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The voices of survivors: An exploration of the contributing factors that assisted with exiting from commercial sexual exploitation in childhood

Annie Corbett

Saybrook University, 1185 18th ave., 94063 Redwood City, CA, United States.



A B S T R A C T

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), reported cases of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) have increased considerably in the United States over the past few years, particularly in the Northern California San Francisco Bay Area. From a strengths-based trauma-informed perspective, this study explored the factors that assist youth with exiting the life associated with CSEC. The primary research question was, “What can be learned from the lived experiences of women who successfully exited childhood commercial sexual exploitation and perceive themselves to be functioning well despite this history?”

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews with 13 predominately women of color, average age of 25 (range 21–26), who successfully exited the *Life* after enduring an average of 4 years (range 1–9). The average age for the group for becoming exploited was 13 (range 8–17), with all exiting during their 17th year. A thematic analysis identified 20 themes organized under three primary categories. The first category, Self-Defined Wellness (4): naming of self-outside the *Life*, positive family connections, breaking the cycle, and embracing the term *survivor*. The second, Describing the *Life* (6): sex for goods, surviving the *Game*, pimp control, wanting to be loved/look good, contributing family factors, and the grooming process. The third, Exiting Process (10): naming one who has exited, others depend on me, not profitable to exit, fear keeps you in, thinking about leaving, the role of family, pending motherhood, wanting to be free, sustaining exit, and professional systems not accessed. There were four recommendations from survivors: active listening, encouragement, non-judgment, and don't leave when we push. Two anecdotal themes emerged: treated like garbage by the legal system, and I thought I was grown.

The study design uniquely positioned the voices of survivors as experts in relation to expanding knowledge about the exiting process and in offering recommendations for youth-at-risk, family members, and providers. Contributions include underscoring the importance of bearing witness to youths' stories as part of resiliency/recovery and valuing the complexities of family relationships/dynamics in the exiting process. Implications for advocacy, research, and practice are discussed.

1. Introduction

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is not a new phenomenon in the United States. There is historical evidence of the sexual exploitation of minors going as far back as the beginning of the 17th century in the land that later became the United States. The practice of indentured servitude to get to the new world meant sexual exploitation for many unaccompanied girls and boys. Later, when the population began expanding along the Atlantic coast and westward, most Northeast and Mid-west brothels were staffed with Asian and European immigrants with the majority of them were under legal age (Regello, 2007). As a result of the expansive nature of this abuse through the centuries, the child welfare movements that sprung up in the 1920s and 1930s did so in response to the sexual exploitation of

children that had become rampant (Myers, 2008).

Apart from sexual exploitation for commercial purposes, thousands of underage children are exploited within their own homes by either relatives or neighbors (Curtis, Terry, Dank, Dombrowski, & Khan, 2008). In recent years, the commercial sexual exploitation of children has gained increasing recognition as the most neglected type of child abuse in the United States (Reichert & Sylkwestrzak, 2013). Among immigrants, poverty is a leading cause for the commercial sexual exploitation of children, although it does cut across social strata (Ives, 2001). Homeless youth, runaways, and what has been termed *throw-away* youth, make up most the victims, although even children from affluent families are often victims.

The forms of exploitation include the molestation by acquaintances and family members; involvement in pornography, phone sex, escort

E-mail address: acorbett@saybrook.edu.

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services, Internet sex/webcam, nude/semi-nude dancing, modeling, stripping; and pimp-directed prostitution among the girls and usually homosexual sex for boys (Conaway, 2013). Other forms of exploitation involve survival sex, which includes trade for shelter, food, and clothing, and bartering for sex, which includes trade for drugs and gifts. In other instances, girls who find themselves as part of a gang engage in commercial sexual activities as part of their contribution to the financial welfare of the gangs (OJJPD, 2016). Despite these apparent problems, many treatment programs for the exploited youth and those at risk are not well known or their rates of success evaluated. Therefore, this study aims at increased understanding of promising therapeutic practices for abused children that populate this segment of society.

Unfortunately, many cases of sexual exploitation are not reported, even though information related to phone tips regarding exploited and missing children has been made increasingly available. These tips increased from 20,000 in 2000 to 100,000 in 2004 in the United States alone; although, it is not clear whether the increase was due to increased awareness or more cases of exploitation, or both (Curtis et al., 2008). The wide gap between tips and incidents of exploitation indicate a possibility that millions of youth in the United States are either already being sexually exploited or at risk of exploitation.

Research conducted by Crowell (2010) indicates that CSEC results in trauma and other adverse health implications that interfere with a child's psychosocial and physical wellbeing. The implications are worsened by the fact that there are few residential treatment programs to address their needs once they are separated from their abusers. In this regard, the problem of CSEC is not only an issue of public interest but also a problem that requires counteractive effort from every member of the society. Boxill and Richardson (2007) stated that among the factors that lure children into exploitation include poor family functioning, history of sexual abuse, lower socioeconomic status, and poor school achievement. These factors are difficult to control because they are unique to different individuals. However, an attempt to deduce lessons from women who have exited commercial sexual exploitation in childhