

Farrell and colleagues (2019) collected data on identified trafficking victims from nine agencies and organizations in an unnamed northeastern city. Using MSE, they estimated that there were 650–1,000 minor sex trafficking victims. Using a similar approach, Tueller, Gibbs, and Kluckman (2021) analyzed longitudinal administrative data on all children with maltreatment allegations in Florida between 2011 and 2016. Using both MSE and mixture models for partially classified data to combine information from both known and likely victims (known and unknown classification statuses, respectively), they estimated that the prevalence of sex trafficking in the child welfare population ranges from 3.3% to 17.6%.

Williamson and colleagues (2010) used a novel approach to prevalence estimation. They first estimated the number of youths in Ohio with risk factors for sex trafficking (e.g., homelessness). Then they applied estimated percentages of how many at-risk youths had been trafficked and used census population data to arrive at an estimate of 1,078 victims of domestic minor sex trafficking in Ohio over the course of a year. Using a similar approach, Busch-Armendariz et al. (2016) estimated the number of high-risk youths (e.g., those who had experienced child abuse) in Texas and used surveys of social service providers to estimate that 25% of these vulnerable youth were sex trafficking victims. Applying that rate to the population size, they arrived at an estimate of 78,996 minor sex trafficking victims in Texas.

## **Prevalence of Sex and Labor Trafficking Among Adult and Minor Victims**

Six studies produced estimates of sex trafficking, labor trafficking, or both among adult or minor victims or both. These studies varied in terms of the type of trafficking included (i.e., labor, sex, or both), population of interest (i.e., youth, adults, or both), geographic level (state and city), and estimation methods. Three of the studies used MSE (Bales et al., 2020; Farrell et al., 2019; Phillips, 2017), and one combined individual-level administrative data on known victims with aggregate data on victimization (Anderson et al., 2019).

Bales and colleagues (2020) collected administrative data on confirmed victims of human trafficking (sex or labor) from eight law enforcement agencies and nonprofit organizations in the New Orleans Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). Using MSE, they estimated that there were 650–1,600 trafficked people in the New Orleans MSA in 2016. Using data from five agencies and organizations in an unidentified western U.S. community, Farrell and colleagues (2019) estimated the prevalence of human trafficking to be 2,000–2,400 victims. Although Phillips (2017) similarly used MSE techniques, her study focused more narrowly on commercial sexual exploitation among adults. She collected prostitution arrest records from 11 law enforcement agencies and estimated the prevalence of commercial sex in the Kansas City MSA to be between 2,830 and 3,275 adults. However, it is important to note that this estimate captures individuals who are involved in commercial sex but not necessarily trafficked.

Similar to an MSE approach, Anderson, Kulig, and Sullivan (2019) collected data from eight agencies and organizations on known sex and labor trafficking victims. Instead of assessing the overlap between individuals in these data sources, they de-duplicated the lists to identify the number of known victims and then incorporated those numbers with aggregate data to arrive at a prevalence estimate of 1,032 human trafficking victims in Ohio.

### **Information Supplementing Prevalence Estimates**

Six of the 12 prior studies focused primarily on estimating prevalence and, in some cases, describing demographic characteristics of victims (Anderson et al., 2019; Bales et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2020; Phillips, 2017; Tueller et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2010). The other six studies explored a variety of other topics, including correlates and risk factors, economic impact of trafficking, law enforcement identification and classification of trafficking cases, and details about experiences of minors in commercial sex (e.g., entry, facilitators and buyers, interactions with law enforcement and service providers). These additional analyses were primarily quantitative, with a smaller number of studies providing rich qualitative findings.

Three studies conducted additional quantitative analyses on the correlates and risk factors of involvement in commercial sex. For example, Greene and colleagues (1999) found that age, length of time as a runaway, victimization, criminal behavior, substance use, suicide attempts, sexually transmitted infections, and pregnancy were all correlated with survival sex among runaway and homeless youth. Similarly, Edwards et al. (2006) found that adolescents involved in commercial sex also engaged in other risky behaviors, including substance use, and may have experienced poor health outcomes (e.g., HIV). The University of Georgia (2020) found that demographic characteristics, sexual orientation, childhood trauma, and child welfare systems involvement were all risk factors for trafficking among homeless youth.



In another quantitative study, Busch-Armandariz et al. (2016) attempted to measure prevalence as well as the economic impact of human trafficking on Texas. They used surveys from social service and law enforcement agencies to quantify lifetime costs of law enforcement, prosecution, and social services for minor victims of sex trafficking. Combined with their prevalence estimate, they estimated that minor and youth sex trafficking costs the state of Texas approximately \$6.6 billion.

In a mixed-methods study, Farrell and colleagues (2019) generated prevalence estimates as part of a larger study exploring how local law enforcement agencies classify human trafficking cases in three communities. The study involved examining human trafficking case files, interviewing law enforcement and other stakeholders about how trafficking cases are identified and reported, and using MSE to estimate the number of victims in each community in order to assess the degree to which law enforcement data capture the population of victims in a community.

Only one study included semistructured interviews with sex trafficking victims to both estimate the prevalence of trafficking and explore other aspects of victims' experiences. Curtis and colleagues (2008) sought to estimate the size, characteristics, experiences, and service needs of the New York City population of children who were commercially sexually exploited. They asked about entry into the market; engaging the market; earnings; pimps, facilitators, and customers; experiences with violence; arrest; health and substance abuse; interactions with youth service agencies; and reflections on "the life" and future expectations.

## **What additional research is necessary to understand the prevalence of sex trafficking in the United States and inform a coordinated response?**

As described above, the existing research on sex trafficking prevalence in the United States has varied greatly in geographic focus, populations of interest, study design, and supplemental information gathered. Although these studies have laid the foundation for understanding the scope of human trafficking in the United States, the estimates cannot be applied to other areas, populations, or time periods. To adequately inform a coordinated, community response to sex trafficking, focused studies are needed to truly understand the scope and nature of the problem. For example, estimates of prevalence across large geographic areas may obscure differences at the local level (i.e., some communities may be more affected than others). Similarly, estimates that combine sex and labor trafficking will not provide adequate nuance about the nature of the problem, as trafficking in different industries (e.g., sex, agriculture, construction, hospitality) may vary greatly within a community.

## **What do we need beyond a prevalence estimate to better respond to trafficking?**

Estimating the number of trafficking victims and survivors is critically important in gauging how large the response may need to be (e.g., capacity of anti-trafficking advocates to reach all of those in need, levels of funding needed). However, the estimate alone does not provide any context or nuance around the nature of exploitation, recruitment and entry into commercial sex, networks of victims and traffickers, and experiences with law enforcement and service providers. These issues are all central to determining what type of response is needed to prevent individuals from being trafficked in the first place, identify individuals who are being victimized, and provide the proper services and supports for individuals after trafficking has occurred.

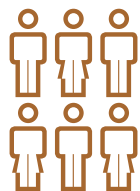
## How does this study contribute to improving the response to trafficking?

This study seeks to estimate the prevalence of sex trafficking in Sacramento County and gather more contextual information about the lived experience of victims and survivors to both inform the local response and compare estimates across different data types and estimation strategies.



The prevalence of sex trafficking has been estimated at the national (n = 2), state (n = 5), and local (n = 5) levels.

***This is the first study to estimate the prevalence of sex trafficking in a California community.***



Studies also vary in their population of interest. Minor victims are a primary focus, with 11 of these 12 studies having included youth; six studies included adults in their sample. How trafficking is operationalized also varies; seven studies focused only on sex trafficking, four provided a combined prevalence estimate for sex and labor trafficking, and two provided separate prevalence estimates for sex and labor trafficking. Moreover, most studies focus on a narrow population (e.g., homeless youth or students).

***This is the first sex trafficking prevalence study set in the United States that includes adults.<sup>1</sup>***



Study methods, data sources, and estimation strategies have also varied widely across studies. To estimate prevalence, the studies reported here included administrative or other secondary data (n = 7) and survey or interview data (n = 6). The number of study participants ranged from 185 to nearly 300,000. Estimation strategies included MSE (n = 5), probability samples (n = 3), network samples (n = 1), and other novel approaches (n = 3).

***This is the first prevalence study in the United States that has separately estimated the total number of sex trafficking victims and the number of minor victims in the same geography using different analytic strategies.***



In addition to estimating the number of sex trafficking victims, this study included semistructured interviews with individuals with lived experience in commercial sex who had worked under the direction of a third party (e.g., pimp) or who identified as having been trafficked. These interviews supplemented what we learned from the prevalence estimate to provide a broader understanding of the nature of exploitation and experiences of survivors.

***Collectively, the prevalence estimates and the rich qualitative interview data laid a strong foundation for developing recommendations for responding to commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking in a coordinated, strategic manner.***

<sup>1</sup> The other studies reported here that included adults either focused on commercial sex generally (not sex trafficking) or provided a combined sex and labor trafficking prevalence estimate.

## CHAPTER 3

# STUDY DESIGN

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### Participatory Action Research Approach

This study used a participatory action research (PAR) approach. This approach is characterized by ongoing and meaningful involvement in the research process by community members who are affected by a particular social issue or topic pertinent to the research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Stringer, 2014). It is an approach well suited to working with hidden, marginalized, and stigmatized communities (Jumarali et al., 2021). PAR offers numerous benefits to both the community members involved and to the rigor and applicability of the research project. For community members, a PAR approach can provide meaningful leadership and professional development opportunities (Jumarali et al., 2021). Guided by and informed by community members' expertise and perspective, research projects using a PAR approach can overcome traditional sampling challenges with hard-to-reach populations; they can improve sampling design and recruitment of potential research participants (Gerassi et al., 2017; Martin, 2013). Furthermore, PAR projects are noted for their direct applicability to local concerns or issues in the community (Stringer, 2014).

This study involved a practitioner-researcher partnership. The project management was led by the Sacramento nonprofit Community Against Sexual Harm (CASH). The other project partners were RTI International and the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at Sacramento State University. CASH was responsible for managing the project, conducting interviews, and soliciting data for the MSE. RTI planned and designed the study, created data collection instruments, analyzed quantitative and qualitative data, and oversaw reporting and deliverables. ISR managed RDS recruitment and transcriptions and de-identified all data before analysis. As a local service provider with extensive experience working with people involved in commercial sex, CASH also convened and facilitated a monthly Survivor Advisory Council (SAC) composed of nine members who provided expert guidance on the research project, guiding the overall research direction early in the project and then focusing on the RDS component of this project (described below).



Although prior research on sex trafficking has used a PAR approach, this is the first study that has involved survivors as interviewers. Selection criteria for being on the SAC included having been trafficked, having physical and emotional stability to regularly attend meetings that discuss sex trafficking, and having interest in contributing actively to the group. CASH used its professional and personal networks to identify and invite people who met these criteria. All invited members agreed to participate. SAC meetings were held in person at CASH's office, adhering to CASH's and county and state COVID-19 mandates and precautions. CASH compensated all participants \$150 for each meeting attended and provided meals. Participation was voluntary and optional, and SAC members could choose to discontinue their membership at any time. Racial composition of the group included five Black women, three white women, and one-mixed race Native American woman.

The SAC met monthly from June 2020 through June 2022. Meeting topics included identification and prioritization of interview topics, question wording, methods and locations for outreach, review of the qualitative codebook, interpretation of the findings, dissemination goals, and debriefing the processes throughout. The meetings were facilitated by the Executive Director of CASH and the Director of Operations, a human trafficking survivor advocate.

CASH also integrated its own peer advocacy model into this PAR study. Any SAC member who wished to conduct outreach, interviews, or both was hired as a research assistant and trained by ISR on interviewing and outreach techniques. Research assistants were able to access an in-house therapist throughout the outreach and interview process, if needed. Six individuals participated in outreach activities, and six participated in interviewing. In this way, all outreach and interviews were led by people with lived experience in commercial sex, sex trafficking, or both.

## Mixed-Methods Approach

### PRIMARY OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY

1. Estimate the prevalence of sex trafficking in Sacramento County
2. Better understand the nature and scope of sex trafficking in Sacramento County
3. Provide data capable of informing a strategic, coordinated, multisystem response to prevent and respond to sex trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of people in Sacramento County.<sup>2</sup>

Given that the objectives of this study include generating a prevalence estimate as well as developing a deeper understanding of the lived experience of people who have been trafficked for sex, this study used a mixed-methods design. Mixed-methods research, which typically combines quantitative and qualitative approaches, is often used for broadening the depth of understanding of a topic and for corroboration, or triangulation, of findings (Johnson et al., 2016).

The use of mixed methods is needed to address our research aims. We used MSE, which relies on multiple sources of administrative data, to estimate the prevalence of sex trafficking in Sacramento County from 2014 through 2020. Additionally, we interviewed sex trafficking victims in Sacramento County using an RDS design to gather more contextual information about their exploitation. We initially planned to use the interviews to generate a second prevalence estimate, which requires sampling from the broader population of individuals who sell or trade sex (i.e., people who have worked independently and were not forced to give some or all of their earnings to a third party). However, we decided it would be more beneficial to prioritize interviewing victims and survivors to better understand their lived experiences and needs. Their perspective is critical in developing recommendations to improve the response to commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking that will be effective in addressing their needs.

<sup>2</sup> The study was reviewed by three institutional review boards: RTI, ISR, and Sterling. The study was also protected by a certificate of confidentiality issued by the National Institutes of Health.

## Administrative Data

MSE uses the overlap in multiple incomplete lists of individuals to estimate the total number of individuals who are members in the lists. “Overlap” means that individuals could be observed in more than one list (e.g., they had interactions with law enforcement and with one or more victim service providers). “Incomplete” indicates that no one list exhaustively documents all trafficking victims. These methods arose from work in ecology, in which animals were captured, tagged, and recaptured and the total population size was estimated for the recaptures. As an alternative to “recaptures,” multiple lists with overlap are typically used in human populations. MSE is often applied to human research when usual research methods such as random sampling are unlikely to work as expected. The current application looked at lists of individuals identified as sex trafficking victims from data collected from 2014 through 2020 in Sacramento. Our research team identified local agencies and organizations that might have administrative data with information about people who have experienced sex trafficking, including victim service providers, community health providers, law enforcement and other criminal justice–related agencies, and others. We then approached these various organizations about this study and inquired about whether their records were such that they could provide a list of known sex trafficking victims.



**Maintaining the confidentiality of known sex trafficking victim lists was paramount.**

Maintaining the confidentiality of individuals on these lists was paramount. Rather than requesting or collecting any personally identifiable information about sex trafficking victims from agencies that were eligible and willing to contribute information to this study, we asked that agencies instead provide a list of victims using meta-attributes to create a unique identifier in lieu of providing names or other identifying details. These unique identifiers were created using selected initials and digits from birthdates that could not be linked back to individuals. As with prior human trafficking prevalence studies in other geographic regions in the United States (see, for example, Farrell et al., 2019), the unique identifiers were sufficiently detailed to allow for matching across administrative lists. It is important to note that the requests for data came from a member of our research team who is herself the director of a local community-based advocacy organization, a trusted and known figure in the local anti-trafficking community.

We approached 14 agencies to contribute administrative data to this study. In total, nine organizations—three criminal justice agencies, three direct service providers, two child welfare agencies, and one health care organization—provided lists of unique identifiers representing known sex trafficking victims from 2014 through 2020. One direct service provider was unable to provide data for the study because of data sharing restrictions placed on recipients of funding under the Violence Against Women Act. Two other service providers who primarily work with other populations and serve only a small number of sex trafficking victims did not contribute data. One small law enforcement agency and another criminal justice agency that has records on juveniles involved in commercial sex were unable to provide data in time for analysis.

The identification of sex trafficking victimization varied across the data providers and the variables they had stored. Law enforcement agencies were instructed to extract all cases investigated as sex trafficking as well as cases of prostitution and pimping or pandering that included indicators of trafficking in the

incident report (e.g., threat of or actual physical or nonphysical harm, demeaning or demoralizing the victim, disorienting, and depriving the victim of alternatives). The other data providers included all cases of sex trafficking victims based on their agency's definition of trafficking and its trafficking screening procedure. The screening processes varied in rigor; they included checklists of trafficking indicators, caseworker screening, Commercial Sexual Exploitation—Identification (CSE-It) Tool, and victim self-identification.

### **MSE Analytic Strategy**

The first step when conducting MSE is determining whether the data represent an open or closed population. An open population is one that members can enter and exit during the study period (sometimes multiple times); it requires repeated observations of individuals with the same capture method (or list). A closed population is one for which individuals were considered members at any time during the study; it requires multiple independent lists. The primary analyses used in the report used closed population models. For the lists from the two child welfare organizations, repeated observations were available, and an open population model was used to reanalyze data in this subset of 696 children after restructuring the data such that the columns corresponded years from 2014 to 2020.

The closed population MSE models were fit using the `estimatepopulation.0()` function of the `SparseMSE` (Chan et al., 2019a) R package (R Core Team, 2021), using the stepwise procedure of Chan et al. (2019b)). The open population model was fit using the `openp()` function of the `Rcapture` (Rivest & Baillargeon, 2019) R package.

### **Semistructured Interview Data**

In addition to collecting administrative data, this study team also interviewed a sample of sex trafficking victims and survivors in Sacramento. The interviews were intended to gather additional information about the nature of sex trafficking and experiences of sex trafficking victims and survivors in the county. The population eligible to participate in interviews included English- and Spanish-speaking adults who had engaged in commercial sex under the direction of a third party in Sacramento County within the past 5 years.

To understand the nature of commercial sexual exploitation in Sacramento County, we included a series of questions derived from the Action-Means-Purpose (A-M-P) model, developed by the Polaris Project (2012), to describe the types of exploitation participants experienced. The A-M-P model establishes that a perpetrator acted (whether by inducing, recruiting, harboring, transporting, or obtaining) to exploit a person (by means of force, fraud, or coercion) for the purpose of commercial sex (sex trafficking) or other labor or services (labor trafficking). Questions about types of exploitation experienced were worded to elicit a "yes" or "no" response, and many interviewees provided more narrative detail about their experience.

### **NATURE OF EXPLOITATION**

Did you know [TRAFFICKER(s)] when you started working for them?

Did others work for [TRAFFICKER(s)]?

How would you describe [TRAFFICKER(s)]'s network of family, friends, and other associates?

How did you fit into [TRAFFICKER(s)]'s network?

At any point during or after you worked for [TRAFFICKER(s)], did you try to access any services such as these available in the community?

Did you feel like there were services available in the community to meet your needs?

Did you feel like service providers that you met with understood any trauma that you'd experienced?

At any point, have you been stopped, cited, or arrested by the police for prostitution?

Has COVID-19 changed anything about your experience with sex work?

These semistructured interviews were also intended to gather contextual information to better understand the nature and scope of sex trafficking in Sacramento. With input from the SAC, and with the goal of learning more about topics that can inform the local response to trafficking, the research team determined that the interviews should include questions geared toward establishing a deeper understanding of participants' recruitment into sex trafficking, the networks of both sex trafficking survivors and their traffickers, survivor experiences with services in the community, strategies for navigating an exit from sex trafficking scenarios, encounters with law enforcement, and the impact of COVID-19 on the commercial sex market.



**Recruitment: Respondent-Driven Sampling**

Interview participants were recruited using RDS, which relies on social link tracing to sample hidden or hard-to-reach populations. The RDS recruitment process is designed to use the social networks connecting members of the target population (Crawford et al., 2018). For this study, we began with a number of seed participants who were recruited because they were believed to have robust social networks of other people involved in commercial sex in or around Sacramento County. Each of these participants was paid \$50 for participating in a semistructured interview. At the end of the interview, each participant was given three coupons with unique referral codes to share with other people in their social networks who met the eligibility criteria for the study (English- or Spanish-speaking adults who had engaged in commercial sex under the direction of a third party in Sacramento County within the past 5 years). Participants were asked to recruit up to three other people to participate in the study using these coupons and informed that they would receive an additional \$25 for each person who completed an interview. Individuals who recruited the maximum of three people were given an additional \$25. Those recruited participants then recruited others from their social networks to participate in the study. In this way, RDS uses existing social networks to identify and recruit members of the target population for inclusion in the study. While similar to snowball sampling, RDS uses an incentivized process that also limits the number of recruits by each study participant in an attempt to ensure broad representation across the target study population.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In nearly all cases, we limited the number of referrals to three. However, exceptions were made to reach subpopulations that are particularly hard to find (e.g., men and transgender individuals).

**CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION**

- Worked under the control of another person
- Work in sex trade was not voluntary
- Did not know they would be doing sex work
- Did not feel free to leave
- Physical or sexual violence against them or someone they cared about
- Violence inflicted on someone else in front of them
- Emotional abuse or coercion
- Threats of something bad happening to someone they care about
- Threats of deportation or law enforcement
- Confiscation of identification documents
- Restricted communication with or ability to visit family or friends
- Surveillance in living space or while working
- Compensation withheld
- Threats of harm to reputation

Participants could recruit others either by distributing paper referral coupons (which included a QR code that, when scanned with a smart phone, brought up a toll-free number associated with the study) or by texting pictures of the referral coupons to other people in their networks. The toll-free line was staffed by research team members who could screen callers for inclusion in the study. When a potential participant reached a member of the research team via the toll-free number, they were asked to provide the unique referral code from their coupon, and then asked a series of simple questions to establish their eligibility for the study.

#### THESE QUESTIONS INCLUDED THE FOLLOWING:

1. What is your age?
2. Have you traded sex for money or something of value, such as a place to stay, transportation, food, or anything else?
  - a. If yes, when?
  - b. If yes, where?

If a participant met the participation criteria, we further probed about whether they had given some or all their money to a third party in an effort to prioritize interviews with those who had been exploited. Participants were then given the option of scheduling an interview. Initially, all interviews were planned to occur face-to-face, but to observe COVID protocols and to increase flexibility for participants, we also offered virtual interviews via Zoom. Participants were asked to bring their recruitment coupon or to provide their recruitment coupon code at the time of the interview.

#### ***Data Collection***

Before we began an interview, we collected verbal consent from participants in an effort to maintain anonymity. Interviewers either read or played a video of the informed consent form to participants and offered an overview of the study, procedures, contact information for further questions about the project, and a copy of the consent information. From September 2021 through March 2022, we conducted 159 interviews. The vast majority were conducted face-to-face; fewer than 10 were conducted via Zoom. All interviews followed a semistructured interview format, and with the permission of participants, interviews were recorded.

At the conclusion of interviews, participants were given three coupons, each with a unique recruitment code linked back to that participant, and instructions about recruiting additional participants. With these recruitment instructions, the interviewer also explained that participants could call the study telephone number to find out whether their invited friends and colleagues had completed their interviews, so they would know whether they were due any compensation for the recruitment efforts. If they were, they could arrange to collect the additional recruitment compensation. Compensation was distributed via cash, Cash App, or PayPal.

#### ***Interview Data Processing and Preparation***

Recorded interviews were transcribed using an automated transcription service. A team member reviewed the transcripts for accuracy, cleaned and edited any inaccuracies, and redacted any identifying information. The de-identified transcripts were then qualitatively analyzed.

A quantitative data set, including the referral chain information from the RDS and responses to closed-ended questions, was also developed. During interviews, interviewers recorded responses to the questions that may be answered with a “yes” or “no,” such as the types of exploitation participants had experienced,

on a paper instrument. This information was then entered into a spreadsheet that was later reviewed by the qualitative analysis team. Because the interviews were conversational, additional information, clarification, or caveats to a discrete response could be included in the full transcript. To fill in any missing responses and ensure the accuracy of the data entry, members of the qualitative research team confirmed the responses to these questions during the process of coding the transcripts. If the response or additional detail in the transcript clearly conflicted with the original response, the variable was recoded. If the response seemed unclear, a secondary review was requested from the qualitative coding team and consensus was reached. Other quantifiable information from the interviews—including demographics, network size, market sectors (e.g., street, online, agencies), and interactions with law enforcement (e.g., arrest, screening for trafficking)—was also entered into the data set.

### ***Qualitative Analysis Strategy***

Qualitative data were analyzed using QSR NVivo, a qualitative coding software. A coding system was established based on (1) describing the nature of sex trafficking exploitation of participants and (2) better understanding recruitment and entry into commercial sex, networks of victims and traffickers, and experiences with law enforcement and service providers. Research team members met regularly to review and revise the codebook during initial qualitative analysis. Additionally, to ensure interrater reliability, before individual coding began, all members of research team involved in qualitative analysis coded several interviews simultaneously and then met to discuss any discrepancies and to establish processes for areas of disagreement.

### ***Quantitative Analytic Strategy***

The data set developed and refined through coding the transcripts was imported into R, a statistical analysis program, for data cleaning and analysis. All analyses were descriptive. Counts and means or frequencies were calculated for all the variables in the data set, such as the number and types of exploitation experienced. Crosstabs were also calculated to explore variation across demographic characteristics.

## CHAPTER 4

# PREVALENCE ESTIMATES



Key to measuring prevalence using multiple systems estimation (MSE) is identifying how many times an individual appears on more than one administrative list provided by agencies that regularly interact with the target population. Nine lists include both minor and adult sex trafficking victims from 2015 through 2020. **Table 4-1** summarizes this overlap, or the number of times individuals appeared in the lists, and **Table 4-2** shows the number of individuals who appeared on each list. As expected, the vast majority of individuals appeared in only one of the nine lists; at maximum, two individuals appeared on five lists.

For the open population model fit to all nine lists of minor and adult victims, the estimated population size was  $N = 13,079$ , with a 95% confidence interval (CI) of 9,637 to 17,953. In other words, about 13,000 minors and adults trafficked for sex at some point during the period 2015–2020 in Sacramento County. This does not mean 13,000 individuals are currently being victimized. It is also important to note that the length of time that victims were trafficked varies, such that some may have been trafficked for a couple days during this period and others for the entire 6-year data collection period. Because of the variation in length of trafficking exploitation, we cannot use this estimate to determine the number of victims in a single year or day.

**Table 4-1. Number of Lists in Which Minor and Adult Victims Appeared**

# of Lists	Freq	%
1	1,115	82.23
2	190	14.01
3	43	3.17
4	6	0.44
5	2	0.15
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,356</b>	<b>100.00</b>

**Table 4-2. Frequencies by Data Source**

List	#	%
A	153	11.28
B	94	6.94
C	139	10.25
D	629	46.39
E	272	20.06
F	134	9.88
G	31	2.29
H	24	1.77
I	182	13.42
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,356</b>	<b>100.00</b>

This analysis further suggests that there are 11.2 times more victims than were identified by law enforcement and service providers.



Although we did not receive individual-level data from two criminal justice agencies, they were able to provide aggregate numbers on cases. One source, which has data on the commercial sexual exploitation of minors, reported a total of 242 cases. The other source included eight victims in cases that were investigated as human trafficking. As described in Chapter 3, three direct service providers in the area did not provide individual or aggregate data. Although we do not know their exact number of cases, we expect that they have relatively few because they primarily serve other populations. None of these cases were included in the prevalence estimates.



A topic that has not yet been studied in the MSE literature is how sensitive MSE estimates are to the inclusion or exclusion of different lists. One likely reason impeding this type of research is that most studies that use MSE draw on a very small number of lists (a notable exception is Bales et al. [2020], who reported using eight lists with a total n = 172). A comprehensive simulation study is needed to evaluate MSE estimate sensitivity to list inclusion, exclusion, and patterns of overlap between included or excluded lists.

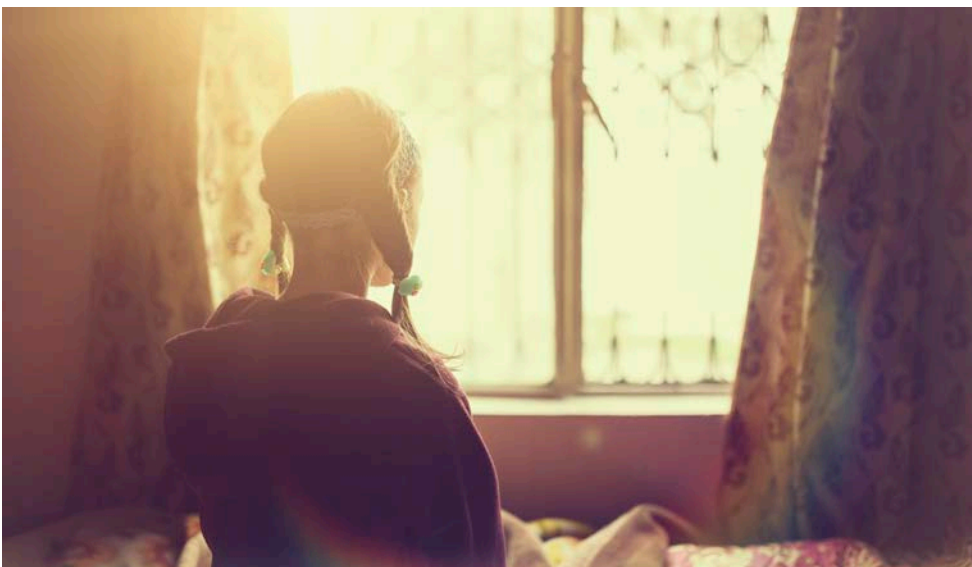
**Table 4-3** summarizes the repeated detections of minor victims for the data used in the closed population model, which estimated a population size of 1,610 with a 95% CI of 1,576 to 1,645. In other words, about 1,600 minors were trafficked for sex at some point during 2014 and 2020. Because this analysis included only two of the nine data sets used above and relies on a different analytic model, the total estimate and estimate for minor victims cannot be compared (i.e., the number of adult victims cannot be derived by subtracting the estimate for minors from the total estimate).

**Table 4-3. Number of Times Minor Victims Were Detected, 2014–2020**

# of Years	Freq	%
1	597	82.23
2	74	14.01
3	21	3.17
4	4	0.44
<b>Total</b>	<b>696</b>	<b>100</b>

## Summary and Recommendations

We found that fewer than 9% of minor and adult sex trafficking victims in Sacramento County were known to law enforcement or service providers for the 6-year study period of 2015–2020. This estimate is based on data provided by nine agencies and organizations that regularly interact with sex trafficking victims and survivors. Many victims are not reaching out for help; if they do, they may not be identified as victims. There is clearly room to better identify and serve victims of sex trafficking. In the chapters that follow, additional information is provided about victims’ lived experiences and service needs that help inform the best way to better support them. For detailed recommendations on improving the response to sex trafficking, see Chapter 14.



## CHAPTER 5

# CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEWEES AND THEIR NETWORKS

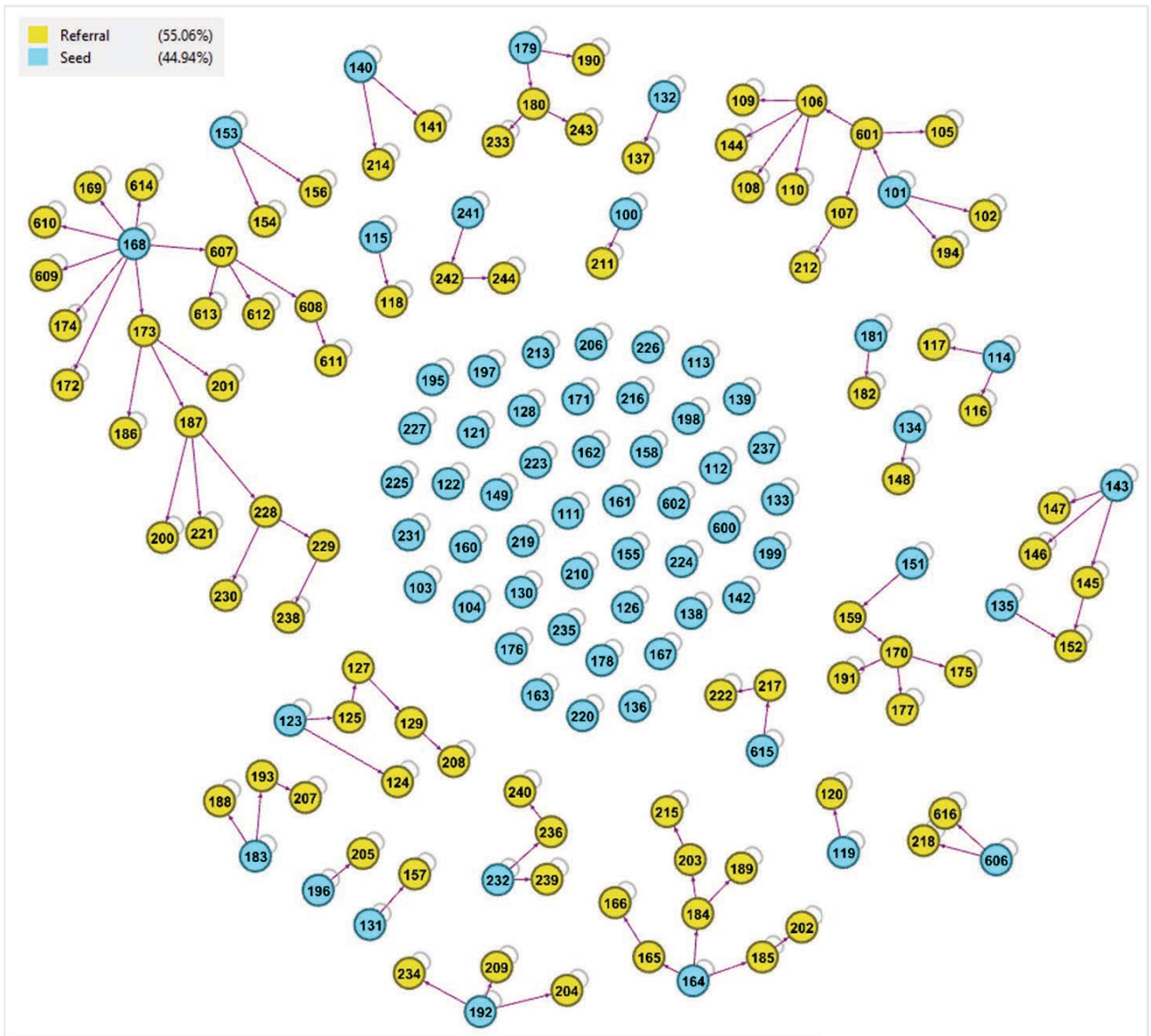
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### Sample Description

To provide a reliable and rich description of the experiences of individuals involved in commercial sex who worked for a third party in Sacramento County, we recruited a sample of 159 interviewees using respondent-driven sampling (RDS). One interview was discarded because the responses were incoherent and could not be reliably coded. We report on the findings from the remaining 158 interviews. Seventy-one individuals were initial recruits, or seeds, and 87 were subsequent recruits. **Figure 5-1** illustrates the sample based on the coupon referrals (the seeds are represented by blue circles and the recruits are represented in gold). This type of figure, called a network plot, has circles (or nodes) to represent individuals and lines with arrows (or edges) showing the direction of referrals. These plots can display additional information in the circles by using a set of colors to represent a discrete characteristic (e.g., race) or a color spectrum to represent a continuous characteristic (e.g., age). Figure 5-1 shows that many referral chains did not take off, as shown by seeds that are not connected to others. Others were quite productive, with the longest extending for five waves. There are numerous potential explanations for why some referral chains were successful and others were not. Some seed participants simply may not have provided referral coupons to others (e.g., they may not be well networked with others involved in commercial sex, or they may not feel that compensation for their participation was adequate); some recruits who received the coupons may have chosen not to participate (e.g., they may be distrustful of researchers, or they may fear that their traffickers would find out).

Figure 5-1. Sample Network Based on Coupon Referrals



As shown in **Table 5-1**, the resulting sample included a group of individuals diverse in age, race, and ethnicity. The mean age at the time of the interview was 36, with a range from 18 to 64. The mean age when participants first sold or traded sex was 20, with a range from 1 to 49. This wide range of entry ages adds to the literature challenging the prominent myth that the average age of entry to sex work is 12–14 years (Cronley et al., 2016; Footer et al., 2020; Hickle & Roe-Sepowitz, 2016).

**Table 5-1. Interviewee Demographic Characteristics**

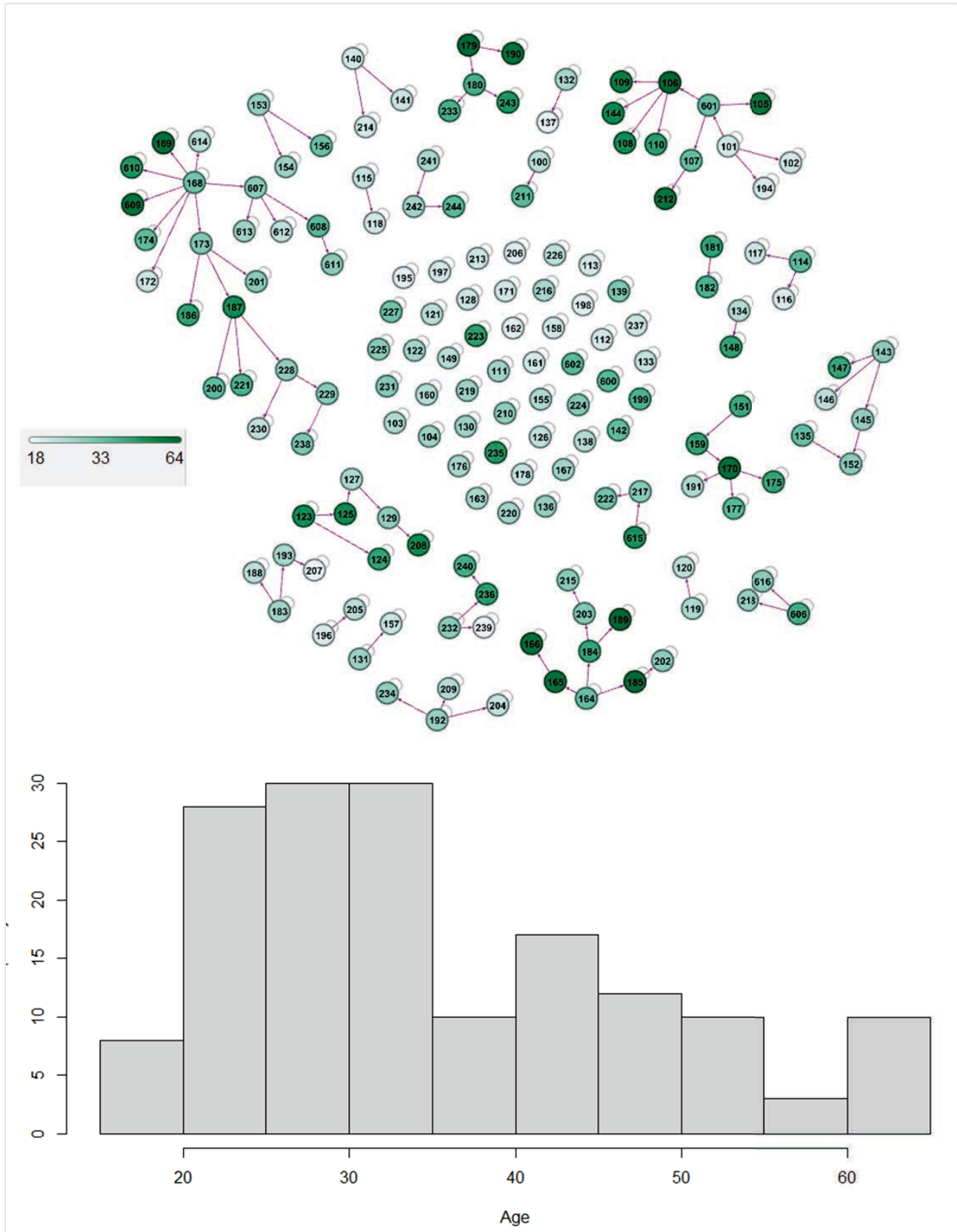
Characteristic	Number	Percent or mean
Age at interview	18–64	35.8
Age first engaged in commercial sex	1–49	20.3
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	149	94.3
Male	8	5
Transgender	1	0.63
<b>Race</b>		
White only	20	12.7
Black or African American only	75	47.5
Native American or Alaskan Native only	3	1.9
Asian only	0	0
Hawaiian or Pacific Islander only	1	0.63
Other race only	11	6.9
Two or more races	15	9.5
<b>Latinx</b>		
	17	9.3

Respondents were asked to describe their race or ethnicity. Because the question was open-ended, responses varied greatly from individuals responding with one race or multiple specific races, reporting only Latinx ethnicity but no race, reporting specific heritages (e.g., Hebrew, Filipino), or responding “biracial” or “multiracial.” For purposes of reporting, we used the U.S. Census definition and classified individuals as being of a single race, if only one was reported, or of two or more races, if multiple races or multiracial was indicated. Similarly for ethnicity, if an individual identified as being Hispanic or Latinx, or reported Spanish-speaking lineage, they were coded as Latinx. Because we did not explicitly ask whether individuals were Latinx or not, those who did not identify as such were assumed to be non-Latinx. Our measures of race and ethnicity rely entirely on how individuals identified themselves. A large number of interviewees identified as Black or African American only (47.5%), followed by white only (12.7%). Very few respondents identified as Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (n = 1) or American Indian/Alaska Native (n = 3). The race and ethnicities reported by study respondents do not mirror those of Sacramento County. In particular, we find that Black individuals are overrepresented in our study sample (47.5% of study sample, compared with 10.9% of Sacramento County residents) and white individuals are underrepresented (12.7% of study sample and 62.8% of Sacramento County residents; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

Although intensive efforts were made to include individuals who identify as male or transgender (e.g., we recruited male seeds and allowed one seed to recruit more than three individuals because they were well-connected with this group), most interviewees identified as female (94.3%). The demographics of participants in this study are not representative of the entire population of people with lived experience of commercial sex in Sacramento County—they represent only the individuals that we were able to recruit through our RDS strategy.

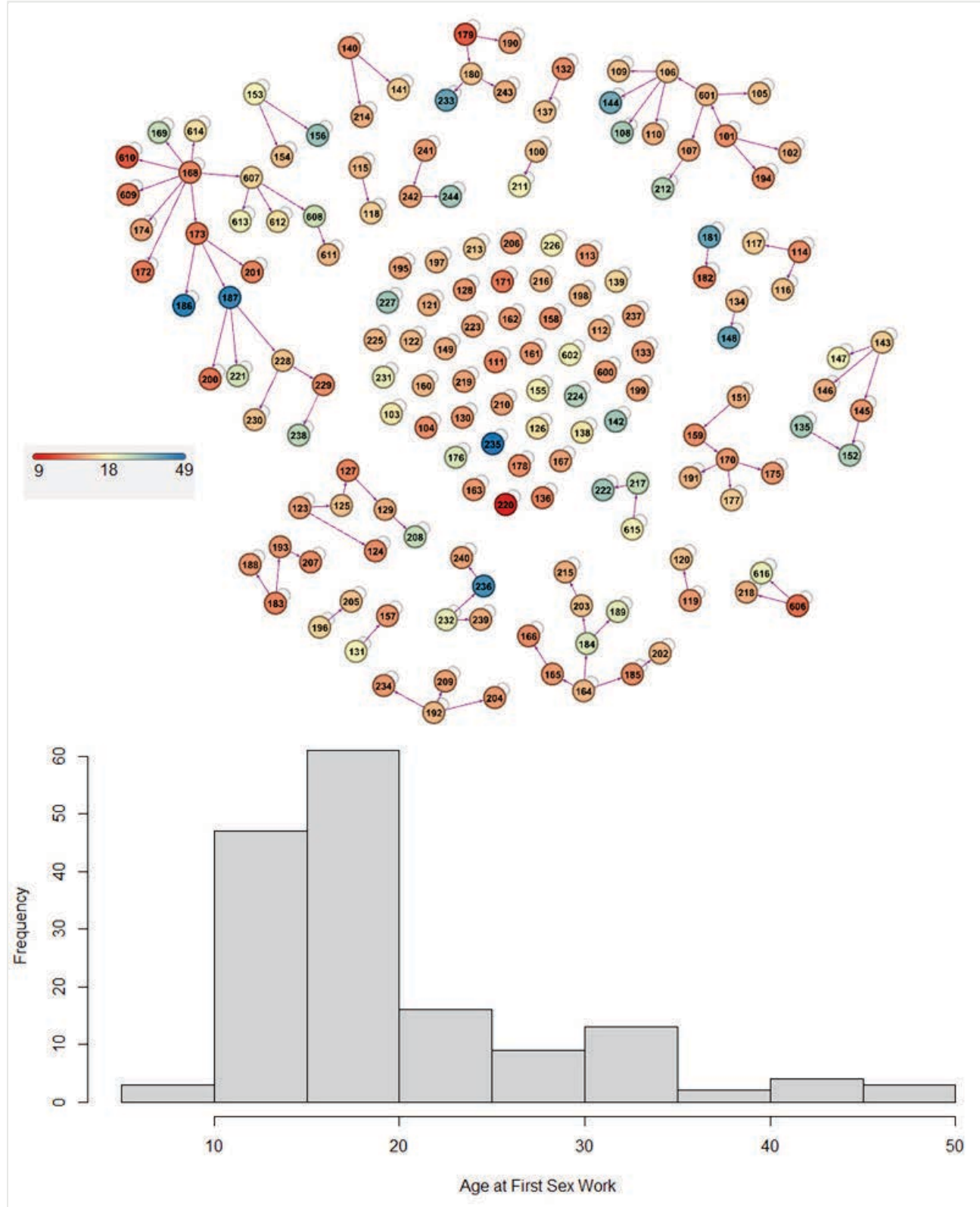
The RDS recruitment method allows us to explore how interconnected the community is across age, gender, racial, and ethnic lines. **Figure 5-2** illustrates the coupon referral network by age at interview. The networks of interviewees appear diverse regarding age. For example, the referral chain that started with seed 168 includes interviewees across the age spectrum.

**Figure 5-2. Sample Network Based on Coupon Referrals, by Age at Interview**



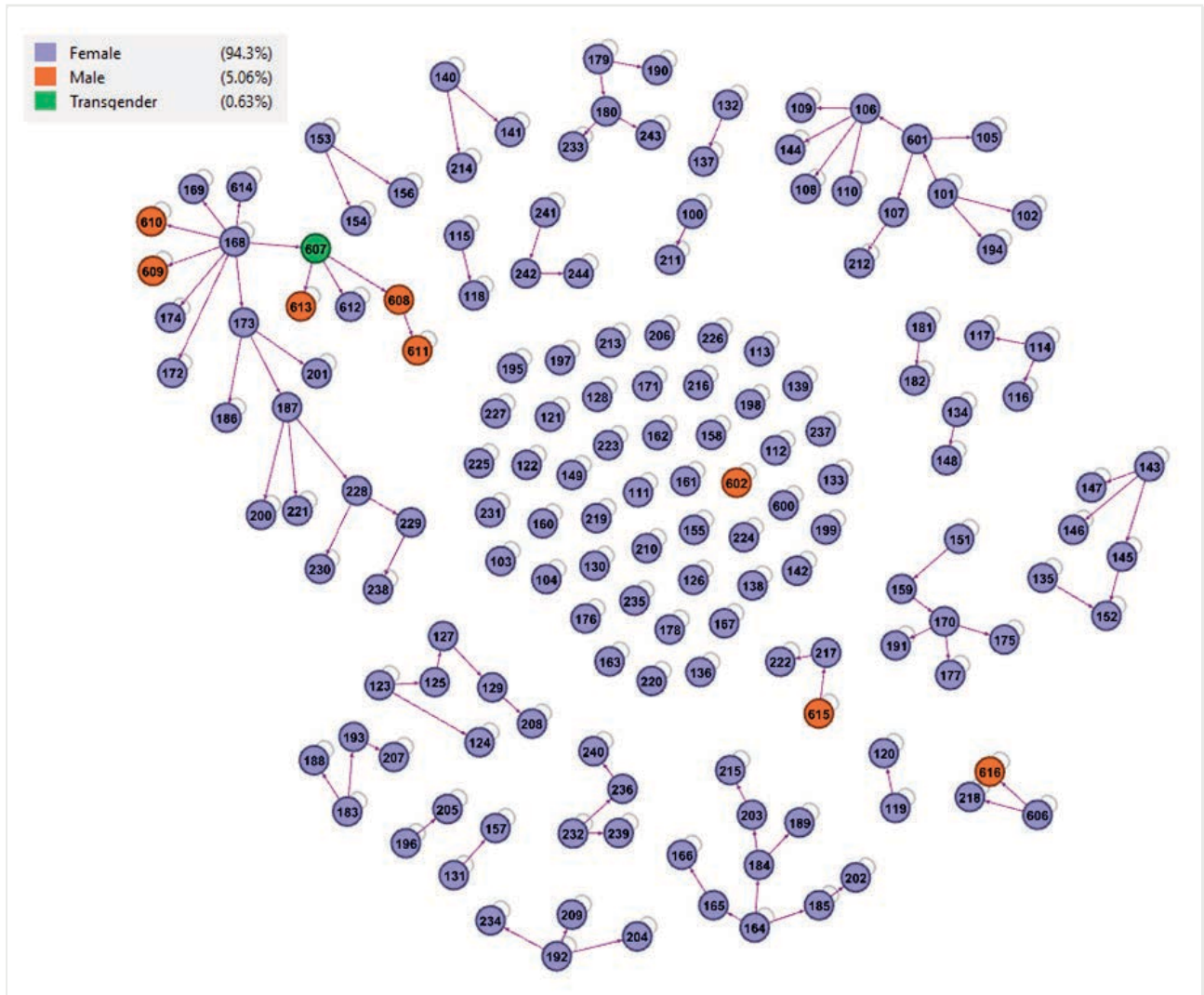
There is variation in the degree of connection that individuals have with those who entered commercial sex at different ages from themselves (**Figure 5-3**). Although the age of entry skews young, individuals who entered later in life appear to have connections with those who entered earlier. For example, the referral chain that started with seed 236 includes a broad range of ages at entry. However, other networks primarily include those who entered commercial sex at similar ages. For example, the chains that started with seeds 183 and 192 both appear to include only those who entered relatively young.

**Figure 5-3. Sample Network Based on Coupon Referrals, by Age at Entry Into Commercial Sex**



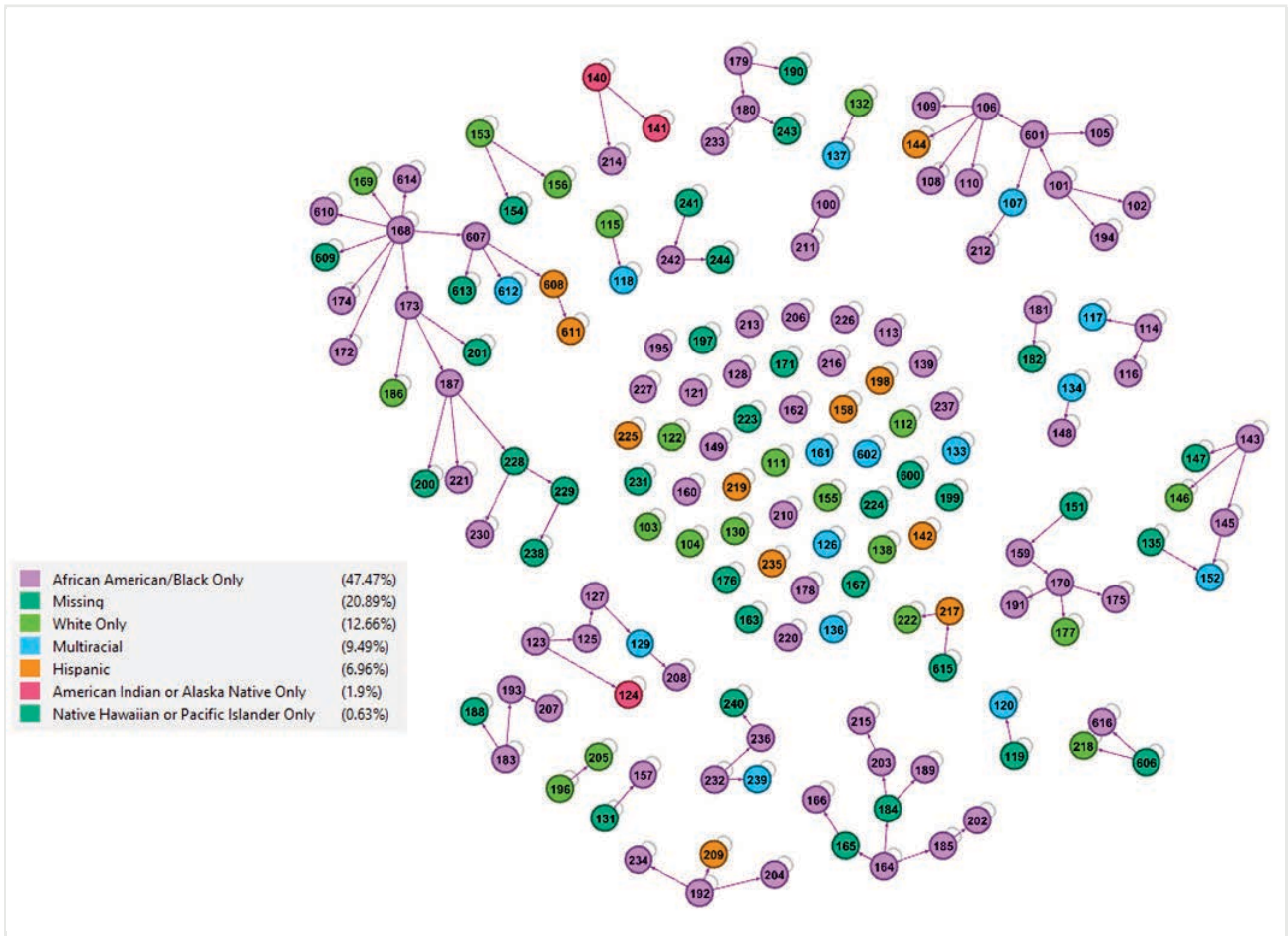
**Figure 5-4** illustrates the coupon referrals by gender. Although over 90% of the sample identified as female, there appears to be some diversity in the networks of male, female, and transgender individuals. For example, one male respondent (615) referred a female, and two female respondents (168 and 606) referred males. The largest network (started by seed 168) included male, female, and transgender individuals. However, many referral chains included only females.

**Figure 5-4. Sample Network Based on Coupon Referrals, by Gender**



**Figure 5-5** illustrates the coupon referrals by race and ethnicity. The referral networks appear to be racially diverse. Although more than half of respondents identified as African American or Black only, many of the networks include multiple racial groups.

**Figure 5-5. Sample Network Based on Coupon Referrals, by Race and Ethnicity**







## Market Characteristics

In an effort to capture the full spectrum of the commercial sex market in Sacramento County, we tried to identify seeds who had worked in various market sectors, including finding work on the street; online; and at truck stops, motels, brothels, and massage parlors. However, given limited contacts in some sectors, the visible availability for street-based recruitment, and differences in receptivity to the cash incentive to participate, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of the entire market in the county. Because some individuals find sex buyers through multiple means, respondents were asked, “How did (or do) you normally find work?” in an open-ended manner. The short text responses were reviewed and grouped into nine categories: street, online, truck stops, agencies, bars and casinos, massage parlors, brothels, motels and hotels, bathhouses, and other. Participants’ responses were coded into separate dummy variables for each market sector, and totals were calculated.

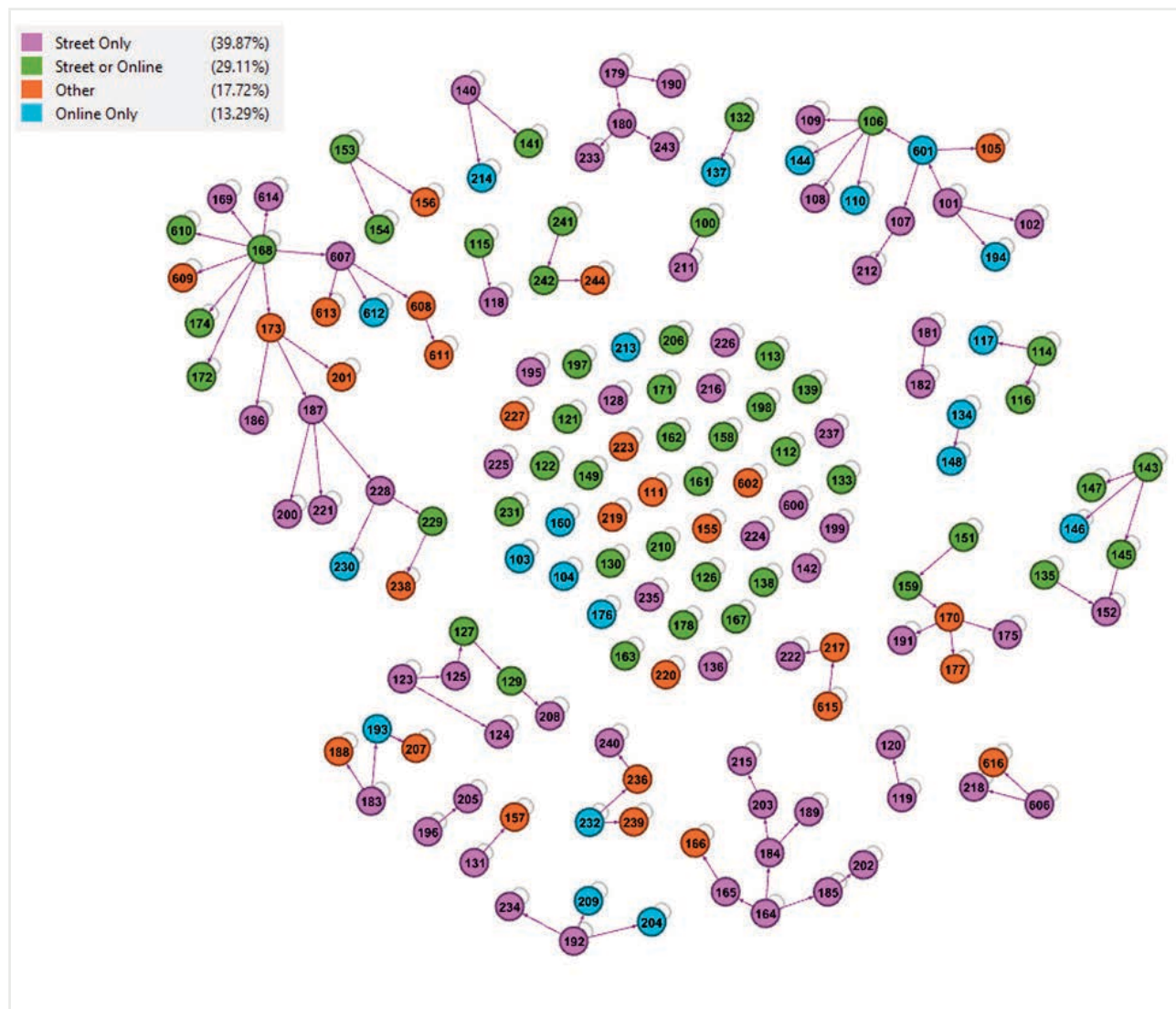
On average, respondents reported finding work in one or two market sectors, ranging from one to six. As shown in **Table 5-2**, the most common markets identified were street, online, truck stops, and bars/casinos. Other sectors described included massage parlors, brothels, escort agencies, hotels and motels, and bathhouses. However, it is important to note that this distribution may reflect not the entire market for commercial sex in Sacramento but rather the individuals we were able to reach. Our existing connections were strongest among individuals who sell or trade sex on the street. Despite efforts to reach other markets—for example, those who work in massage parlors—we were largely unable to successfully start referral chains in each potential market.

**Table 5-2. Market Characteristics**

Sector	Number	Percent
<b>Total</b>	<b>211</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Street	109	32.70
Online	67	31.80
Truck stops	10	4.70
Agencies	1	0.47
Bars and casinos	7	3.30
Massage parlors	3	1.90
Brothels	4	1.90
Hotels and motels	5	2.30
Bathhouses	1	0.47
Other	7	3.30

Because most interviewees reported working in multiple markets, we explored whether there were patterns such that certain sectors are typically worked by the same people. Among individuals who reported finding work through multiple sectors, the most common were street and online (64.5%). This variable was grouped into categories “street only,” “online only,” “street and online,” and “other” to visually explore how interconnected the community is across these various market segments. **Figure 5-6** illustrates the coupon referrals by market sector. The networks of interviewees do not appear to be limited to one market sector; most of the chains include individuals who find work through different venues.

**Figure 5-6. Sample Network Based on Coupon Referrals, by Market Sector**



## Summary and Recommendations

Using RDS, we interviewed a sample of sex trafficking victims and survivors in Sacramento. Although the study participants identified primarily as female, they were diverse in race, ethnicity, age, and age at entry into commercial sex. Most of the victims were involved in street-based or online commercial sex, or both, and some had experience in other types of markets. The social networks of participants appear diverse; however, the RDS yielded many seeds who did not refer others to participate. This limits our ability to draw conclusions about the nature of social networks among this population. Additional methodological work is needed to identify where the process breaks down (i.e., participants choosing not to refer or referrals choosing not to participate), whether it is more (or less) effective with certain subpopulations, and how it could be more successfully implemented.

The interviews were intended to gather additional information about the nature of sex trafficking and experiences of sex trafficking victims and survivors in the county. The remaining chapters describe their lived experiences in the following domains:

- Nature of exploitation
- Recruitment and entry into commercial sex
- Trafficking networks and operations
- Exiting commercial sex and leaving a trafficker
- Encounters with law enforcement
- Barriers and pathways to services
- Experiences with medical care
- Experiences with community services

## CHAPTER 6

# NATURE OF EXPLOITATION

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To better understand the strategies that traffickers use to recruit and control victims, we asked interviewees a series of questions about exploitative experiences they may have experienced. Interviews began with a short series of screening questions to confirm that their activities in commercial sex involved a third party. These included questions of whether respondents had ever “had to give some or all of the money you made from selling sex to someone else, even if it was in exchange for transportation, rent, motel rooms, or food” and whether they had “worked under the control of a pimp or another person.” Individuals who responded “no” to both of those questions ( $n = 2$ ) were excluded from analyses about exploitation at the hands of a pimp or other third party. Among the 156 respondents who had worked under a facilitator, 3 did not answer any of the exploitation questions. All interviewees who did respond to these items reported experiencing at least one type of exploitation and are described as sex trafficking victims or survivors throughout the rest of this report.

The purpose of including qualitative interviews in this study was to understand the nature of exploitation. What were the strategies that pimps or traffickers used to compel participants to engage in sex work? How did this power and coercion manifest between study participants and their pimps or traffickers? This study sought to understand the extent of experiences with 13 unique forms of exploitation among study respondents, displayed in **Table 6-1**. Furthermore, this study sought to understand the impact of experiencing a confluence of forms of exploitation, as most respondents reported experiencing several. On average, respondents experienced 8 forms of exploitation. Two respondents reported just one form of exploitation, whereas 10 respondents described experiencing 12 of the 13 forms.

Some types of exploitation were overwhelmingly common experiences among the study sample. The most widely experienced forms of exploitation included having their pay or other compensation withheld (92.7%), being surveilled in their living or working spaces (89.4%), and not feeling free to leave a trafficker (88%). More than three-quarters of the interviewees reported experiencing physical or sexual violence (81.5%), experiencing emotional abuse (82.6%), and being prevented from communicating with or visiting family or friends (77.5%). Over half reported witnessing violence inflicted on someone else (68%), being threatened that something bad may happen (61.8%), having to start selling sex for a third party involuntarily (61.6%), or not knowing that they would be engaging in commercial sex (55%). Only 16% of respondents reported experiencing threats of deportation or reporting to law enforcement.

**Table 6-1. Nature of Exploitation**

Type of Exploitation	Number	Percent
Started working for third party involuntarily	93	61.6
Did not know they would be doing sex work	83	55.0
Did not feel free to leave	132	88.0
Experienced physical or sexual violence against themselves or someone they care about	123	81.5
Witnessed violence inflicted on someone else in front of them	103	67.8
Experienced emotional abuse, including bullying, taunting, belittling, or insulting	123	82.6
Experienced threats of something bad happening	94	61.8
Experienced threats of deportation or reporting to law enforcement	24	16.2
Had identification or other personal documents confiscated	103	68.7
Were prevented from communicating with or visiting family or friends	117	77.5
Were surveilled in living or working space	135	89.4
Had pay or other compensation withheld	140	92.7

**Note:** Interviewees were allowed to skip any question, and the number of respondents to each exploitation question varied. The percentages reported were calculated by dividing the number of affirmative responses by the number of responses to that question (i.e., individuals who did not respond were not included in the denominator). Some interviewees were asked about threats to their reputation; however, the results are not presented in the table because the question was not consistently asked.

Additional detail on exploitative experiences was provided in the interviews; however, responses did not always fall neatly into the discrete categories reported above. In the rest of this section, we describe themes that emerged about their exploitation.

## Physical and Sexual Violence

The vast majority of respondents have experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of traffickers, sex buyers, or others. Of those who experienced either type of violence, nearly all were physically harmed, and that abuse was perpetrated almost entirely by traffickers. Few respondents reported physical violence by sex buyers, or “tricks.” However, sexual violence was equally likely among traffickers and sex buyers.

Multiple respondents reported being in pleasant relationships with their pimps at first and then having the relationships escalate. Of those whose relationships started romantically, few interviewees expected that they would be doing sex work. Many interviewees shared stories of beginning what they expected to be a romantic relationship, only to find out that their partners expected them to make money. In these cases, violence generally ramped up after a tender start:

**“At first, you know, a good person when we met, he was a good person, like friend and all that. Then it like led to more like, you know, being involved with him and like romantically. And then, um, down the line, it’s just like, you know, he got very controlling and like very controlling and then I couldn’t go nowhere. I couldn’t see nobody, couldn’t talk to nobody. And then he was putting his hands on me and then you, yeah. And then it led to that.” (Female, 34)**

Traffickers who physically abused respondents tended to hit with their hands or fists. In some cases, however, pimps used various implements. One participant was burned with a glass pipe, and others were hit with pistols or guns. A participant recounted one such experience: “He cocked me in a head with a gun and I probably still have the... head damage and stuff.... Real bad headaches and stuff” (Female, 23). Another respondent described an attack by her trafficker that began when he “took [a penitentiary clock] off the wall, [and] whip my ass with that” (Female, 55). Those who were hit with hands or fists generally did not seek medical attention. Some were forbidden to do so by their abusers; others did not feel their injuries merited seeing a doctor, given the questions they expected to be asked, but in retrospect expect that they would not have been prevented from seeking attention if needed. The woman who still suffers headaches was never given medical care.

Only a few individuals who were originally prevented from seeking care were eventually allowed to do so, and many of these individuals were badly enough hurt or kept from care for long enough that they have lasting effects from their abuse. One respondent was stabbed by her trafficker and made to care for herself until it became clear two days later that she was in serious danger; she still retains scars from where doctors had to remove dead skin. Another was allowed treatment only once, after being raped and stabbed by a sex buyer. A third respondent has lasting memory issues from being hit on the head.

Our research questions aimed to gather information about violence toward not only respondents, but their loved ones and acquaintances as well. Nearly all interviewees reported having witnessed violence against others, even if they themselves were not the victims of physical abuse. In fact, most of those who were not directly hurt by their traffickers did witness their traffickers hurt others, and they took these experiences as intimidation tactics. The threats were credible, not only because respondents bore witness to violence, but because often the victims were working for the same traffickers. Several individuals describe hearing their “wifey,” a term used to describe women and girls under control of the same pimp (Shared Hope International, 2022), being beaten, raped, and in one case tortured: “I knew I wasn’t special.... That could be me, you know?” (Female, 64). In rare cases, traffickers also hurt respondents’ families or children.

Very few respondents responded to physical violence by harming their traffickers in return. Multiple female interviewees cited lack of relative strength as the reason for this, although one male respondent feared that anything he did to his trafficker would be taken out on his wifey who could not fight as well as he could. However, some interviewees did respond to violence by leaving. Several shared examples of having been hurt badly and considering it the last straw, after which they escaped a trafficker. A more detailed discussion of experiences leaving the trafficker can be found in Chapter 9.

## Threats of Physical and Sexual Violence

Around two-thirds of all respondents reported experiencing threats of physical or sexual violence against themselves or loved ones. Many threats of physical or sexual violence were against respondents themselves and were in response to respondents’ ideas about leaving their traffickers or otherwise disobeying traffickers’ demands. One respondent was told that he would “be with his [deceased] ex if he did something stupid” (Male, 30). Another had left a trafficker previously and been found and beaten; she was afraid to try again.

Many interviewees also reported consistent intimidation, verbally or nonverbally, when someone else was hurt—if a trafficker beat up a sex buyer or a wifey this indirect victimization was used to make respondents understand that this could happen to them. Those who were not physically harmed by a trafficker still tended to take these threats seriously:

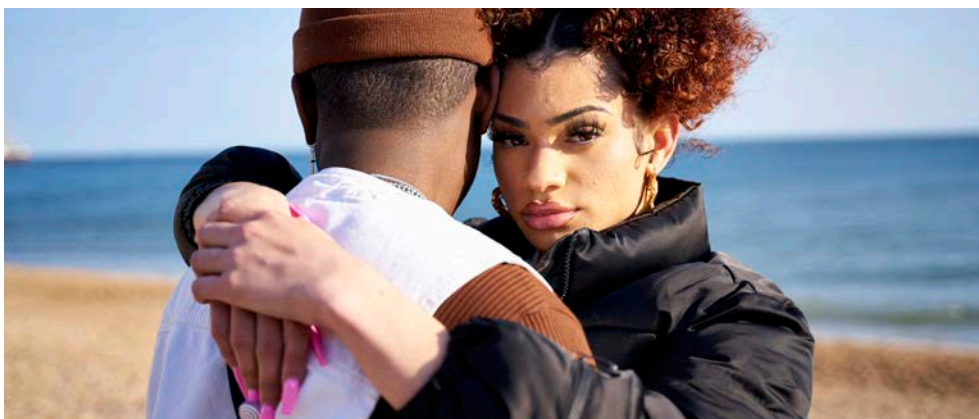
**“I seen him knock a bitch out. I don’t know what she did. I wasn’t allowed to ask no questions, nor did I want to. I didn’t want to know. That was none of my business. I don’t ask no questions. But yeah, I seen that shit. So I knew he could go there, but I wasn’t trying to take him there at all.... If you don’t give a fuck about her face, I know you don’t give a fuck about mine.” (Female, 33)**

Similarly, one male interviewee who felt able to enough to defend himself to his trafficker was reluctant to do so because his trafficker had made it clear that his wifeys, whom he loved, would be punished instead:

**“But it’s because of my friends and the girls that I was with where he, he would actually go... ‘I’m gonna take it out on her and go take your friends. You love them.... You know, you hold the keys to, uh, what’s gonna happen....’ I could get violent too, but you know what for when I got people that I love there that would pay for whatever I do.” (Male, 53)**

Pimps commonly threatened respondents’ loved ones as well, including those outside “the life.” One trafficker threatened to burn down the house of a respondent’s mother; the respondent took it seriously and did what she could to prevent it, but he ended up doing so anyway. Luckily, her mother was unharmed. Children were also the common focus of violent threats, including one interviewee whose pimp told her plainly that he would kill her and her son if she tried to run. Several interviewees were told that their traffickers would hurt their children, give them away, or get them to start sex work themselves. Of those individuals whose families were not used against them, many expect that this is only because they weren’t close with those family members at the time. Although this was not a specific research question, multiple interviewees volunteered that they were distanced from their families specifically to avoid this kind of collateral damage.

## **Affection for Trafficker Used as a Form of Emotional Manipulation and Coercion**



Many interviewees who had experienced trafficking had a compulsion to stay in the relationship because of affection for the trafficker. It is also quite common for a female interviewee to have been trafficked by the father of her children, and one male interviewee reported this as well. These particular victims felt that they could not escape the situation because of emotional ties, custody trouble, or both. This phenomenon is described in greater detail in Chapter 8.

Those who were trafficked by their partners often expressed that they did not realize that this situation “wasn’t love” at first, and once they did, they were not “strong enough” to leave. Many individuals who have stopped selling sex expect that now, in retrospect, they would be better at recognizing signs of an unhealthy relationship. Often these same individuals report dysfunctional relationships in childhood, struggle now with having healthy relationships or friendships as adults, or both:

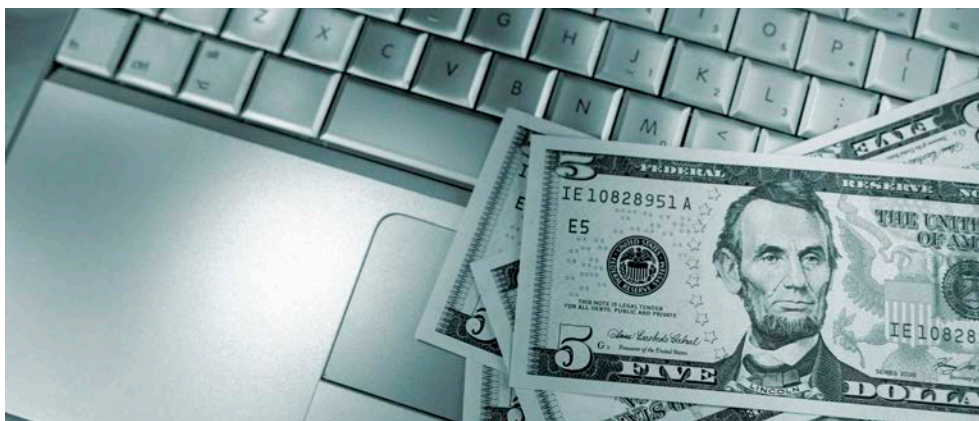
**“I have PTSD really bad. Like I didn’t trust nobody.... I don’t know if you’ve ever heard that saying like, you’ve been so fucked with that everything that is good seems like a setup.... That’s how I felt.... I’m just now starting to trust people. I even thought doctors were like trying to do stuff to me. So yeah. It’s been bad.” (Female, 39)**

Whether or not a pimp was romantically involved with their victim, they often sought out and took advantage of people in vulnerable positions. Many respondents reported that, at the time that they met their traffickers, they were estranged from family members or were having a difficult time at home. One respondent had just lost her son to sudden infant death syndrome when she met her pimp online (he knew about her loss); another was grieving his deceased partner and homeless when he began to sell sex. In response to an interview question regarding why victims did not feel they could reasonably leave their traffickers, the heavy majority mentioned either fear of physical harm or having nowhere else to go and nobody else to rely on. One woman describes living with her trafficker’s mother, and his mother asking the respondent not to report him:

**“And she’s like, ‘Don’t call the cops on my son. Don’t have the cops on my son.’ ‘cause I was going to try to call the cops. I told her and she’s like, ‘Don’t call the cops on me. Don’t call the cops on him....’ Her thing is... ‘He loves you. He loves you. He’s only doing this ‘cause he loves you.’ That’s what she says.” (Female, 27)**

Pimps often exacerbated this isolation by having their victims sell sex in areas where they knew no one; imposing rules about whether victims could look at, speak to, or communicate with anyone else; or both.

## Financial Coercion or Withholding of Compensation



One of the screening questions that this study used to identify those who had been trafficked for sex was that of having to give money or other compensation to those controlling them. More than 92% of interviewees reported having payment withheld, in the form of money or other compensation, such as housing or drugs. Most often, the money that participants earned was either taken by their traffickers or collected by the traffickers in the first place, so that the workers never saw it. In the latter case, a trafficker might set a price with a sex buyer before a session, thus disallowing the interviewee from taking any for themselves.



Several respondents whose money was taken from them shared stories of trying to retain some for themselves without success. One woman hid cash in a tampon box, only to find it missing the next morning; another hid money but was discovered and told that she was meant to be earning “for our family” (Female, 23). A few workers might give cash to family or friends to hold off-site, but that could backfire. One such friend spent the interviewee’s money on drugs for himself, and was volatile enough that he might have told her trafficker anyway:

**“I gave part of the money to somebody to hold for me. ‘cause I wasn’t gonna give it all to [my trafficker]. I just wasn’t gonna do it... The person that I gave it to, I remember sneaking away to, to go to see them and they was smoking my money.... When I saw [the friend] smoking crack, I was like, shoot, he might tell, you know what I’m saying? And I, I mean, I had that fear for a while that he might somehow mention it to [my trafficker]. ‘cause I was like, he gonna kill me. That was the only time I really kind of tried to keep something for myself and it kind of backfired on me.” (Female, 60)**

Another individual who gave money to a friend for safekeeping was disgusted when that friend gave it to her own pimp, in part because the respondent was working as a “renegade” at the time, without a trafficker, because she wanted to keep her earnings:

**“Something was going on because I always kept losing my money. So I asked my friend to hold my money, this dumb bitch decided to hand it over to her man.” (Female, 48)**

Many of the traffickers who controlled respondents’ earnings ensured that their victims had what they needed to survive and work. Excepting those individuals who experienced homelessness while selling sex, it was common to have been provided housing and food, and sometimes non-necessary treatments, such as manicures or hair services. However, even those who were allowed to buy themselves treats were rarely trusted to handle cash; either the exact price of a hairdo would be handed to a victim or the pimp would pay for it directly.

Money withheld from respondents was not always in the form of recently earned cash. Many traffickers stole their victims’ disability or Social Security payments; it was fairly common for these individuals to have experienced identity theft as well, likely linked. Even if interviewees did not have their money stolen directly, several traffickers found ways to get it anyway. One respondent was charged \$100 less than her monthly Social Security payment in rent by her trafficker’s mother. Another was forced to hand over the money from paychecks earned from jobs outside of sex work:

**“When I met him, I had a caregiving job and I had gotten paid. It was my third check. I had to cash it through somebody else. I didn’t see no reason to tell him why ‘cause it was my money. He ended up finding it and taking all of it. It was only like \$283, but he took it.” (Female, 40)**

One respondent suffered various financial abuses at the hands of her pimp’s family, including being forced to buy the pimp’s cousin a new cell phone (for which her credit is still bad), being charged \$500 for transport to sell sex elsewhere, and having her disability payments stolen.

Besides money, multiple interviewees mentioned the use of addictive substances as compensation, usually in the form of its being withheld unless the individual reached a monetary quota. Although not all respondents reported drug use as a factor in their experience with human trafficking, coercion was the context in which it was most commonly brought up. Many individuals who used drugs—whether stimulants, opioids, or another kind—were trafficked by their dealers or by someone in their dealers’ networks. Several respondents mention “earning” a hit of the substance to which they were addicted at the time, and they were clear that restriction of drugs was a very credible threat.

**“If you’re sick... [and they] put you in this position and put you in a room and you’re locked up and you’re going through it.... It’s like, I’d rather for you to take away my mama.” (Male, 52)**

Housing was also withheld from a few respondents, in that they would not be allowed to return to their living space or their city before completing a quota. As the housing provided by a trafficker was often a respondent’s only viable living space, this restriction and the lack of cash on hand prevented many respondents from leaving their traffickers:

**“And I ended up in Fresno at his house with a lot of other girls and they were walking and he said, the only way for me to go home was to make money.... I never, like, even thought to even do something like that. And for me to go home from Fresno, I never been there and [don’t] know nobody. It was like really traumatizing ‘cause I really thought it was just the end of my life. Like I couldn’t call my family. I didn’t have no phone. Like nobody would come get me. Like I really just thought it was just over like. Ugh.” (Female, 27)**

In fact, desperation for funds—for drugs, essentials for newborn children, or other necessities—led more than one individual to start selling sex in the first place. The idea of making cash quickly was often recommended by a friend or acquaintance, as summed up by one respondent who said, “Yeah, I needed money. Homeless.... There might have been a couple of friends who’ve probably put it in my mind. You kind of feel trapped a little bit” (Female, 42).

## Isolation and Surveillance



One of the most coercive tendencies of traffickers identified in our study was that of isolating victims from their families and friends. The majority of respondents who were not in touch with family while selling sex were explicitly prevented from having a support network. Generally, the trafficker’s aim in isolating a victim was to ensure that the victim had no emotional connections or logistical help outside of the pimp. One respondent’s girlfriend-turned-trafficker consistently promised to help her learn to use a computer, but never did: “She doesn’t want to teach me.... She doesn’t want me to know” (Female, 61).

Occasionally the trafficker’s self-interest in isolating a victim was more direct: one respondent shares that her brother, who had recently gotten out of prison, would have gotten violent if he’d known what was going on. Another woman’s family would likely have taken her away from her trafficker, thus ending his access to her earnings, if she had been able to see them:

**“I stayed away from my kids for a whole year. Actually. I think I missed birthdays.... They be scared if I go home like, oh, you know, ‘cause I got a mom and I, you know, I got family, I got, I’m the only girl, I got all brothers. I have all brothers and they not playin’. So, um, they be like, oh and you go home, you know, they’re gonna try to keep you.... And that’s when they try to keep me or try to break my phone so I can’t get in contact with my mom or um, delete and block them.” (Female, 31)**

Some of those individuals who were allowed to talk to their networks ended up creating distance from these people anyway. A few respondents shared that they were unhappy or ashamed enough that they simply could not face their parents or friends.

Some interviewees described having to “earn” a phone call or visit with family, or they reported having full access to their cell phones but having to allow pimps full access also. Some pimps used their victims’ cell phones to set up sex buyer sessions, going above their heads. Victims also reported that pimps used GPS technology on their cell phones to track them 24 hours a day. Respondents also commonly reported that their traffickers restricted their calls so as to deny their families access to information or monitored their calls to control what information was shared:

**“He’d be scared and be right there, like snatched the phone and put it on speaker phone to hear who I’m talking to [and] sit right there the whole time while I got done. And then if it was on FaceTime with my son, I had to hold it up, like close up to right here to my face, just to talk to my son... so they couldn’t see my surroundings.” (Female, 26)**

A few interviewees managed to keep secret cell phones or made calls and then deleted call logs. Traffickers who wanted to be in contact with respondents might delete the victims’ telephone contacts or provide them with burner phones, leaving only the traffickers’ own number as an option.

Most respondents, though not all, reported being watched while in their living or working spaces. Of those who lived with their traffickers, nearly all were watched at “home,” some even when traffickers were not present, through video and sensor systems:

**“Not really [was I watched]. There was a house alarm, so they would know if there was a window or door opened. I wouldn’t say kept an eye on, I was able to use the bathroom alone. I was able to cook alone, you know, go in the backyard, smoking a cigarette if I needed to. But everybody pretty much stayed together as a group, unless we went to go see a client or something.” (Female, 24)**

A few respondents were unsure of whether they were watched but suspected that their traffickers’ knowledge of their own whereabouts was not a coincidence, and that they must have kept an eye out somehow. Sometimes it was blatant; one trafficker would walk directly behind a worker when they were in the same space, watching her the whole time.

It was also common for a trafficker to subsume a victim’s social network with his own, thus combining surveillance and isolation. The traffickers’ use of their own networks to isolate and surveil victims is discussed in detail in Chapter 8.

Although we did not include surveillance at work as a research question, interviewees varied on their reports of being watched on the job. Of those individuals who took sex buyers in places that they themselves did not live—such as a temporary hotel room—it was quite common for a trafficker to sit outside either the room or the building and await the sex buyer’s departure. Those traffickers who were paid directly by the buyer would therefore have an easy time collecting payment. It was uncommon for traffickers to be in the room during a session, but at least one respondent was watched and coached by his trafficker during sessions.

Respondents were also watched on the street as they solicited sex. Not all interviewees were happy about being watched in hotels, but some respondents were theoretically glad of the protection afforded by a pimp while on the blade (a street with high levels of commercial sex activity). However, it was hard to ascertain how helpful a patrolling trafficker could really be if a situation got dangerous:

**“He say he’d be out there now. He ain’t out there. [laugh] ‘cause I feel like nobody was watching me. And if they do, if something happened, what they gonna do, girl? Stuff that’s gonna happen so quick.” (Female, 31)**

## Verbal and Emotional Abuse



The lion's share of our interviewees reported that they had been verbally or emotionally abused by their traffickers. Some reported this abuse in isolation; others pointed out that the purpose of this abuse was to lower their self-worth and demean them, leaving them trapped in their current situation.

### LASTING EFFECTS OF VERBAL AND EMOTIONAL ABUSE

- Trouble trusting anyone, including doctors
- Trauma bonding (an emotional attachment to an abuser)
- Continued fear after abuse
- Trouble shopping after having been rushed through stores
- A need to walk away from attractive people after not having been allowed to speak to them
- Trouble imagining a healthy relationship for themselves

Whether or not the demeaning effects of verbal abuse were known to respondents at the time they experienced them, this abuse had detrimental effects on its victims. Several respondents who cried in the interviews did so while describing the names that they had been called. Derogative terms cited by respondents included common insults, such as references to victims' sexual orientations or appearances. Some verbal abuse was less superficial and more focused on the victim as a person. A particular individual was called "birthless," and another was told that she had not, in fact, been raped, because "everyone has consent over [her] body" (Female, 29).

Verbal abuse is a form of emotional abuse; other forms of emotional abuse were common as well, especially among trafficker-victim relationships that began romantically. An overarching theme among respondents was a boyfriend or girlfriend found in person or online, a relationship that would start out sweet but then shift from affection to abuse.

Besides the abusive nature of forcing a partner into commercial sex, many traffickers held respondents' pasts against them: several respondents who were out of the life were forced back into it after a partner learned that they'd sold sex in past, and those who had never stopped selling sex were assumed to be willing to continue. When victims were in relationships with their traffickers, it was common for the pimp to put the arrangement forth as a measure "for their family."

**"With [my daughter's father], we were dating and stuff and he kept saying we need to make money.... And I was like, well I know how to make money. In the wraps of starting to make money, he started to get, verbally abusive, and he started to want to make more money. And then just before I got pregnant with her, I left to make it better for me and her." (Female, 24)**

Multiple respondents also reported jealousy among traffickers, whether or not the victims considered themselves to be dating their pimps. Often, traffickers who accused victims of "cheating," with or without provocation, would themselves be regularly in contact with multiple other women or men. Victims also reported emotional distress stemming from the verbal and emotional abuse of others, and several interviewees mentioned their wifey's when asked about witnessing abuse of people they liked. In addition, sometimes traffickers' families or friend networks would join in on abusing women, either actively (e.g., comments on their weight) or passively (allowing them to be ignored or hurt).

The effects of emotional abuse were felt strongly by respondents, and in some cases the effects were lasting. One respondent shared that during a period of being locked in a room, she felt claustrophobic and began to feel extreme anxiety, at which point she was denied her anxiety medication:

**"Well, the first guy would bolt the doors. He would bolt doors, and he would literally lock the doors and keep me in my room.... I don't like being confined in spaces, for one, so me acting out made a whole bunch of more problems.... And I acted out, and eventually that kind of led to more problems. He would take my medication away from me. I had meds for my depression and my anxiety, and he took them away because I acted out, and he thought it was the meds. He was like, 'Oh, you're taking these pills, blah, blah, blah. You're a fucking stupid bitch,' and then take my shit. And I'm like, 'Really? How, why? Why would you do that?' That was insane." (Female, 20)**

Multiple respondents noted that they find it hard to trust others. One woman, who is Black, shared that she was attracted to Black men, but that her pimp would punish her for speaking to Black men while she worked for him. To this day, she walks away from anyone she finds attractive. Another individual was consistently rushed while shopping for herself, and still has trouble with grocery stores, though she is no longer selling sex.

A particular type of abuse was common among those interviewees who are transgender, gay, or are straight men who have sex with men. This was the threat of being "outed" to one's family or friends. Some interviewees were more fazed by this than others—one trans woman is fully out, including an identifying tattoo—but others were badly affected. Another trans woman was told that "nobody's gonna fuck with [her]" due to her identity (Female, 25), and she stayed with her trafficker for a while out of fear and shame. Another participant—a man who identified as straight but would occasionally have sex with men for drug money—was coerced into sex several times against the threat of being outed.

## Confiscation of Documents or Identification



Another form of exploitation this study sought to measure and better understand was whether respondents had ever their identification confiscated. Responses were mixed, in part because some individuals seemingly considered only their driver's licenses as identification, when in fact the variety of documents withheld from their owners was much larger.

Of those who ended up with missing documents while selling sex, most respondents had their papers taken directly from them by pimps. Those traffickers who confiscated driver's licenses or other photo IDs generally did so as a means of keeping victims in hand: without IDs, sex workers may not be able travel by plane or Amtrak. Sometimes participants were allowed to retain their licenses so they could book a hotel room for a sex buyer or drive themselves to jobs, but some among this latter group were given the document only when necessary and forced to return it afterwards. It was also not uncommon for participants to be given a false ID in place of their own, for this exact purpose of being able to work but not leave.

Other documentation commonly stolen included Social Security cards, birth certificates, and financial information. Again, this was mostly a form of isolation: for instance, a birth certificate and Social Security card are both needed to obtain a new driver's license (Real ID). However, a few pimps used these materials for something other than imprisoning their victims. One respondent was forced to pay her trafficker \$2,000 on top of money from sex work to "earn back" her son's Social Security card, which the trafficker had stolen.

Several interviewees shared that their information was used to collect disability or Social Security pay, or that financial information (such as a debit card) was taken directly. Indeed, a few respondents were still trying to straighten out financial situations at the time of their interviews after their credit records were harmed.

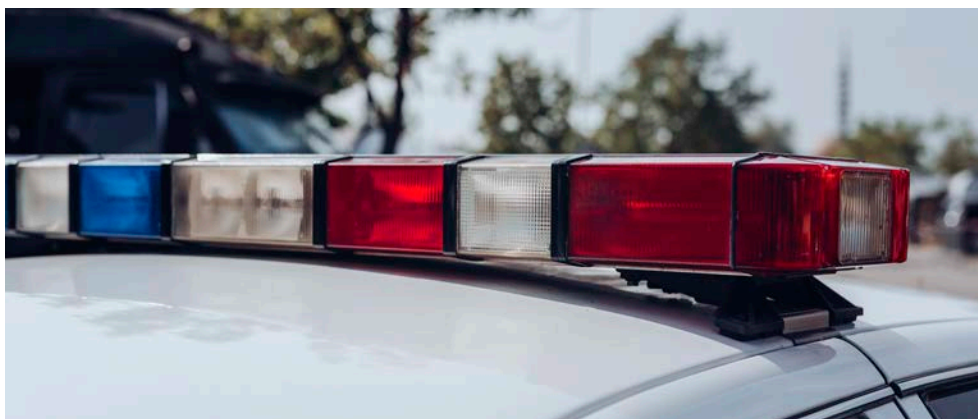
Some respondents did not have documents taken from them, but lost access regardless. Individuals who carried items on the street—whether identification, cell phones, or debit cards—were frequently robbed. One woman described having to replace a cell phone several times because she had repeatedly fallen asleep with it on her lap.

**"Yeah. I mean, he didn't take it, but I mean, I lose my stuff all the time.... I mean, people steal my cell phone on a regular basis.... That happens still, constantly, out on the street. I can't hang onto a cell phone.... Fall asleep with it on my lap and it's gone when I wake up.... It's the most frustrating thing in the world." (Female, 49)**

Other individuals, especially those who were living in a group or foster home at the time that they sold sex, never had their documents at all. Multiple interviewees shared that a foster home or government agency was holding on to their Social Security card, birth certificate, or other important papers. This was especially true of people who began to sell sex while under the age of 18. Another individual had not yet gotten her

driver's license at the time of the interview. Still others avoided theft of important items by having trusted individuals hold on to them, such as parents or friends.

## Threats of Law Enforcement Involvement or of Deportation



The vast majority of respondents agreed that not only did pimps generally not threaten to call law enforcement, but that doing so would be the last thing that traffickers would want. More than one interviewee shared that they had encouraged a trafficker's threat to contact authorities, or done so themselves, suspecting that it might be a secure path out of their dangerous situations, though this rarely came to pass.

For a few interviewees, the threat of police would be a credible one. Many had active warrants and expected that they would have been arrested if their traffickers had followed through. Even if no warrant was present, some respondents simply feared jail and were eager to avoid it. Two sex workers were actually jailed after their traffickers called authorities, and one went to prison. A few individuals had sex buyers call the police on them as well, ostensibly because the respondents requested payment, but the outcomes of these calls were not discussed.

## Summary and Recommendations

All respondents who worked for a third party reported at least one form of exploitation, and experiencing multiple types of exploitation was the norm. The most common forms of abuse included withholding pay, monitoring and surveillance, making clear that the worker should not feel free to leave, committing physical or sexual violence, committing emotional abuse, and restricting communication. Although physical violence typically included the use of hands and fists, other objects and implements were also used. Violence was not limited to the interviewees; they also witnessed violence against others, which was interpreted as a message that it could happen to them as well. Financial coercion took several forms, including the trafficker's collecting payment directly from the sex buyer, taking other forms of income (e.g., disability), withholding addictive substances, and withholding housing. Restricted communication included being totally isolated, having restricted access to phones, and having to earn a call or visit with family or friends. Surveillance during these limited communications was also common. The confiscation of driver's licenses and other identification served to further the isolation. Emotional abuse was common and had lasting effects, such as difficulty trusting anyone or imagining a healthy future relationship.

There are no easy solutions for reducing the exploitation that victims experience at the hands of their traffickers. Strategies are needed that prevent individuals from pimping and trafficking in the first place. After an individual has been trafficked, it is essential that they have access to a wide array of services to help restore them, including medical attention for any injuries sustained, therapy and support to process the emotional abuse they experienced, and legal mechanisms to clear any debt a victim accumulated because of a trafficker or his associates.

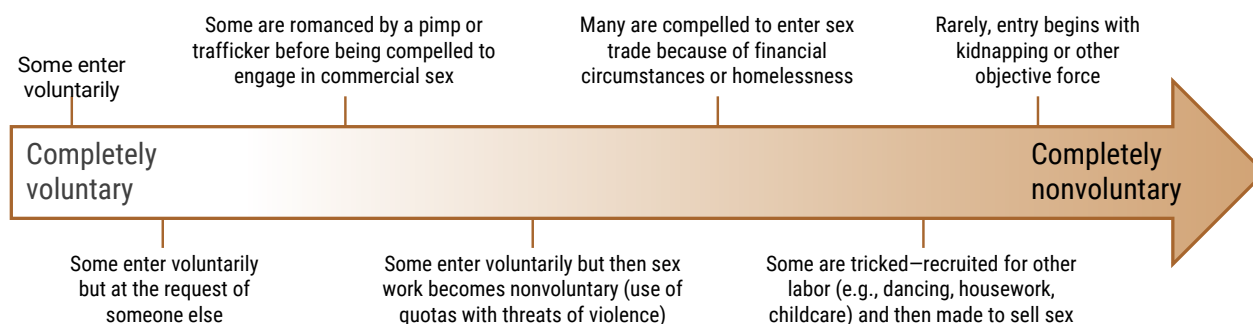
## CHAPTER 7

# RECRUITMENT AND ENTRY



Interviews for this study included questions aimed at understanding how participants first entered sex work, how and when they met their traffickers, whether they knew they would be doing sex work, and what recruitment tactics traffickers had used to compel them into the trafficking situation. Responses indicated that initial entry into prostitution or trafficking situations ranged from completely voluntary to completely involuntary. As shown in Chapter 6, nearly two-thirds of interviewees started working for a third party voluntarily (61.6%) and over half did not know they could be made to sell sex (55.0%). Yet, the vast majority of respondents described entry to the life as happening somewhere in between this binary, indicating an opportunity for policy responses focused on prevention strategies for people whose social or financial vulnerabilities may compel them into situations involving sex trafficking. This chapter will discuss the main themes that emerged from interviews with survivors about their entry into sex work and recruitment into situations involving sex trafficking. These themes are presented in the order of voluntariness or autonomy described by the survivor. This spectrum of voluntariness of entry is illustrated in **Figure 7-1**.

**Figure 7-1: Continuum of Voluntariness of Entry Experiences Among Sample Population**





We discuss the stages along this continuum in discrete sections in the remainder of this chapter, but the experiences reported by interviewees did not necessarily fit neatly in one category or another. Rather, when asked whether they entered into sex work voluntarily, most respondents struggled to answer succinctly because what is considered voluntary is subjective. One respondent who knowingly entered because she was desperate to feed her children might answer that she entered voluntarily, while another who entered under the exact same circumstances may describe the entry as involuntary. Our findings are consistent with prior research on entry into sex work among sex trafficking victims, which suggests a broad variety of experiences and push factors that impact a survivor's entry into prostitution as well as a continuum of voluntariness (Hickle & Roe-Sepowitz, 2016). We have tried to capture the nuance and subjectivity of perceptions in our summaries of what respondents described during interviews.

## **Voluntary Entry Into Sex Work, With or Without a Trafficker/Pimp**

Although infrequent, some study participants reported entering sex work completely voluntarily. Some described entering the industry after seeing the money that friends or family members had made or because they thought the lifestyle seemed glamorous. Two participants in this study did not report any trafficking experiences during the time they were involved in sex work, but for others who entered into sex work voluntarily, their involvement in commercial sex eventually turned into a situation involving exploitation by a third-party trafficker.

While most respondents in this study did not have this experience of a totally voluntary entry into sex work, it is worth noting that this does happen, and it is particularly important to understand the perception of easy money. Countering this perception may represent an opportunity for prevention.

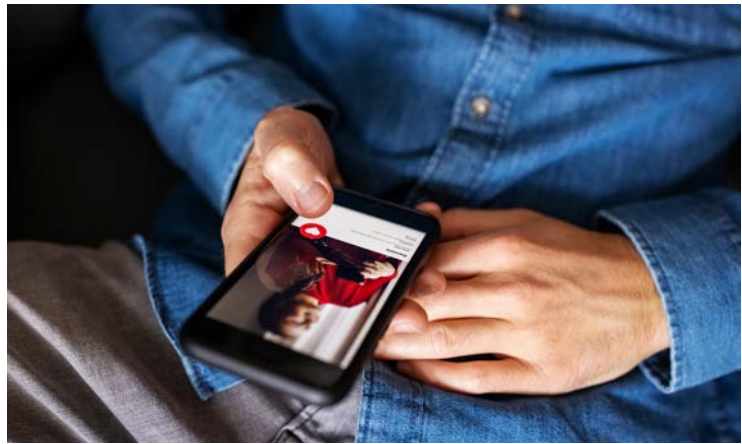
## **Voluntary Entry at Someone Else's Request**

Some reported entering into prostitution voluntarily, but at the request of someone else. Many study respondents described having help making the decision to enter sex work, and they cited a number of people who contributed to their decisions, including boyfriends or romantic partners, family members, foster siblings, and friends. What this actually looked like ranged widely, from being asked by a friend who was dabbling in sex work to come along with them to having someone else in their life—often a boyfriend or other romantic partner—suggest they sell sex as a way to earn quick money. In the words of one interviewee, “I was just doing it, I guess, to please someone, basically” (Female, 22).

For many participants, even before they entered sex work, it was not an unfamiliar world to them. Some interviewees described having familiarity with sex work through knowing other people who did it—some for their entire lives. For these participants, sex work was normalized by people close to them who sold sex, including sisters, foster siblings, cousins, friends, mothers, and other family members. It is important to understand that before entry, the phenomenon of sex work may have already been somewhat destigmatized, demystified, or normalized for some participants. Prior research supports the notion that existing relationships can facilitate a person's entry into commercial sex (Nixon et al., 2002; Orchard et al., 2014).

## **Entry by False Pretense of Romantic Relationship**

Among those who reported being asked to engage in commercial sex by someone else, most frequently, respondents reported being asked to do so by boyfriends or other romantic partners. A large subset of participants who had this experience described a situation where they met that partner and believed they were embarking on a committed, romantic relationship, only to later realize the partner was a pimp and had recruited and groomed them to engage in sex work.



No two participants' experiences with this phenomenon were the same, but many interviewees recalled similar accounts of how they met their traffickers. Some met in person (in this study, participants described initially meeting traffickers through friends, on the street, and in stores) and many initially made contact through dating apps or social media. The trafficker was highly complimentary, and the two began dating. Often, the trafficker was lavish in their attention to the survivor: buying them clothes and other things, paying for them to get their hair and nails done. Many interviewees discussed how the trafficker would talk about their futures together. Many interviewees described feeling like they were in love with the trafficker. Some became pregnant by their traffickers.

At this point, the traffickers would begin to compel interviewees to engage in sex work. They often framed it as a way that the interviewees could support their families or contribute to the future they were dreaming up together. Some participants who had children with their traffickers described situations in which the trafficker used the children to coerce them into engaging in commercial sex. One participant described how she went from falling in love with her trafficker and having his baby to feeling compelled to sell sex. She said, "And then it's like, I've been forced to be out there. Since I have his baby, [because] he makes it seem like, 'Oh, we're a family. So we need this. We need to do this as a family'" (Female, 23).

This phenomenon, of recruitment and entry into the sex trade by so-called "Romeo pimps," has been well-documented in prior studies of sex trafficking (Bullens & van Horn, 2002; Duncan & DeHart, 2019; Eberhard et al., 2019; Martin & Pierce, 2014). This strategy seems to be effective beyond recruitment of victims: many participants in this study reported staying involved in sex work longer than they wanted to and having difficulty exiting because they felt they were in love with their traffickers.

## Voluntary Entry That Becomes Nonvoluntary

When asked whether their entry into sex work was voluntary, many participants described a pattern in which they voluntarily agreed to engage in sex work initially, but either gradually or quickly found themselves in a situation where their involvement in sex work was no longer voluntary. One participant described how this transition happened to her:

**"It was voluntary and then like slowly shifted to not voluntary. Or like, at first, he was like, 'If you wanna do it, you can do it. If you don't, you don't.' And then it was, 'You need to make this much money while I'm at work.' And he would check up, like texting all day while he is at work. 'How much money have you made? How much money have you made?' And then it was, 'You're gonna work tonight and you're gonna make this much money.'" (Female, 29)**

The methods that interviewees described traffickers using to compel their continued engagement in sex work varied and are documented in other chapters of this report. But when asked to reflect on whether their entry to sex work was voluntary, many respondents described situations like this, in which they felt that they made a voluntary decision to enter sex work, but the actual experience was not what they thought it would be like and that at some point, they did not feel that they could leave if they wanted to.

## Compelled Entry due to Financial Circumstances or Necessity

It was very common for respondents to describe feeling compelled to begin sex work because of dire financial circumstances or necessity. One participant said, “I wanna say most of the time I really didn’t wanna do it. I did it because of having to survive and feeling like that’s the only way to make money” (Female, 32). A number of participants entered sex work because they needed money or were homeless. Some explicitly mentioned beginning sex work to support their children. At least six participants mentioned leaving group homes or foster care and entering the sex trade. Some participants describe their entry into sex work as driven by a drug addiction. These vulnerabilities may have made these interviewees attractive targets for traffickers: it is easy to understand what they need and how badly they need it and to take advantage of that. As one respondent described,

**“Uh, it was more—not voluntary. It was more situational. If that makes sense. Like, I didn’t have nowhere to go. I didn’t have nobody to help me. Love me. Be there for me. It was more like situational. They made me feel loved. They made me feel safe and gave me a place to stay wherever they were staying.” (Female, 27)**

The experiences of this group of survivors—those who enter sex work because of financial imperative or other life circumstances—demonstrate an important opportunity for intervention and prevention. It is likely that, if offered healthier alternatives to sex work that would meet their pressing needs, many would opt for those alternatives.

## Entry by False Recruitment

Less frequent, but still reported by some interviewees, was the experience of being recruited for something other than sex work and then being forced to sell sex. Within our study sample, there were participants who described being recruited for doing escort work, selling drugs, dancing, cleaning or doing housework, and caring for children. These individuals recall being genuinely tricked into a situation in which they had to sell sex. False recruitment offers have often been recognized as a strategy used in recruiting foreign national victims of sex and labor trafficking and bringing them to new countries to work (Demir & Finckenauer, 2010; Owens et al., 2014; Silverman et al., 2007). It is important to recognize that this deception also happens to domestic victims of sex trafficking.



## Entry by Force

Rarely, participants reported having entered sex work by force. Three participants described being kidnapped or abducted and forced to sell sex. One participant described how this happened to her when she was a teenager.

**“My friend at the time was like, ‘Do you wanna go smoke weed with my cousins?’ So I was like oh yeah, it’s fine.... So we were driving and I realized like, we’re going really far. I was like, why are we on the freeway? And they’re like, ‘So this is what’s going to happen. You’re gonna make 1.5k or we’re not going to take you home.’... So I ended up working until like four in the morning.” (Female, 19)**

This participant’s account of her kidnapping is probably different from what the vast majority of the public imagine when they think about a person being kidnapped and forced into sex work. To provide better prevention opportunities and improved care for people who have experiences like this, it is important to close the gap between perceptions of trafficking and the reality.

## Summary and Recommendations

Participants shared various accounts of how they entered into sex work. Some felt they entered completely voluntarily and some felt they entered completely involuntarily—but most participants described an experience that fell somewhere in the middle. Effective policies to prevent sex trafficking would focus on the experiences of those who may fall closer to the middle of this spectrum: those vulnerable to false promises of love or employment or those who are compelled to enter sex work because they need a place to stay or a way to feed themselves or their children. Prevention strategies would include improved social safety nets for vulnerable people, especially those with children, as well as free and accessible economic empowerment and drug treatment programming. Curricula for young people focused on online safety strategies might also help prevent the recruitment of young people through dating websites and social media.

## CHAPTER 8

# VICTIM AND TRAFFICKER NETWORKS AND OPERATIONS

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Study participants described a broad array of relationships among and between traffickers, victims, and others in commercial sex. In some situations, victims were isolated from others; in others, victims were closely connected with the traffickers' social networks or had strong relationships with each other. At times, trafficking operations involved travel outside of Sacramento. Next, we describe the characteristics of traffickers and their social networks, relationships among victims of a trafficker and other people in the life, and any movement or travel for the purpose of commercial sex. We conclude with recommendations for future research that is needed to better understand the composition and operations of trafficking networks.

### Description of Traffickers

Sex trafficking survivors who participated in this study were asked to describe any traffickers under whose control they had worked, with a focus on those within the past 5 years in Sacramento County. Participants' experiences varied from limited involvement with a single trafficker to long-term involvement with multiple traffickers. These descriptions tended to focus on general characteristics, such as the trafficker's race, gender, and age.

The race and age of traffickers were as varied as those of the study participants. Although most of the traffickers described were male, several interviewees had been trafficked by a female. A couple participants described female traffickers who appeared to be working with other individuals, either with men or other women at massage parlors. A couple respondents described female traffickers who worked alone and exploited their friendships or partnerships with the victim. As one respondent described,

**“I have worked under a pimp, but not anymore. And at the time, I didn’t view—it was a female. I didn’t view her as a pimp at the time. I thought she was my friend, because she would take me to go get my hair done. She would take me to go get my nails done to get costumes, and she would drag me to my appointments. And so I viewed her as just like a friend putting me up on game, trying to help me put money in my pockets, but it wasn’t until after she started beating me and that I had to escape from her that I realized that she basically was a pimp.” (Female, 22)**

## Social Networks of Traffickers

Study participants were asked to describe the traffickers’ networks of family, friends, and other associates. Knowledge about those networks varied, such that some interviewees had no knowledge of or contact with others in the trafficker’s circle and others were closely connected with those individuals. Participants who had knowledge or contact with the trafficker’s friends and families described individuals falling into two broad categories: (1) pimps, drug dealers, and gang members; and (2) socially conventional.

### Limited Knowledge of or Contact With Trafficker’s Network

Some interviewees had little knowledge of and no contact with their traffickers’ families, friends, and associates. This included situations where the trafficker intentionally isolated them, not allowing them to communicate or interact with his family and friends at all. As one interviewee described,

**“I’m [PIMP]’s lady. I’m his girl. I don’t speak to his friends. I don’t, I have no relationship with his friends. We don’t wine and dine. We don’t go out. His friends don’t talk to me. His friends don’t talk to none of us. When I say us, I told you it was like 12, maybe 15, of us. You know, it’s just us girls and it’s like a meeting in a ladies’ room, you know? We don’t see them. It’s like we can’t talk to anybody if it’s not a trick, a gentleman, a Joe, a Don, you know? We just don’t. We don’t. We don’t because if we do, then, it could be a bad situation. You know, it could be beat up, jumped on, you know?” (Female, 34)**

Similarly, another stated, “I didn’t have any interactions with them. I couldn’t ‘cause I [am] his property” (Female, 33). Some participants reported that they would get in trouble if they even smiled at one of the trafficker’s friends, so there was no interaction.

Others described casual, but restricted, interactions with the trafficker’s social network. In these situations, the victim may be in physical proximity with the trafficker’s people but not be allowed to communicate with them. For example, “If you look at ‘em or talk to them, you’re out of pocket.... So you have to sit there and not stare right there or look and shut up or gonna get... your ass beat” (Female, 27). One reason for restricted communication with the trafficker’s family and friends is that they are also pimps. In these situations, there is fear that the victims may be taken by another trafficker. As one participant described it: “So, I didn’t say too much because anytime a pimp thinks another pimp’s going to take his woman, she better not talk to him. There’s going to be problems. And you know that, right?” (Female, 60). Sometimes, victims were able to interact with the trafficker’s female family friends, but not the males. There appear to be implied rules about whom it is acceptable to interact with, as described by one interviewee:

**“Or they have boyfriends or other pimps that was intimid[ated]—you know.... You can’t be around this guy, or but I would mingle with his people because he had such control. It was like you know if it’s a guy, you don’t talk to him. Only talk to the girls I bring you around, whether it’s my family or other hoes or whatever. So, I felt like he probably felt like he had it under control. I can mingle with his people because he knows she’s not going to talk to any of the guys. She’s not going to look at any of them. She’s loyal or whatever the case may be. So I was around his people, but my people hated him.” (Female, 27)**

## Traffickers' Networks

Most of the traffickers appear to have socialized primarily with others involved in some type of criminal activity. Many of the traffickers' associates, both family and friends, were described as pimps and drug dealers. A few were described as gang members, gang bangers, or "thugs." Some of these friends actively helped the trafficker control and surveil victims. For example,

**"His friends are all pimps and they, when he's not around, they watch you while he's gone or they'll count how many cars I've hopped in. Like, if I wanted to tell him that it's slow, there's no money out here, whatever. So he leaves to go get money from the other girls or something so I could make some money to get away. His idiot friends told him how many cars I've been in. They counted my cars. They count. They even followed me to where I did my dates. They even double teamed me to talk shit about me in the freaking garage where I lived." (Female, 32)**

It is not always clear whether the friends and family members who helped the trafficker did so informally on limited occasions or whether the operation was more formalized. Only a couple respondents explicitly mentioned organization, including one reporting, "They have each other's backs. It's the most organized thing I've ever seen in my entire life" (Female, 41). Another said, "No, he was not letting me go. He had people, you know, he was kinda the head in that big organization" (Female, 58). Similarly, only a couple respondents mentioned the trafficker having a "bottom" ("a female appointed by the trafficker/pimp to supervise the others and report rule violations" [Shared Hope International, 2022]).

Some of the pimps' families were also aware of and actively involved in the trafficking. These reports frequently included descriptions of traffickers' mothers who were supportive of their sons' activities. The support took different forms. A few respondents mentioned that the mothers witnessed and ignored incidents of violence perpetrated by their sons. Other support for trafficking activities included helping with hair and make-up, renting cars and hotels when they would travel, and babysitting. A couple participants mentioned family involvement in finances and earnings related to the participant's sex work. For example, one participant described:

**"She would tell him yeah, she should be getting this amount. And, um, tell like, when I got kicked out of [SHELTER], I had to move in with them. And they knew how much SSI is. And so she started charging me pretty much the full amount to where I would have like just a hundred dollars left and he would just let her." (Female 26).**

Intergenerational pimping, such that traffickers were born into families who were involved in the life, does not appear to be uncommon. For example, a participant described how the trafficker was initiated into pimping by his mother when he was a child:

**"So the family wasn't no support or anything. That's why I feel like he became that type of predator man that he is today. He said his mom uh made him pimp on his girlfriend when he was just like 12, 10 years old... told him that she can't come over to my house unless she's getting some money. So that's, that's what he said. That's why he started doing uh, women wrong because his mom did him wrong." (Female, 30)**

Less frequently, the trafficker's friends or family were described as normal people appearing to have regular jobs and no involvement in the life. Sometimes, traffickers had both criminal and normal friends, such as one whose victim reported, "He had people that did what he did, but then he had a lot of people that were normal" (Female, 41).

## Relationships Among Victims of a Trafficker

Interviewees were also asked about any relationships they had with others who were being trafficked with them. Many participants reported that they were the only one being trafficked. When there were other victims involved, the descriptions of the relationships fell into four main categories: nonexistent, casual and friendly, close friends, and jealous competitors.

### TYPES OF RELATIONSHIPS AMONG VICTIMS

1. Nonexistent, isolated from other victims
2. Casual and friendly
3. Close friends, sisterly
4. Jealous competitors

### Isolation From Other Victims

A few respondents said that they did not know whether others were being trafficked. Some of them suspected that there may have been others, but they were not sure and knew not to ask. For example,

**“There was one other girl initially when he first guided me. There was this other girl, and then, like I said, he had other stuff going on. So when he popped back in and had both feet in, you know what I’m saying? It was just me. I don’t know where she was at. She wasn’t even talked about, so I don’t know. And then there’s certain things that you don’t get to ask.” (Female, 33)**

Other participants reported that they were aware that there were others being trafficked, but that they were isolated from them. Sometimes the isolation was complete, such that they were aware of, but had not met, anyone else working under the trafficker. They were kept separate because the trafficker did not want them talking to each other. A participant described how this happened to her: “He didn’t want me really talking to the other girls or, or anything. So he never really left me there by myself too much; when it was time to go, I’d go with him. So I didn’t never really get to know the other girls” (Female, 42). Other times, they had limited and monitored contact with each other. As one participant noted, “He didn’t allow us to communicate with each other.... Not for long periods of time. And everything had to be, like, monitored. He has to be there” (Female, 41).

### Casual and Friendly

Some interviewees described relationships with other victims that were casual, friendly, and cool. They got along fine but were not particularly close. For example, “It’s not that we funk or anything, we just cool. We cool. We talk to each other, we clean up. It is just, we all cool” (Female, 26). Many interviewees provided similar, short descriptions of these casual friendships.

### Close Friends, Sisterly

Some participants described their relationships with other victims as being very close or sisterly. These women had each other’s backs and bonded over their shared experiences. For example, “It’s that bond under those kind of circumstances, because y’all both realize that... we both in the game, we together. So it’s like, you gotta, we gotta have each other’s back” (Female, 36). They would take care of each other in a variety of situations, including helping someone who had been injured or abused and sharing money when someone had not made enough. As one participant described:





**“I was basically the only Black female and the rest were white and he’d favor the white girls more than he’d favor me. I would get beat because I wouldn’t have enough money. And my coworkers would try to console me when he wasn’t around and they’d try and pass me money to build my bank, so I’d meet my quota.” (Female, 63)**

These bonds may have even resulted in some women’s staying in the life longer. As one respondent recounted, “We got along great. Um, we actually clicked very well. She’s probably the reason I stayed for as long as I did, because how good we got along. Um, it was cool. Laid back chill until it was time for me to leave. Then it was not *[laugh]*” (Female, 31).

### **Jealous and Competitive**

Despite close relationships in some circles, the bond of being in the same situation did not bring everyone together. As described by one participant:

**“I didn’t really care about any of the other girls. Because I knew they didn’t care about me. It wasn’t that type of—and it was almost like a competition. So for me, yeah, he did this stuff to me, um, and he did it to the other girls too, but I wouldn’t say I cared about them.” (Female, 27)**

Given the nature of the business, it is not surprising that some relationships were difficult and involved jealousy and competition among the victims. One interviewee recalled, “It was kind of rocky. I feel like everybody was jealous [of] each other” (Female, 24). Jealousy could arise over the amount of money earned or time spent with the trafficker. For some, there was competition to earn the most money or make the trafficker happy. The benefits of being a high earner included being treated better and getting to spend more time with the trafficker.

### **Relationships With Others in the Life**

Study participants were also asked about friends or other people they could trust who were also in the life. Most respondents reported knowing others who sold sex, the majority of whom also worked for a pimp or other facilitator (one interviewee said, “‘cause it’s against the rules to not have one”; Female, 26). Another suggested that being a “renegade” (i.e., someone without a pimp) is rare and, when it does happen, it does not last long because “Either the pimp comes back and finds you, you give in because you need help, or something doesn’t go right, or you’re lonely and you miss this guy. So it doesn’t really last long when people do, do that” (Female, 27).

Descriptions of these relationships suggested that some individuals either had nobody they could trust or that their relationships were primarily work related. Many interviewees reported having no close friends or anybody they could trust while they were involved in commercial sex. Sometimes, this situation was because the traffickers would not allow them to have friends, so they were extremely isolated. Even if they had good friends at some point, they may have been cut off from them by the trafficker. As one participant described it:

**“It was just, um, there’s a few people that, um, that I knew that was into it before I met him. Um, but then he cut all ties off, but like every now and then I’d sneak like, and, and like call ‘cause I have a good friend. Um, who’s, she’s still into it to this day and um, that I would sneak and communicate with and, and stuff. But not much though ‘cause he monitored everything. I couldn’t even really have my cell phone.” (Female, 42)**

Another suggested that she could not trust anyone because of the nature of the life: “Well, you can’t really trust anyone doing sex work ‘cause I mean they’re really out to, for themselves to make their money. And so I wouldn’t say that I had anyone that I could trust” (Female, 42).

Despite this general lack of trust, many interviewees described friendly relationships with others who were selling or trading sex. For example,

**“People that I wouldn’t say I would take ‘em to a chicken fight or leave ‘em alone with my kids or anything. But you know, you do, you do tend to gravitate towards some people. There is still... some positive people out here, but that doesn’t necessarily mean I trust them or I, um, you know, but I, you know, I know what to say. Well, not to say.” (Female, 47)**

These were frequently people they knew from the blade (a street with high levels of commercial sex activity) or through other friends or pimps. These casual relationships were primarily work related. As one interviewee described it, “I wouldn’t say [I] trust them. I had people that I could, you know, do doubles with or maybe travel with. It was all business, but it wasn’t no choice. They weren’t people that I trusted” (Female, 31).

Fewer respondents reported having closer connections with friends in the life such that they watched each other’s back. For example,

**“So I called ‘em, like my HPs, they’re called hoe partners or whatever. Um, I have probably like three or four that I communicate on a day-to-day basis. They, some have folks, some don’t, um, we have good connections. We just travel, state to state. Sometimes we’ll meet up, sometimes we’ll just tell each other about locations, sometimes, um, we’ll tell each other about bad dates or bad people, bad pimps, you know, all types of stuff like that. It’s really just a little, our own little community to not be judged or feel awkward.” (Female, 22)**

## Travel for Commercial Sex

In addition to gathering information about the networks of individuals involved in commercial sex and trafficking, we also asked interviewees whether they traveled to sell sex. Traveling outside of Sacramento County was common, but some respondents reported working only within the county. When individuals were moved around, it was most frequently to surrounding communities in California, such as the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and Oakland, as well as to Nevada, primarily Las Vegas and Reno. A smaller number of respondents recounted traveling outside of states in the Pacific and Mountain West, with a few mentioning some international travel. It appears that much of the regional travel was by car, and one respondent mentioned Amtrak. Some respondents involved in longer distance travel described taking flights.



The length of travel ranged from a single day to months and tended to vary depending on how much money was being made. As one respondent described, “If it was like good money, like 2 weeks, um, sometimes a month. Um, but if it’s like bad money, then we would like change like either that day or every like week” (Female, 20). The selection of locations was based on prior knowledge of an area or information from others in the life. For example,

**“It really just depended. Um, he would, he would get a lot of his information on where to go from like other pimps that he knew and it, they’re friends of his. Um, so we would go and if the money was good, we would stay until it wasn’t good anymore. Um, but like, we go to Fresno, Stockton, LA, um, San Francisco, uh, Fresno was a good spot for a while. Um, so we frequented there often and would stay there for a cool amount of time.”**  
(Female, 31)

For the most part, traveling was not described as dangerous and appeared to be a fairly common part of the industry. However, a couple interviewees recounted situations in which traveling resulted in their being stranded and having difficulty getting home. Being in an unfamiliar area may make it more difficult to leave a bad situation. As one participant recalled,

**“There was actually a time where, ‘cause I’m I’m California born and raised. Um, so I’m pretty familiar with um California, but she took me, um, outta state and I was stuck out there for a month. She left me out there, came to pick me up like 2 weeks later and we came to [Sacramento] for like 2 days and then we ended up going back to Reno or um, to like outta state and um, she ended up like being abusive towards me and like beating me up. She was beating me with a belt. And so I fled and I was just stuck out there for 2 weeks, um, doing drugs and just hanging out with men, not eating or showering or sleeping too much, just really lost. And um, one day I woke up and I was just like tired of living like that. So I had to sleep with this one dude for money to get back to California. And so mind you, I was actually, the goal was to go out there to be busting dates, to be making money. Well, I only made one client out there because like I said, I really didn’t want to do it.”** (Female, 22)

## Summary and Recommendations

Traffickers varied substantially regarding age and race; however, most were male. Traffickers sometimes isolated their victims such that they had little or no contact with the traffickers’ associates, other victims, or others in the life. When interviewees did have knowledge of the traffickers’ social networks, they reported that the traffickers typically associated with others in the life, although some had more conventional family and friends. When traffickers had multiple victims, the relationships among the victims were variously

described as nonexistent, casual and friendly, close, or jealously competitive. Relationships among interviewees and others involved in commercial sex more generally (i.e., not co-victims) tended to be work related and characterized by a general lack of trust.

The findings suggest that pimping, dealing drugs, and engaging in other criminal activities are normative in many of the traffickers' social circles. There are no easy solutions for breaking this cycle. Rather, policies that ameliorate the root causes of many forms of crime, such as adverse childhood experiences and family and interpersonal violence, may be needed to prevent individuals from seeing trafficking as a logical way to earn a living. Additional research focused on traffickers is needed to help inform the development of trafficker-oriented prevention and intervention strategies.

The social isolation reported by some victims may make leaving a trafficker particularly difficult. This is described in more detail in Chapter 9.

## CHAPTER 9

# EXITING THE LIFE OR LEAVING A TRAFFICKER

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Among study participants, the circumstances of leaving a trafficker or a trafficking situation—whether to work under a different trafficker, to continue sex work on their own, or to leave sex work altogether—were as varied as the trafficking experiences themselves. Most study participants faced complex and difficult barriers to exiting their trafficking situation. The ways in which study participants were able to move away from their traffickers varied. Some participants left the situation passively, as a result of circumstance. Other participants had to take a more proactive approach. This chapter begins with an overview of the most-reported barriers to leaving a trafficker. It next describes the circumstances under which survivors were able to leave their trafficking situation, whether actively or passively, and concludes with a discussion of related recommendations that may support sex trafficking survivors as they navigate exiting the life or leaving their traffickers.

### Barriers to Exit

Sex trafficking survivors who participated in this study discussed various physical and situational barriers to exiting a trafficking situation or leaving a trafficker. The six most commonly reported barriers to exiting trafficking were (1) violence or threats of violence against the victim; (2) threats of violence against their loved ones; (3) lack of other personal relationships, lack of a place to go, or both; (4) the trafficker's possession of the victim's documents, other valued possessions, or money; (5) physical restraint or lack of permission to leave; and (6) romantic attachment to the trafficker.

## REPORTED BARRIERS TO LEAVING A TRAFFICKER

1. Violence or threats of direct violence
2. Threats of violence against their loved ones
3. Romantic attachment to the trafficker
4. Lack of other personal relationships, a place to go, or both
5. Trafficker's possession of documents, other valued possessions, or money
6. Physical restraint or lack of permission to leave

### Violence or Threats of Violence

Among the most common barriers to exit from trafficking was the use of violence or threats of violence to compel survivors to stay in the trafficking situation. Many respondents reported physical and sexual victimization at the hands of the trafficker, and though there was some variation in what was reported, the abuse described was typically severe. Several respondents reported being raped by their traffickers. Many described physical assaults, some so severe that they resulted in permanent disfigurement. As one respondent said, "He [trafficker] would become very violent. He would, you know, break my things, damage my property. He would slap me, punch me, choke me, spit on me. Throw stuff on me.... He would [break] into my house. All types of stuff" (Female, 26). The fear of violence or the ongoing threat of violence compelled many survivors to stay with their traffickers.

The threat of being killed was very real for participants. One interviewee described what happened when she did attempt to leave.

**"I left once. And then it was like, when he caught me... it was bad. I was going to die, you know, slapping my face with a pistol. He told me he had killed me.... I remember I was out for a few days... and then when I woke up... my lip was up to my nose and my face was all messed up. I couldn't see good.... I didn't think about leaving [again]. I might, you know, tell somebody else, you know, don't get involved with this. But I didn't think about leaving. I just did what I was fucking told." (Female, 60)**

For others, even if they were not a direct recipient of violence at the hands of their pimp or trafficker, observing violence against others served as a powerful deterrent to attempting to leave their traffickers. As reported by a participant,

**"The other girls, they pretty much got beat up and I saw it and I watched it and I heard about it and I didn't want that to happen to me. So I was like, most of these girls' stories [were] they were trying to leave, where they were tired. They wanted to go back home now that they didn't have the freedom that they thought they would, and I didn't want that to happen to me. So I was like... if I try to leave, he's going to beat me up and I don't want to get beat up." (Female, 29)**

Understandably, experiences with direct or indirect victimization diminished participants' feelings of autonomy and control as they navigated decisions around leaving traffickers.

### Threats of Violence Against Loved Ones

It was also common for participants to report that traffickers would use threats of violence against their parents, children, or other loved ones. As described in Chapter 8, the sex trafficking survivors included in this study had varying relationships with their traffickers, and those relationships directly related to the level of fear and credibility that could be associated with threats of violence against loved ones.

Survivors who reported that their traffickers had threatened their loved ones sometimes described how their traffickers would learn where the survivors' families lived. At least one participant described this as an intentional act during the grooming stage, when the survivor trusted the trafficker, before he had exhibited any signs of violence or control.

Sometimes threats would be made against a child that a survivor shared with the trafficker, which was complicated for survivors. Having a child together complicated the calculation around leaving the trafficker, as some participants described the decision as not only being about their own situation with forced or coerced involvement in commercial sex, but also needing to factor in their child's relationship with their father. One participant described threats made against her and her child:

**"He would say that he would harm other people. So... he would tell me, 'Oh, if I ever see you with someone else or you bring them around our baby, I'm gonna shoot you and him.' And he would stand in front of me and demonstrate how he was gonna boom, boom, boom.... I started to see that it was really serious." (Female, 26)**

### **Romantic Attachment to Trafficker**

As has repeatedly been reported in research on sex trafficking exploitation, this study found that survivors frequently felt that they were in love with their traffickers, especially early on in their relationships (Bullens & van Horn, 2002; Duncan & DeHart, 2019; Eberhard, Frost & Rerup, 2019; Martin & Pierce, 2014). A common narrative around participants who described romantic attachments to their traffickers as a barrier to exiting the trafficking situation was that the relationship between the survivor and trafficker began gently, sometimes following the same pattern of a more typical romantic relationship, later followed by the use of violence and other methods of coercion to compel the sexual exploitation of the survivor. These participants faced particular difficulty in leaving their traffickers, as their ties to the situation were emotional and not purely situational.

### **Social Isolation and Lack of a Place to Go**

When asked why they didn't leave the trafficking situation earlier than they did, many participants stated that they didn't have anywhere to go. Participants frequently discussed troubled, tarnished, or nonexistent relationships with their families. Some expressed shame about returning home to their families because their loved ones knew that they had been involved in commercial sex. For some participants, this was a result of their trafficking experience—some participants described having their personal cell phones confiscated and not being allowed to leave to visit family. In those cases, the trafficker used isolation as a method of control. For other participants, their alienation from their families may have served as a risk factor for involvement in commercial sex in the first place.

### **Trafficker's Possession of Money or Important Possessions**

Another common reason that participants gave for not leaving the trafficking situation sooner than they did was that the trafficker had possession of important documents or other beloved possessions. Almost always, the trafficker also had all of the money that the survivor had made selling sex. As one participant described,

**"I knew I could leave. I just didn't [have] nowhere to go. I was free to leave, but they made sure that they had control of everything. So if I left, I had nothing to take with me. So I would have to come back. So I was free to leave. They wouldn't care 'cause they know I'm gonna be right back. Both of them kept all my money in their bank account. So when I left, I left with nothing." (Female, 27)**



### Physical Restraint or Lack of Permission to Leave

Least commonly reported, but still described by some participants, was the use of physical restraints to keep them engaged in commercial sex. One participant described living in a room that had a deadbolt that required a key on both sides, meaning she could not open the door to leave even if she wanted to. Other participants mentioned being under constant surveillance by the trafficker or someone in his network, which prohibited them from walking away at will. One participant went so far as to describe those providing surveillance as security guards. As she described, “He had security guards at his front door... and we could only leave out when it was time to go work. They would bring us food... but we weren’t able to go outside in the daytime, see our family, nothing” (Female, 26).

### Proactive Attempts to Leave

Despite the circumstances described above, most study participants had left their traffickers, and by the time of the interviews for this study, had also stopped sex work altogether. This study sought to understand when and how study participants were able to leave traffickers. We found that there were two broad ways that study participants left their trafficking situations: either actively or passively because of a change in circumstances.

Among those who took a proactive approach to leaving, several themes emerged. First, it was common for an event to trigger the decision to leave. Among our study participants, these events included experiencing extreme violence, becoming pregnant, or simply having the opportunity to get away. When describing how they managed to get away, study respondents mainly described relying on formal services (e.g., service providers or law enforcement) or informal supports (e.g., friends, family, sometimes even sex buyers). Rarely, respondents described incapacitating their traffickers to facilitate an escape.

#### MAIN TRIGGERS AND STRATEGIES FOR PROACTIVE LEAVING

##### Triggers for Leaving

- Extreme act of violence
- Becoming pregnant
- Opportunity emerges to leave

##### Proactive Strategies to Leave

- Use of formal services or supports, such as service providers, police
- Use of informal supports, such as friends and family
- Rarely, incapacitating the trafficker





### **Trigger to Leave: Extreme Violence**

Ongoing violence at the hands of a trafficker was commonly described by participants. But when asked what made them leave the trafficking situation when they did, many participants described experiencing more serious or brutal acts of violence or victimization that served as the impetus for leaving, with several participants fearing death if they did not leave. One participant described how this happened to her.

*“I was scared for my life. I mean, we fought all the time, but this particular night I like got the shit beat out of me, so bad. I thought I was near death. I thought this was the night I was going to die. I’ve never felt like that about any time we fought. I mean, I was scared of course, and yeah, in pain, but it never felt like, ‘Oh my god, is this the fucking moment?’... I called my mom, like, hysterical. Like, ‘Mom, please, anything. Please help me get home. I will never deal with this man again.’ And they got me home.... I knew from that moment I could never be around this guy again, because he is going to kill me eventually. He wants to. And if I make him mad enough, he will.” (Female, 27)*

What happens next, after a survivor experiences violence like this, is critical because it seems to be an important window of opportunity for intervention. Some people, like the participant just quoted, relied on their families or informal support networks. Others used formal services, such as emergency room services or emergency policy response services, in which their victimization may or may not be identified. Understanding whom survivors call, where they go, and what they need immediately upon leaving situations like this is critical to developing better intervention and support strategies.

### **Trigger to Leave: Becoming Pregnant**

Less often, but still common among study participants, was deciding to get out of the life after learning that they were pregnant. This seemed to be a more complicated decision when the father of the baby was the trafficker, but among participants who left the life after learning of a pregnancy, many expressed that they wanted to provide their child with a different kind of life.

### **Trigger to Leave: Opportunity to Escape**

For several participants, leaving a trafficker was contingent on simply having the opportunity. Some respondents planned their exit with one or more other victims working for the same person. Others sought help from other people in their lives when they were able to leave their traffickers. Some participants talked about making plans to leave, whether that be by secretly saving money, hiding their belongings where they could easily pick them up after leaving, or coordinating with people who could help. Others did not have the opportunity to plan strategically but just left when they were able to.

### **Strategy to Leave: Use of Formal Services**

Some participants discussed using formal services, such as community-based services, to facilitate their leaving traffickers. Importantly, participants needed to know about these service providers and what they offered in order to rely upon them during the act of leaving a trafficker or in the time shortly thereafter. Some participants expressed that they needed to know that they could count on services beyond short-term crisis response or emergency housing. One interviewee discussed how she might have left her situation earlier if she had had a better understanding of resources available that she could rely on for sustained assistance. She said it might have been helpful to know about resources to help get out of that situation “that weren’t just temporary, like for a night or being put on a waitlist. Because I think those are the only things I ever heard of or found” (Female, 30).

Some participants went to law enforcement to facilitate their leaving a trafficker. This act often followed a physical or sexual assault. As one interviewee shared, “He beat me so severely that my head swelled up... and I couldn’t take it anymore. And I turned him in to the police that time” (Female, 48). As discussed in Chapter 10, in some instances, going to law enforcement for help or assistance with leaving a trafficker does not feel like a viable option for survivors. This situation presents an important opportunity for improved response and intervention.



### **Strategy to Leave: Use of Informal Supports**

Far more common than relying on formal sources of help was the use of informal supports to facilitate leaving a trafficker. Most commonly these informal sources of support included family and friends. Though some participants didn’t want their families to know that they were involved in commercial sex, some were able to disclose enough about their situation and need for help to actually leave. What that support looked like varied—sometimes the most critical support a survivor needed was transportation away from the trafficker, often to a different city or state. Frequently, survivors needed to know they had a place to live.

Less commonly, interviewees relied on other people to help facilitate their escape from a pimp. Several respondents described using sex buyers to facilitate their escape, simply by having the buyer drop them off somewhere different from where they had been picked up. There were also a few respondents who described the essential help of good Samaritans whom they did not know but were in the right place and the right time, who either picked them up and took them somewhere else or gave them clothes or other essential things that they needed to leave the pimp with no prior notice but given the opportunity.

### **Strategy to Leave: Incapacitating the Trafficker**

A final strategy, described by just a few participants, involved incapacitating a trafficker so that the survivor could leave. These interviewees described intentionally giving the trafficker excessive amounts of alcohol or drugs so that they would be incapacitated enough that the survivor could leave.

## Passive, Circumstantial Leaving

Sometimes leaving a trafficker was not a purposeful, planned event. Many interviewees reported leaving their traffickers, or the commercial sex industry, by virtue of changing circumstances. These circumstances most frequently involved incarceration of either the trafficker or the survivor, the death of the trafficker, or an active decision by the trafficker to terminate their relationship with the survivor.

### COMMONLY REPORTED PASSIVE, CIRCUMSTANTIAL WAYS OF LEAVING A TRAFFICKING SITUATION

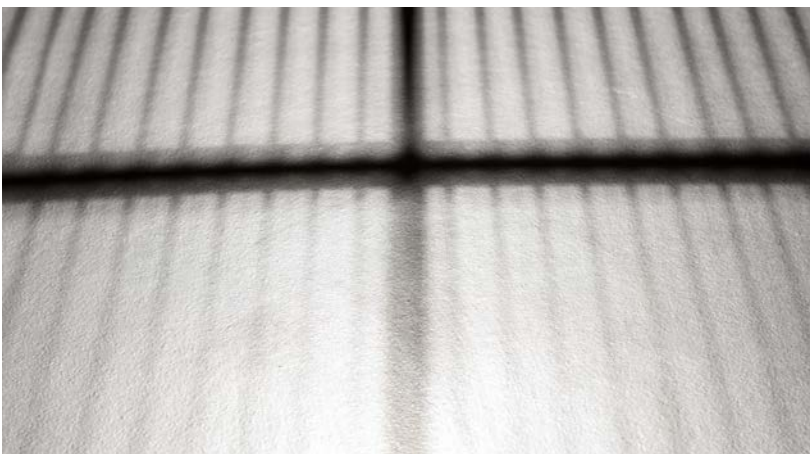
- Trafficker is incarcerated
- Survivor is incarcerated
- Trafficker dies
- Trafficker ends relationship

#### Trafficker Is Incarcerated

A common way that interviewees reported leaving their traffickers was that the opportunity arose when the trafficker was incarcerated. Among those who described what the trafficker was incarcerated for, charges included trafficking-related offenses, such as pimping and pandering, as well as other offenses, including homicide and drug-related charges. There were mixed feelings among those who left because their traffickers were incarcerated. Some were glad to be able to escape their trafficking situations. Others felt deeply committed to the trafficker or as if they had a romantic connection and struggled with the separation. Often it took interviewees in this situation some time to realize that the situation was not what they wanted and then they either severed ties with the trafficker or left commercial sex altogether. As one participant remembered, “Then he ended up going to prison for an extended period of time. And that actually helped me a lot because I was kind of like forced to move on” (Female, 26).

#### Survivor Is Incarcerated

Some interviewees were arrested and spent time in either jail or prison while they were still being trafficked, which served as a point at which they cut ties with the trafficker—or the trafficker cut ties with them. One interviewee said, “I got tired of being beat up and forced to have sex and being broke even though I was out there hoeing all day, and I just couldn’t take it anymore. So I eventually went to jail and got away from him” (Female, 33). Another recounted, “So I was driving and um, I seen the undercover cop and I started riding behind him really close so that we would get pulled over and you’re like, Hey. And they cited me and released me right there. And I was just like, oh my God. I was hoping you would just take me to jail” (Female, 27).



Although there is some indication from interviewees that their time behind bars offered the opportunity to reflect on the true nature of their relationship with the trafficker as well as whether they actually wanted to continue to engage in commercial sex, it is not the case that incarcerating victims is a viable strategy to address sex trafficking victimization. These survivors are saddled with the consequences of criminal legal involvement for the rest of their lives, with important effects on their employment, housing, and other prospects. A critical question, then, is what types of respite we can offer sex trafficking survivors that give them shelter and space from the demands of life, without the collateral consequences of an arrest record, particularly for those whose offenses are directly related to their trafficking victimization.

### **Trafficker Dies**

Less frequently, the way that interviewees left trafficking situations hinged on the death of the trafficker. As one interviewee expressed, “I would hate to say that if the [trafficker] didn’t pass away, I would’ve been stuck forever like that to this day. I couldn’t imagine that. I was just lucky” (Female, 45).

### **Trafficker Ends Relationship**

Last, some interviewees described the time when they left the trafficker as having been not in their own control, but in the trafficker’s. The reasons that interviewees gave for their traffickers’ severing ties with them were varied and included things like the survivor’s getting older, their looks changing, or their not getting along with other workers. In a few cases, traffickers ended their relationships with interviewees for other reasons. One interviewee described how her trafficker was driving her car and hit someone on a bike and drove off, and then got out of her car and she never heard from him again. These more random instances of permanent separation between victims and pimps were rare.

## **Summary and Recommendations**

Traffickers use many tactics to compel survivors to stay and continue working for them. Among the most common are feigning love and care for survivors, using or threatening to use violence against the survivor or someone the survivor cares for, and controlling the survivor’s access to their belongings or money. Traffickers create and exploit preexisting social vulnerabilities among survivors, encouraging social isolation from friends and family who would be able to facilitate a survivor’s exit from the trafficking situation. When survivors do leave, they do so either proactively or passively. Proactive leaving is often triggered by violent incidents, pregnancy, or simply an opportunity to leave. Passive leaving often happens because either the trafficker or survivor is incarcerated or because the trafficker dies. Both formal sources of help (e.g., police and community-based victim service providers) and informal sources of help (e.g., friends and family) can play an important role in helping a survivor leave a trafficker or leave the sex trade altogether.

Importantly, though the criminal legal system and its actors can facilitate a survivor’s exit from a trafficking situation, criminal legal system involvement can also impede survivors’ social reintegration and success in rebuilding their lives. In particular, it is important to consider alternatives to arrest and incarceration of survivors, as the collateral consequences of facing criminal sanctions are difficult, if not impossible, for survivors to overcome.

## CHAPTER 10

# ENCOUNTERS WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

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Study participants were asked about experiences they had being stopped, cited, or arrested by the police, including whether they were screened for trafficking during these interactions. More than half of respondents reported having had an interaction with law enforcement. While some of these interactions were positive, others were not. In this section, we describe the nature of these interactions; victims' assessment of them, whether positive or negative; and victims' experiences of being screened by law enforcement for trafficking. We conclude with a discussion of recommendations for how law enforcement may better support sex trafficking victims.

### Nature of Law Enforcement Encounters

As shown in **Table 10-1**, over half of study participants reported having had an interaction with law enforcement. Encounters included being arrested or cited for prostitution (51.3%), being arrested or cited for another charge (2.6%), and being stopped or having some other interaction with law enforcement (1.9%). It is important to note that some participants may have had multiple interactions with law enforcement; however, we focused the interview on experiences they had while being arrested or cited for prostitution. The variable was coded so that an individual could fall into only one of the categories (i.e., no arrest, arrested/cited for prostitution, arrested/cited for other charge, or stopped or other interaction with law enforcement). For example, an individual who reported being arrested for prostitution and having other law enforcement interactions were coded only as, "Yes, arrested/cited for prostitution." The other categories were used only if an individual reported not having an arrest or citation for another charge.

**Table 10-1. Nature of Law Enforcement Encounters**

Arrests and interactions with law enforcement	Number	Percent
<b>Total</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>55.8</b>
No arrest or interaction with law enforcement	68	44.2
Yes, arrested/cited for prostitution	79	51.3
Yes, arrested/cited for other charge(s)	4	2.6
Stopped or other interaction with law enforcement	3	1.9

## Victim Experiences With Law Enforcement

Victims reported various experiences with and perceptions of law enforcement. Descriptions of their interactions with law enforcement included both positive interactions, in which concern was shown, and negative interactions, when the victims were mistreated or exploited. In addition to the nature of their interactions with the police, some described the impact that arresting traffickers and victims can have.

### Positive Encounters With Law Enforcement

Some interviewees recounted stories of times that the police showed care or concern, even simply noticing the victim's emotional state. For example, "Because they can tell. They can tell that yesterday you were happy or yesterday you were mad, but today is something different. They pay attention" (Female, 49). Others mentioned law enforcement offering to provide help, such as, "I had the police, nice police, tell me if you need help, just come here. We'll talk about it" (Female, 58). Others recognized that the police could provide safety when, for example, they were trying to get away from a pimp. As one explained,

**"I tried to go to the police plenty of times. The police is where it's safe. I ain't scared of the police. I'd be like, 'Look, I'm running from my pimp. Can you help me? Can you put me in jail for a couple nights?' It was like, 'Well, we could hold you for up to 7 days.' I said, 'Yes, please.'" (Female, 32)**

Other positive encounters centered around screening and resources offered, which are described later in this chapter.

### Negative Encounters With Law Enforcement

Several interviewees recounted negative interactions with the police that involved mistreatment and exploitation. Some of these encounters involved officers using disparaging and demeaning language. One interviewee recounted an experience of being degraded and even spit on by an officer in the holding cell:

**"I ended up going to the jail, they put us all this holding cell and this one officer comes and he was like, 'Look at my collection of whores' and is like calling names and shit. And I'm hella close to the, um, the bars, and I was like, 'What did you call me?' And he was like, 'I called you a fucking whore.' And he spit in my face. This is a cop." (Female, 31)**

Another participant described her rationale for not seeking help from the police, for fear of how she would be treated:

**"No, no, the police did not help. The police did not help. No. The police... I'm afraid to even talk to the police too. You think you could go to the police and get help, but I think they're in on it or something because they it's like they're crooked and they, they don't really, they don't care at all. They make fun of you and laugh at you." (Female, 41)**

Other negative experiences included being robbed by law enforcement and being subjected to force that was beyond a reasonable necessity. For example,

**“I was sitting at the bus stop and I was getting ready to cross the street and he [police] went by me and then he made a U-turn and came back and rode up on the sidewalk and told me, come here. And I was like, no, I’m going home. I was getting ready to go home, right? And he grabbed me by my arm, flung me on the car, put my hand behind my back and, um, put his body up against me like that. And I was trying to get him off me. And then it was just one big old, it was just a mess.” (Female, 54)**

A few respondents reported being asked to provide sexual favors to police. In some of these situations the police solicited the victim for sex. A few even reported being asked to trade their freedom for sex. As one participant described,

**“So instead of asking me like, am I a victim of trafficking or anything like that, I get in one of the unmarked cars with my little handcuffs and the guy was like, ‘Well, we can resolve all of this right now. Um, you know, we can hit this corner.’ Basically, he wanted to trade sex for my freedom. I told him, ‘No,’ he got mad.” (Female, 31)**

### Impact of Arrest

In addition to describing their personal encounters with law enforcement, some study participants offered their perspective on the impact of arrest on exiting the life (even though they were not directly asked for this information). Some of these interviewees recounted how the arrest of their pimp or trafficker helped, or would have helped, them exit the life. For example, one respondent said, “What could have stopped it a long time ago would have been the police actually helping me when I reached out for help” (Female, 32). Another explained, “I just felt like it was the best opportunity. Um, it basically the police got involved and I just kind of turned myself into the police like that to get away and he went to jail, so that’s kind of how I got out” (Female, 33). Another suggested that if pimps got in more trouble with the courts, they would be less likely to offend.

Although the arrest of traffickers was described as potentially helpful, a couple respondents noted that their police records made it harder for them to get legitimate jobs. As one interviewee explained, “cause, I mean, people look at my.... Sometimes I don’t even want, I was gonna try to get a job, but then I didn’t want people looking at my record” (Female, 60).

## Screening for Sex Trafficking Victimization

Interviewees who reported having been cited or arrested for prostitution were also asked whether they had been screened for sex trafficking victimization during any of those interactions. As shown in **Table 10-2**, nearly half (46.4%) had been screened for trafficking. Most of their screening experiences occurred in Sacramento in the past 5 years.

**Table 10-2. Screening for Sex Trafficking Victimization**

Screened for trafficking?	Number	Percent
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>46.4</b>
No	37	53.6
Yes, screened in Sacramento in past 5 years	29	42
Yes, other time or place	3	4.3

Many participants who were not screened provided little detail about how they were treated instead. Some just noted that they had not been asked any questions. However, a few explained that they were treated poorly (as noted above). As one individual caught in a sting described,

**“They just classified me as a hoe. They didn’t even have no regard or no care, like, ‘Oh, are you out here?’... Oh no, not a victim. No, not a victim. They were just like, ‘What are you out here for?’ And he was like, ‘We’ll let you go, just tell the truth.’ And I was just steady, lying and steady lying, like, but they, they, they, they put, they put me down for, for, for the intent.” (Female, 26)**

Among respondents who were screened for trafficking victimization by law enforcement, three broad themes emerged: (1) many victims reported having lied during screening to protect their traffickers; (2) screening did not always prevent victims from being arrested or guarantee services; and (3) when resources were provided, they were not necessarily used. Several interviewees reported that they were screened, sometimes regularly, but they would lie to protect their traffickers. These lies included things such as, “but I say he was just giving me a ride, but they did ask” (Female, 31) and “I never let the police know that he was like my pimp, just that he was hitting me” (Female, 24). A couple interviewees said that law enforcement knew they were pimped or trafficked, but the victims still would not tell on their traffickers. For example, “They knew it and they wanted him so bad and I wouldn’t tell on him” (Female, 55). Another remembered,

**“They knew, they knew who I was running with. They always knew. Yeah. They always knew they wanted to know where he’s at. And is he still a pimping? Is he, you know, they would, they always acknowledge that, you know, and I would always lie and say he doesn’t pimp.” (Female, 62)**

#### **SURVIVORS’ EXPERIENCES WITH BEING SCREENED FOR HUMAN TRAFFICKING:**

- Many lied during screening and denied victimization to protect traffickers
- Screening did not always prevent arrest or result in service connection
- If resources were provided, they were not necessarily used

A few respondents reported that screening for trafficking victimization occurs but doesn’t result in any help. For example, “They did [screen]. Yes they did do. I do remember that. They did ask you that, but they don’t do anything about it... and they don’t give you no papers for resource or nothing” (Female, 44). Some recounted incidents when they avoided jail because of the screening but were still booked and fingerprinted. As one interviewee explained:

**“That was one of the first things they said this pass, go around. Um, they said they weren’t citing me because of whatever, like they weren’t gonna give me a ticket. I just had to appear in court and get booked or fingerprinted. But as far as like going to jail, they weren’t gonna do that ‘cause they were looking for a pimp.” (Female, 22)**

Other interviewees were provided with resources; however, they did not all use them at the time. One participant described just throwing the resources away:

**“Yeah. One, one was in Rancho and I told ‘em that I was being sex, I was human trafficking or whatever. And I had a black eye, I was with pimp number one. And um, they asked me, they, they asked me, did I want, they gave me hell of paper for programs and to help me or whatever. And they told me to reach out to these programs and they let me go. But they asked me, was he making me? And I said no and they let us both go and I just threw the papers away.” (Female, 27)**



Another explained that one downside of screening is that, even when resource lists are provided, the resources cannot necessarily accommodate everyone. Shelters may not have room, so victims end up having to sleep outside anyway. She further expressed the need for more safe places or homes, and that the assistance needs to be available when the individual needs it:

**“But they need more safe havens.... Pretty young girls. Because some of ‘em are doing it by forcing, some of ‘em are doing it because that’s their daddy are, but there’s nowhere for them to run to, where can they go?... When the sun go down, then what?... I just think they need to open up, somebody needs to open up a house for just young prostitutes, open up three or four rooms. Put bunk beds, military camp.... Whatever you gotta do. If these girls wanna go home, send ‘em home. They wanna go to a program, make sure that they can get into one that they don’t have no idle time in between time because some people need that discipline. I needed it. I didn’t need no in between time. ‘cause in between time I’m gonna go get home.” (Female, 47)**

## Summary and Recommendations

More than half of the interviewees had had at least one encounter with law enforcement. Although some of these encounters were experienced as positive by the victim, many were negative. Treating all people involved in commercial sex with dignity and respect is imperative. Treating members of this community with anything less can cause victims to avoid reaching out to law enforcement for help. It has been empirically demonstrated that an individual officer’s treatment of a citizen affects the citizen’s views of law enforcement in its entirety and it affects the public’s willingness to report crime; this is also true of victims of sex trafficking (Mazerolle et al., 2013; Tyler, 2004, Tyler & Fagan, 2008). Just like individuals suffering from an addiction, individuals in the life may need multiple contacts before they are ready to seek the assistance they need. Demeaning victims may make them reluctant to seek help from law enforcement because of lack of trust. Treating victims with dignity and respect can help establish a foundation of trust for them to seek help when ready. It may also decrease the likelihood that they will lie to law enforcement to protect their pimp. Additionally, law enforcement and prosecutors should consider ways to build cases against traffickers that do not rely on the cooperation or testimony of victims. Although a few of the survivors interviewed here suggested they may find resolution through traditional criminal legal responses, such as convicting and incarcerating traffickers, prior research suggests that sentiment is not universal (Yu et al., 2018). Alternative options, including restorative justice, may need to be considered.

Nearly half of the interviewees who interacted with law enforcement reported having been screened for trafficking. While this number is a good start, every contact made with individuals who sell or trade sex is an opportunity to screen. Once screened for sex trafficking, no matter the outcome and the law enforcement officer’s personal assessment, services and resources should be offered. Once again, although that moment may not be the right time for them to leave the life—because of safety concerns, financial concerns, or other personal reasons—offering services on every contact can help establish a trusting relationship and educate victims on what resources are available for them should they decide to seek assistance.

## CHAPTER 11

# BARRIERS AND PATHWAYS TO SERVICES

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Study participants were asked about their awareness of, pathways to, and experiences receiving services in the community. This chapter describes lack of awareness and other barriers that impede survivors' access to services, and it outlines the common paths that lead survivors to services. We conclude with key recommendations.

### Lack of Awareness

Many participants reported not being aware of services available in the community. Some survivors said they had not heard about services or providers, and some reported that it had not occurred to them that help might be available. One survivor explained, "No, that's not something I thought about. I never thought like, oh, I could go and get help somewhere. There would be a resource to help me. I never thought that" (Female, 31). Some respondents described being in "survival mode" and not thinking about seeking out formal help.

#### BARRIERS TO ACCESSING SERVICES

1. Many survivors were not aware of available services
2. Survivors encountered many barriers trying to access services
3. Survivors usually came to services on their own, after recommendation from friends or family, or through system

**"It was just, 'Get the fuck up out of here. Run away.' But it was never like, 'Look for help.' You know what I mean? I mean, it's awesome that you guys [CASH] have all these programs now and all that, but that was never something that crossed my mind."**  
(Female, 33)



Similarly, another survivor's description exemplifies how extreme self-reliance can be a barrier to seeking help, which is consistent with some prior research (Labouliere et al., 2015; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018).

**"I never knew about no for services or programs.... I'm the type of person that I never expect nobody to do nothing for me 'cause nobody never did nothing for me.... So, I never asked nobody about a program or looked for a program." (Female, 27)**

Lack of awareness about services was a hindrance for some respondents to leave their trafficking situations. One survivor said more outreach is needed and noted, "There's a lot of times when I wanted to leave it. Where was I gonna go?" (Female, 35). Another survivor was asked, if she had known of services, which would have been helpful at the time of their trafficking situation. She replied,

**"Getting away, food, just having a spot to be by myself for a little bit. You know, someone to talk to, just to be in a different setting, to make you really think and analyze about what's going on, and what your options are, because, I mean, if you did have somebody to talk to, or there was other ways for people like me who didn't know about these things, then you would've gotten out of it a long time ago. If you had the choice to choose." (Female, 28)**

## Barriers to Accessing Services

Of those aware of local service providers, many respondents said they had not tried to access services. Some respondents were unsure how; as one respondent stated, "Nobody ever schools you about help" (Female, 63). Some survivors did not think they needed help, and some reflected that they were not ready or in the right mindset to engage or take advantage of services at the time they were available.

**"And honestly now I feel like now, you know, been going through the classes and looking back and a lot of stuff. Okay. Yeah. I could have used the help back then, but like back then, I wouldn't have seen it like that. You know? So, like now I understand all the risk and all the, the stuff that I took, you know?" (Female, 22)**

A similar barrier that respondents identified was a lack of understanding of their trafficking situation (e.g., not knowing what trafficking is, not recognizing their own experience as trafficking, not understanding the severity), which made it hard to see services as useful.

**"I never even thought about the situation being this way.... I didn't look at it as a problem. I say I looked at it as a weird situation that I was in, but I didn't, you know, you wouldn't think you[r] girl being a pimp you know or anything like that?... It's like, wow. Mind blowing. Is kinda like, I never knew, but I did know kind of situation." (Male, 34)**

Some respondents reported that it can be hard to get into programs (or “super hard!” as one survivor said), and eligibility criteria for services are too restrictive. One survivor—describing herself as single and without kids or substance use needs—said:

**“I didn’t qualify for anything.... Things have to get really, really bad for you to get any type of help. Like, not trying to, like, put a level of how bad things get on life, but you have to get to those points to get help.” (Female, 22)**

#### OTHER LESS FREQUENTLY REPORTED BARRIERS

- Inability to pay or the provider’s not taking Medi-Cal
- Waitlists and the lack of immediate or same-day help
- Short-term services (e.g., shelter for one night) but a need for long-term options
- Night services are not available: “That’s when things happen but they have nowhere to go” (Male, 53)
- Too much red tape: “Why can’t you just tell ‘em, ‘Hey, I need help,’ and you don’t have to go through too much to get help?” (Female, 55)
- Concerns about trafficker hurting other people (e.g., program staff, participants)
- Concerns about privacy or confidentiality (e.g., being recognized because the survivor knows people in the provider’s neighborhood)

It is worth highlighting the obstacles that study participants encountered accessing a particular local service provider because it was, by far, the provider that participants were most aware of. One barrier was a misperception about eligibility requirements, specifically that the organization serves only women with children or, separately, only domestic violence victims. Although this is not true, some survivors cited these limits as a reason they did not try to access services from the organization. Another barrier was simply difficulty contacting the organization. Survivors described scenarios in which their calls were not answered or returned or they had to call multiple times. One survivor described her experience calling the organization about 2 months before the interview: “I contacted them as well and they told me they’d put me in their case management, but no one’s ever reached back out” (Female, 27). And another survivor explained,

**“When I called [organization], it’s either they hang up or have to call back and then they just sit on the phone, like, talking and have a conversation and stuff. And I’m like, [what] type of services is this if you’re trying to, you know, get some help?” (Female, 32)**

Several respondents also said they were told they would be put on a waitlist or that they were denied program enrollment. Some also described how this response negatively affected future help-seeking.

**“A lot of people told me to try [organization]. I would call them. They’d be like, you have to be on a waiting list and me on a waiting list? Like sometimes when, even when I spoke to people about situations that I’m in, like they wouldn’t think to take it serious unless I consistently call them. And that would be my thing, because I would just be like, okay, you can’t help me when I’m telling you, why would I have to keep calling you?” (Female, 27)**

**“I got discouraged with [organization], and they’re supposed to be, like, the top kind of thing. When they denied me, it kind of discouraged me from looking anywhere else because, man, if they’re gonna deny me of that, who else is gonna, they’re not gonna want me either, you know? So, it kind of discouraged me.” (Female, 44)**

## Pathways to Services

For participants who did receive services, the common pathways included survivors' seeking services on their own, after recommendation from a friend or family member, or through involvement with the criminal legal system or child protective services. Interestingly, participating in this study seemed to be a point of access for some survivors. They noted that coming to CASH was the first time they had been to a service provider, and several asked if they could keep the list of service providers the interviewer asked them about (which the interviewers did allow them to do).

## Summary and Recommendations

Participants reported several barriers that impeded their access to services, starting with a lack of awareness of available services. Among those aware of service providers, barriers included not understanding how to access them, not feeling ready to take advantage of services, not recognizing their experience as trafficking, facing eligibility restrictions, and having waitlists or other obstacles to receiving help immediately. Strategies need to be developed to remove service barriers. First, we need to increase and vary dissemination efforts to improve awareness of what services are available in Sacramento and how to access them. In addition to formal awareness-raising campaigns, word of mouth can be a powerful dissemination tool. It is important to recognize that survivors not only will hear about positive services experiences, but they may also hear misinformation and about negative experiences.

It is also critical to reduce obstacles to survivors' access to services. When a survivor is finally in a position to reach out for help, the response should not be "Call back" or "We can put you on a waitlist." For many, having to repeatedly reach out for assistance quickly leads to a dead end and they will not receive the critical help they need. Providers that are at capacity or cannot meet a survivor's immediate needs can help the survivor connect to another provider with availability if there are strong partnerships and coordination among providers in Sacramento. Providers must always follow up when they say they will. Survivors understandably often feel mistrust toward people. Not following through can exacerbate that feeling and reduce survivors' likelihood of trying again.

## CHAPTER 12

# SURVIVOR EXPERIENCES WITH MEDICAL CARE

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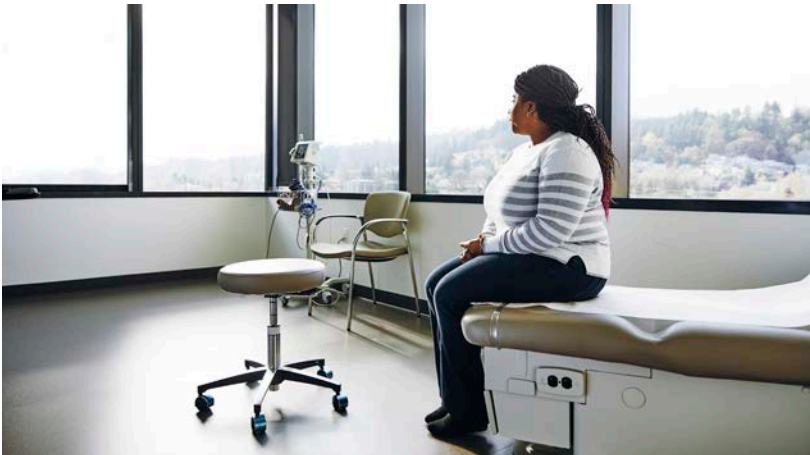


Given the physical violence that sex trafficking victims often experience, health care professionals may come into contact with them and are in a unique position to help identify and provide assistance to them. Participants were asked about their ability to access medical care. We also asked whether they were connected with additional services by a health care provider. This chapter describes survivors' experiences with medical care. We conclude with key recommendations.

### Receipt of Medical Care

Of the study participants who reported that violence was used against them during their trafficking experience, many also reported never having received medical treatment. Some respondents said that they did not believe their injuries were serious enough to seek treatment, as summed up by one participant who said, "I didn't go to the hospital because... yes, I had hella swelling and had hella cuts, but I wasn't, like, oozing out blood. You feel me? I don't have a concussion. So I just didn't feel like going to the hospital was necessary" (Female, 22). Other participants were afraid—or explicitly were not allowed by their traffickers—to seek treatment. For this latter group, participants described relying on self-care, or, as some participants said, "home remedies," or "just [letting] it heal." Some participants noted that not receiving medical attention had enduring consequences—for example, "Last year, the doctors told me there was like a bunch of damage from previous, like, concussions that I never had gotten checked out" (Female, 22).

1. Many survivors did not receive any medical care during their trafficking experience
2. Survivors who received medical care only sometimes were offered additional services
3. Survivors who received medical care were often too afraid to disclose information about their trafficking experience
4. Very few of the study survivors received assistance after medical care



But a sizeable number of participants did receive medical treatment, often after a severe incident (e.g., stabbing, broken jaw, broken arm, “knocking my teeth out”). When medical treatment was received, additional services or referrals were offered only sometimes. Survivors’ reports suggest that, the more severe the injury, the more likely health care professionals were to inquire about survivors’ situation or offer additional services. One respondent believed additional services were not offered “because they knew I didn’t have no insurance, so they wanted to hurry up and get me out.... They released me back to the same person, like, ‘Here. Take her’” (Female, 22). A few survivors felt judged (e.g., because of substance use or a sexually transmitted infection), which influenced professionals’ response and, as one participant said, left them feeling “hopeless about it.” Another survivor reflected,

**“I remember going to the hospital for a few times and I think they just saw that like I was an addict and then just, it was kind of like an in and out. So, I don’t think they ever asked, you know, as far as do you need help? I think they just would like, here’s a street sheet.”**  
(Female, 30)

When health care professionals did raise the need for additional services, most survivors said they would lie about what happened or not follow up with provided referrals. As one respondent recalled, “I would go and say I fell, or I did this to myself, and it was never like an altercation with me and anybody else” (Female, 39). A small number of respondents noted sensing that health care professionals did not believe the stories they made up about their injuries. The primary reason survivors did not disclose information or pursue services was fear of their traffickers—who sometimes were present. One respondent explained, “I lied because of course he was there the whole time. Like, ‘You better not tell ‘em what happened ‘cause WTF, I’m gonna get in trouble. I’m gonna get in trouble.’ Like, he was scared to get in trouble” (Female, 27). Another survivor said she was offered “resources to get out the lifestyle... but I was too afraid to really answer and be honest with them” (Female, 22). Other less-reported reasons that respondents did not disclose information or follow up with services included believing they did not need services, not wanting to involve law enforcement, being concerned that child protective services would be contacted, being responsible for another person’s care, and not wanting to cause trouble for their traffickers (and, in turn, for themselves).

As such, very few participants reported receiving assistance or services after medical treatment. For those who did, the type of assistance varied and included a ride home from a social worker, referral to a local service provider or shelter, connection to a victim advocate at the hospital, and a call to a shelter to come get the survivor. For those who accepted services or referrals, we have very little information to explain why. On the basis of a small number of responses, survivors accepted help because they had reached a point of wanting change (e.g., “I wanted them to know I was really trying to change myself”) or their circumstances required it (e.g., following severe injury, needing help once their traffickers “got caught up”).

A small number of survivors reported receiving routine medical care (i.e., not precipitated by a violent incident). In these situations, survivors did not voluntarily disclose information about their trafficking experience, and they were not asked whether they needed additional services.

## Summary and Recommendations

Survivor reports indicate training needs for health care professionals to improve identification and supports for sex trafficking victims. This need is in line with a recent study that found that 42% of health care respondents to a survey had received formal training in responding to human trafficking but 93% felt they would benefit from it (McAmis et al., 2022). Those who received training suggested improvements that included emphasis on building concrete and actionable skills. Too often the trainings focused on building awareness and general knowledge and not enough on skills that could be applied to practice.

Providing medical treatment to a person experiencing sex trafficking offers a critical and rare opportunity to intervene, but the window of access is short. Referrals put the burden on survivors to access services. Preferably, professionals could provide an immediate handoff to someone who has the time and expertise to help with trafficking-specific needs.

A study by Richie-Zavaleta and colleagues (2021) collected recommendations from survivors of sex trafficking specific to increasing identification of sex trafficking by health care providers. Survivor participants in their study made several recommendations that align with what was reported in this study, including to have health care providers look at a patient's whole medical history (if available) to look for patterns of abuse, rather than treating only the presenting injury or illness. Additionally, survivors recommended that health care providers pay attention to partners who will not leave the patient alone for care, even if they appear to be caring. Survivors also noted that while they might not be in a place to disclose the full extent of their oppressive conditions, they were likely to share tidbits that speak to their trauma; these small clues should not be dismissed.



## CHAPTER 13

# SURVIVOR EXPERIENCES WITH COMMUNITY SERVICES



Interviewees were asked a series of questions about their awareness of and experiences with a variety of community services. This chapter describes service availability and receipt, the extent to which participants felt that the services met their needs, the nature of their experiences, and disengagement with services. We conclude with recommendations for improving survivor experiences with community services.

### Service Availability and Receipt

Of those who were asked, most respondents reported that services are available or somewhat available in the community (compared to not available). When responding to this question, several respondents noted service accessibility issues similar to those reported earlier (e.g., not knowing how to access them, not qualifying for them). As one survivor said, “I just didn’t know how to access them.... I don’t really hear about any services.” And another noted, “I feel like they were available, but to get for them to actually pick you? It was hard.”

#### EXPERIENCES WITH COMMUNITY SERVICES

1. Survivors believe services are available in the community
2. Survivors received services from a wide array of local providers
3. Survivors usually reported that their needs were met, but housing, employment, and financial assistance are primary areas of unmet need
4. Survivors largely reported positive service experiences and felt that providers understood their trauma; however, survivor reports show room for improvement in providing trauma-informed care

Respondents named a variety of places where they had received services or assistance in the Sacramento area, including Bridges, California Victim Compensation Board, CASH (including RESET), Capital Star, Catholic Charities, Chicks in Crisis, City of Refuge, Community of Peace, Francis House, food banks, Gender Health Center, Harm Reduction Services, Hope Cooperative, LGBT Community Center, Loaves and Fishes, Mack Road Partnership, Maryhouse, My Sister's House, Opening Doors, Planned Parenthood, Sacramento County public benefits, Safe Ground, St. John's Program for Real Change, Salvation Army, Urban League, Volunteers of America, WEAVE, Wellsprings, Wind Youth, and Women's Empowerment.

## Meeting Survivors' Service Needs

Most respondents said that their needs were met or somewhat met, although some said they were not. The primary areas of unmet need reported by survivors were housing, employment, and financial assistance. It is not surprising that these interconnected needs have been challenging to address. There is a severe shortage of affordable housing in Sacramento, matching state and national trends (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2022a). Per the National Low Income Housing Coalition, a person in the Sacramento area has to make \$20.38 per hour, working 40 hours per week, to afford a zero-bedroom unit at fair market rent or \$22.85 per hour to afford a one-bedroom unit (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2022b). However, as one survivor explained, it can be difficult to find employment:

**"I never had the opportunity to get a job and keep a job. So, it's like really hard. My education is all over. I'm a mystery. I don't know where to start at. Me trying to get help from someone that's been in my situation, I haven't met that person yet. It's like always, well you gotta keep trying. Well, the more I try it doesn't get me anywhere. It's a lot of people that wanna hire someone that's had the experience. So, it's like, well, I don't know what I'm gonna do there." (Female, 45)**

Survivors also reported needing mental health or counseling services and, less often, general support (e.g., "a safe place to be," "emotional support," "love"), transportation assistance, and education assistance.

Housing instability or homelessness and financial insecurity or poverty are risk factors for sex trafficking and barriers to exiting the life. One survivor described her experience seeking help:

**"I reached out myself. I wanted to clean my life up. I had first got up rid of the pimps, then I couldn't get out of the lifestyle and that's where I needed help. 'cause I'm now, I'm just doing it just to survive. Now I'm just stuck in the cycle. Now it's like, dang, I need money to go wash our clothes. I need, I need money for, for the bus. I need money for everything. And then I'm just still catching dates and was like, I didn't have a babysitter. So, I had to take chances on leaving my daughter in a hotel room and go out and make some money and come back." (Female, 32)**

A few survivors reported that their male children over a certain age (e.g., 12 years old) were restricted from shared living options. As these were the only options available, they had been unable to find stable housing for their families.

These larger systemic issues require long-term systemic solutions, aided by political will, to mitigate risk of being trafficked and to address survivors' needs and support their healing.

## Negative Service Experiences

Some survivors shared experiences when they did not feel supported or cared for, which, for some, left them feeling hurt and resistant toward services.

**"I contacted them for help. And, uh, once they asked me, they asked me a series of questions about him. And uh, after the, after the intake interview, they decided they weren't able to assist me. And I don't know why to this day, they said they didn't have to let me know why.... I thought that was really cruel." (Female, 49)**

"[Organization's] employees stepped up, made me feel very uncomfortable.... I mean there was like two or three of them. Each time I came in, when they came in, I'm getting a, just a dirty look, like I'm dirty or something. And they rollin' they eyes, and it started irritating me. I started talking now too. I said, 'You know what? You guys are in the wrong place to be working at if you have that type of attitude. 'cause you can't help nobody, if you rolling your eyes and stuff at 'em.'" (Female, 62)

"I tried to go to a shelter once, but at the end of the day, when my time was up, I was on my own. I didn't even know, know what to do or where to go. What? So yeah. I just, you just go back 'cause what, what else can you do? You know? I don't know nobody. I felt like he protected me when he really wasn't, but, but you just, I mean, what do you do? It just put me out. I was over and I was standing, looking stupid. I remember sitting at the bus stop just crying and crying and crying 'cause I didn't know what to do. And I had nowhere to go and I didn't, I didn't really know. I didn't know nobody who had their own place and stuff like that. So what do you do? I called him, got my ass whooped. You know and then just like back, business as usual. So I never, you know, after that it was like, that I ain't messing with no programs, no nothing. You know, because they, when they get done with you, they done with you. That was hurtful. That that was crazy. 'cause it was like I had, I think I had 60 days or something and you know, it's like, y'all put me, told me you was gonna help me put me through all this. I done made this break. And now I'm all by myself, just sitting [on] the corner with a bag." (Female, 60)

Although rare, it is important to highlight that two survivors reported that service provider staff disclosed their location to their traffickers, gravely compromising their safety.

## Positive Service Outcomes

Conversely, many survivors shared examples of how the services they received helped them on their healing journeys. Some survivors reported that they are now working at the organizations they received services from. When asked how that felt, one person shared, "I had an opportunity. They was so nice. It was so, I was so joyful and I was somebody, I felt like I was somebody, you know, I had my time then I, I was doing so good." Another said, "So many times I could have been dead. And about 4 years later and now I'm working here." Other examples of survivors' positive experiences include these:

"So when I came to [organization] it was so, I was so glad there was something like this. Because you got to just sit there, you know? Sometimes everything goes so fast because you're just trying to survive. You're in survival mode. But you need to be in a different mode to where you're not afraid, you know. So that's where I was like I'm just going 90 going north the wrong way, you know?" (Female, 54)

"Now I got my therapy. Now I'm working and you know, I got this support system. That's good. And I feel like, like can't nothing hold me back." (Female, 36)

"The women at [organization] been through the same things we've been through, they live the same type of life we live. So, they're very relatable. Uh, they'll listen to you, they offer you different services, um, and resources that you need to try to fix your life, um, and be better, um, from therapy and classes to maybe housing resources and, uh, workforce development.... It's trying to rebuild survivors, um, into something that they always knew they were.... They're very open-minded and patient." (Female, 27)

## Provider Understanding of Trauma

Among survivors who received services, the majority reported feeling that their trauma was understood. When asked how providers showed understanding, most responses emphasized the importance of providers who had lived experience, or, as one survivor said, "having stories like mine." This was a clear theme, as demonstrated by these survivors' narratives:

“I think it’s helpful to talk to anyone who has experience rather than knowledge, because anyone can pick up a book and read the paper, but if you’ve been through it, it makes a difference. Um, you know, some of the terminology or just when my anxiety would get really bad and it would be hard to say something, they would already know what I was trying to say or what I was thinking of. ‘cause they’ve been through it.” (Female, 22)

“They gave me their own experience and it was more of, it was more, not sympathy, it was more empathy. When you have empathy that, because either you experienced it or it’s being, you just, you know how to reciprocate it. I don’t want nobody feeling sorry for me. I really don’t even want nobody to lift my wounds. I just need to express myself.” (Female, 47)

“Two women that I knew would, you know, always take their time to even just to come see me. That was just for me, like my escape, even being in a detention facility, like feeling like I was the one in trouble. Like it was all my fault. I was the one doing something wrong, but they were the only one who understood, like why I was really there. What kept leading me back there. The trauma, you know, like they knew like I wasn’t where [I] probably really needed probably, you know, like in a, uh, therapeutic facility? Being in that setting, um, taking their time that’s yeah. They show me by coming and just talking to me. You know, or, when they would, I’d ask them for certain things, like, you know, just ways to cope or help, you know, get me through it. Like, you know, just their advice by giving me advice and sharing their experiences with me, helped me.” (Female, 22)

“It seemed like they really, they get it, and they understand me where I’m at. I’m not going to be, ‘Oh, let’s meet.’ I just met you. It’s going to take me some weeks to even feel comfortable to come and meet you face to face and talk. And my case manager allowed me that space to kind of get comfortable with her.” (Female, 30)

“They didn’t push me. They didn’t ask me to give them a name. They didn’t ask me to prove to them what I was saying. They listened and then they asked me more questions, but then not about other people, you know, they asked me like, what is it that you feel that you need? So, I started to realize, I really didn’t know, you know? Yeah. And they were all also survivors. So, I felt like they really did know.” (Female, 35)

“I don’t remember her name or anything, but I remember, but just bawling my eyes out because it was just, just someone with a kind voice. And that was just her voice was just soft and she was, she didn’t interrupt me. She just let me vent and um, and I just remember bawling my eyes out and stuff and she was like, ‘It’s gonna be okay. It’s gonna be okay’ and stuff. So, I appreciate her.” (Female, 42)

It was noted, however, that some providers “are not very well trained on the experience and the trauma, what to look for,” as one survivor said. Several survivors shared experiences when they did not feel their trauma was understood. For example:

“I needed someone that knew exactly what was going on with me, who knew me, who already knew my story, you know? Because I have trouble saying things, as a whole. I have trouble explaining things. So, when I try and explain something, I kind of sidetrack or I miss the whole question, or I do something like that. But I always find out ways to just knock myself off balance in conversations. So, when I’ve talked to people, they just kind of like, oh, okay, well, she’s probably full of it, or bullshitting or whatever, but I’m not. I just have a really hard time explaining shit, that’s just me. So, I felt like that extra support, that extra therapy kind of—that definitely was a hard one for me, because I didn’t trust anyone. I couldn’t trust anyone with my story.” (Female, 20)

“No, they can’t understand. ‘cause I mean, if they been it through it, then they could slightly understand, but I understand what I go through every day. Just like, ‘cause at the end of the day they go home, and you know, it’s like they there to help you, but then they don’t really help you. Because it’s like so much you think I, you have to do and they don’t look at your situation you in, how it could be hard, you know? And it’d be like, where’s the help at the end of the day? Because I’ve been on straight up and up and it didn’t get me anywhere. It seems like it didn’t.” (Female, 35)

“This didn’t seem relatable. Didn’t seem the sincere that maybe somebody would need at that point to stick it out and be heard.... [*What did they do to show they didn’t understand?*] Lack of communication, lack of ability to spend the time that may be needed at those points. Being pushed through like a number.” (Female, 42)

“No. They always wanna want to be like, ‘Oh, I know exactly how you feel,’ but you don’t, but you, how could you know how I feel if you never went through it? And that’s what I shut down. ‘cause like now I’m done talking to your dumb ass—I just, I’m not about to waste my breath. Like with some stuff like that, like there’s no way you can know how I feel. And those are like the most annoying words to hear.” (Female, 32)

“I feel like the majority of the people that you interact with in the services are not qualified to even be questioning you or communicating with you about your experiences, of some of the trauma that you go through out there in the street. I’ve had people ask me, ‘Hey, we’re here to help provide the homeless with services. Can you meet me at the local Starbucks?’ You’re thinking, great, yeah, you’re going to get Starbucks. I know they got a Starbucks card. That’s why they want me to meet them there. And you meet them there. They have a cup, and you’re just sitting there. I’m starving, I’m hungry, and you want to meet in a place like this? Where I have to smell this? And I had to iterate that to them about how ignorant that [is]... Because see, you have a right to leave here and go be comfortable. I’m not going to be comfortable when I leave. I haven’t ate. You come be uncomfortable for a moment in my comfort. So you can jump in your car and go on about your business and jump back into comfortability. But also, get an understanding of where we’re coming from. That’s why I try to communicate the best I can with the services, so they can get a non-biased point of view that is not high, that is not mental illness, that is not chaos. I just want to tell them the truth. It’s just a hamster wheel.” (Female, 44)

In their descriptions of both positive and negative experiences, survivors are demonstrating the importance of

- providers’ knowledge about how to recognize and respond to signs of trauma
- active and mindful listening
- nonjudgmental and respectful interactions
- empathy (rather than sympathy)
- patience, willingness to meet survivors where they are, and recognition that building trust may take time
- recognition that survivors have individual experiences, needs, and goals
- a focus on strengths and empowerment

These approaches to working with survivors align with trauma-informed practice, which is widely supported as an essential element of service provision with survivors of sex trafficking (Ladd & Weaver, 2017). Ladd and Weaver outlined four strengths-based trauma-informed practices that may be helpful to improve response to trafficking survivors, including (1) collaborate and support (between professionals across disciplines and between providers and survivors); (2) recognize the roots (of trafficking); (3) understand and integrate awareness of trauma; and (4) value survivor strengths, choices, priorities, and goals. Results from a 2019 survey (Santos et al., 2021) highlighted the need for trauma-informed care training for service

providers working with human trafficking survivors. Similar to the training recommendations made by health care professionals, the recommendations from survey respondents relayed a need for more in-depth training that focused less on theory or definitions and more on how to practically apply trauma-informed care in day-to-day practices.

## Reasons for Disengagement With Services

Very few respondents shared why they stopped participating in services, but among those who did, the primary reasons given were that the services were not what they wanted or were not helping, or they did not feel they needed them anymore. A small number of survivors reported being kicked out of or leaving services because of conflicts with staff or other participants. A couple survivors left to protect their and others' safety after their traffickers learned where they were receiving services. And one survivor explained that lack of transportation and childcare prevented their participation in services. Echoing the importance of feeling that trauma is understood, another survivor said, "I stopped going anywhere if I don't connect with someone or if I feel like they're judging me or if I feel like me sharing what I'm going through is gonna do me more harm than benefit me" (Female, 35).

## Summary and Recommendations

Most respondents reported that services are at least somewhat available in the community. Among those who received services, most, but not all, reported that their needs were at least partially met. Key areas of unmet need include housing, employment, and financial assistance. In addition to needs that are not met, some survivors reported negative experiences with service providers, including not feeling supported or cared for and not having their trauma appropriately recognized. However, many survivors told stories of how services had helped on a pathway to healing and said that they felt that their trauma was understood. Others reported that they stopped participating in services because the services were not helping.

Recommendations for improving survivor experiences with community services include (1) expanding pathways to high-value resources, particularly stable housing assistance, job assistance, and guaranteed income programs; (2) increasing continuing education opportunities on trauma-informed practices for service providers; (3) expanding survivor-led programming; and (4) tailoring services to a survivor's specific circumstances to ensure that the services are actually needed and have the potential to be helpful.

## CHAPTER 14

# SUMMARY AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

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The purpose of this study was to estimate the prevalence of sex trafficking exploitation among adults who trade or sell sex in Sacramento County. Additionally, this study was intended to better understand the nature and the scope of sex trafficking in Sacramento County and to collect data capable of informing a strategic, coordinated, multisystem response to sex trafficking—a response that can be useful for both prevention and intervention efforts.

### PRIMARY OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY

1. Estimate the prevalence of sex trafficking in Sacramento County
2. Better understand the nature and scope of sex trafficking in Sacramento County
3. Provide data capable of informing a strategic, coordinated, multisystem response to prevent and respond to sex trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of people in Sacramento County

To date, only 12 U.S. studies have estimated the prevalence of sex trafficking. These have been at different geographic levels, producing national, state, and local estimates. These studies have focused on various, sometimes narrow, populations (e.g., homeless youth) and were not all aimed at producing a total prevalence estimate for all sex trafficking victims in the study site. Because of these differences, the studies' findings are not comparable. There has not been enough U.S.-based research to know how similar prevalence rates may be in different communities or to what extent the findings can be extrapolated to other areas.

Yet, understanding the scope of sex trafficking is important for developing adequate and strategic responses that are aligned with the magnitude of the problem. Micro-level studies, focused on a specific target population in a clearly defined geographic area, are likely to be the most feasible for calculating robust estimates and may be more useful in developing specific and actionable recommendations. This study has built on and expanded prior U.S. prevalence estimation research by producing the first prevalence estimate for sex trafficking in California and by including adults in the estimate. We have also gone beyond estimating prevalence to provide data on assorted topics that are useful in informing a coordinated, strategic response to sex trafficking.

This study was practitioner-led and incorporated a participatory action research approach from the outset, including by convening a Survivor Advisory Council of people with lived experience to provide input to all phases of the study. The Council helped us narrow down the key areas and domains for the interviews; reviewed and provided feedback on the instrument, recruitment protocols, and the compensation structure for participants; served as interviewers for the study; provided input on some of our findings; and generated recommendations.

We used a mixed-methods design, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data. We collected administrative data on identified sex trafficking victims or survivors from nine agencies to generate an estimate of prevalence. Using RDS, we conducted 159 semistructured interviews to gather more contextual information about the lived experience of victims/survivors of sex trafficking. Collectively, these methods yielded rich information about the scope and nature of sex trafficking in Sacramento.

## Summary of Key Findings

Approximately 13,000 minors and adults were trafficked for sex in Sacramento County **at some point during the period 2015–2020**. The data cannot be used to determine the number of victims in a single year or day. This analysis further suggests that there are 11.2 times more victims than were identified by law enforcement and service providers. Many victims are not reaching out for help; even if they do, they may not be identified as victims. There is clearly room to better identify and serve victims of sex trafficking.

Although the study participants identified primarily as female, they were diverse regarding race, ethnicity, age, and age at entry into commercial sex. Most of the interviewees were involved in street-based or online commercial sex, or both, and some had experience in other types of markets. The social networks of participants appear diverse regarding race and ethnicity, age, and age at entry into commercial sex. However, we had limited success in accessing certain populations (e.g., men and transgender people, individuals who work in massage parlors).

All respondents who sold or traded sex for a third party reported at least one form of exploitation; experiencing multiple types of exploitation was the norm. The most common forms of abuse included withholding pay, monitoring and surveilling, making clear that the victim should not feel free to leave, committing physical or sexual violence, committing emotional abuse, and restricting communication. The exploitation experienced at the hands of a trafficker may change over time; for example, a pimp may start by posing as a romantic partner and ramp up violence later.

Participants described various precursors to becoming involved in commercial sex. Although some felt that they entered completely voluntarily and others felt that they entered completely involuntarily, most participants described an experience that fell somewhere in the middle. Experiences that resulted in an individual's entering sex work included someone else's request, false pretense of a romantic relationship,



financial circumstances or necessity, false recruitment, and force. It is important to note that many participants described a pattern in which they initially agreed to sell sex but eventually found themselves in a situation in which their involvement in sex work was no longer voluntary.

Interviewees described pimps and traffickers that varied substantially regarding age and race; however, most were male. Traffickers' social circles typically included others involved in pimping, dealing drugs, and engaging in other criminal activities. Traffickers may have isolated their victims such that they had little or no contact with either the traffickers' associates or other victims. However, other participants described relationships they had with others in these various networks. When traffickers had multiple victims, the relationships among the victims were variously described as nonexistent, casual, close, or jealous. Relationships among interviewees and others involved in commercial sex more generally (i.e., not co-victims) tended to be work related and characterized by a general lack of trust.

Victims described challenges in leaving a trafficker and exiting the life. The most common tactics traffickers used to compel survivors to stay were feigning love and care for them, using or threatening to use violence against them or someone they care for, and controlling the survivor's access to their belongings or money. Proactive leaving was often triggered by violent incidents, pregnancy, or simply an opportunity to leave. Passive leaving often happened because either the trafficker or survivor was incarcerated or because the trafficker died. Both formal sources of help (e.g., police and community-based victim service providers) and informal sources of help (e.g., friends and family) can play an important role in helping a survivor leave a trafficker or leave the sex trade altogether.

More than half of the interviewees had had an encounter with law enforcement. Although some of these encounters were experienced as positive by the victim, many were negative. Nearly half of the interviewees who interacted with law enforcement reported being screened for trafficking. Survivors who were screened reported lying to protect their pimps and discarding resources that were provided, suggesting that persistence is critical (i.e., screening and providing resources may need to happen multiple times before a victim is ready to use them).

Barriers to receiving services included not being aware of available services, not understanding how to access them, not feeling ready to take advantage of services, not recognizing their experience as trafficking, being subject to eligibility restrictions, and facing waitlists or other obstacles to receiving help immediately. Despite these barriers, most respondents reported that services are at least somewhat available in the community. Among those who received services, most, but not all, reported that their needs were at least partially met. Key areas of unmet need include housing, employment, and financial assistance.

Given the physical violence that sex trafficking victims often experience, some study participants made contact with health care professionals. However, many respondents who reported that violence was used against them never received medical treatment. Some respondents said that they did not believe their injuries were serious enough to seek treatment. When they did receive medical care, additional services or referrals were not consistently offered; even when they were offered, most survivors said they would lie about what happened or not follow up with provided referrals.

Interviewees also reported on their awareness of and experiences with other community service providers. Most said that services are at least somewhat available in the community. They shared stories about their experience with these service providers that were both positive, such as being put on a pathway to healing, and negative, such as not feeling supported or cared for and not having their trauma appropriately recognized. Others reported that they stopped participating in services because they were not helping.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The prevalence estimate for Sacramento County demonstrates that a significantly wide gap exists between how many community members are affected by sex trafficking and how many are currently being identified and served. The qualitative interviews further highlight the pervasive use of physical and sexual violence and emotional abuse on victims of sex trafficking, often leaving lasting physical and emotional damage that continue to affect their quality of life. Given that the consequences of sex trafficking are so severe for victims and that the prevalence estimate is substantial, it is recommended that Sacramento County—and all counties in California—adopt a public health framework for preventing sex trafficking and serving survivors.

A public health framework has several advantages over the typical law enforcement response, including the opportunity to develop strategies that can prevent perpetrators from exploiting victims in the first place and addressing the demand for commercial sex from minors and trafficked individuals. Such a framework would include policies that ameliorate the root causes of many forms of crime, such as adverse childhood experiences, family and interpersonal violence, and poverty. We need to raise awareness of these preventable root causes and focus community education and funding on removing these issues. Although there are no easy solutions for prevention, it should be prioritized to advance the health and wellness of the population.

We also need strategies that improve victim identification and intervention. Law enforcement and the criminal legal system are frequently tasked with leading the intervention effort. Although the criminal legal system and its actors can play an important role in facilitating a survivor's exit from a trafficking situation, they can also impede a survivor's social reintegration and success in rebuilding his or her life. It is critical to implement alternatives to arresting survivors so they can avoid the collateral consequences of an arrest record. When law enforcement is involved, it is imperative that they treat all people involved in commercial sex with dignity and respect. Once a person is screened for sex trafficking, no matter the outcome and the law enforcement officer's personal assessment, services and resources should be offered. Although that moment may not be the right time for a victim to exit, persistence in offering services can help establish a trusting relationship and educate victims on what resources are available for them when they are ready. Moreover, a public health framework makes space for restorative justice and relationship building.

After victims have been identified, a public health framework also prioritizes meeting the long-term needs of survivors. Doing so first requires improving awareness of what services are available in Sacramento and how to access them. In addition to formal awareness campaigns, word of mouth can be a powerful dissemination tool. We also need to reduce obstacles that survivors face to accessing services. This may include strengthening partnerships and coordination among providers in Sacramento so that a provider that is at capacity or cannot meet a survivor's immediate needs can help the survivor connect to another provider with availability. To support long-term needs, it is critical to expand pathways to high-value resources, particularly stable housing assistance, job assistance, and guaranteed income programs. Eligibility requirements for programs need to be flexible to ensure that victims do not fall through the cracks.

Finally, a public health framework allows for the meaningful participation of survivors of sex trafficking to assist communities to address this issue. Survivors may help with crafting prevention strategies that might not seem intuitive to those without specific lived experience and that invite the broader community to invest in screening and addressing the preventable root causes of sex trafficking in our communities. Increasing survivor-led programming may also reduce some of the negative experience that participants have had with service providers who did not understand their trauma.

This report summarizes our high-level recommendations. A detailed action plan with cost estimates will be published separately.

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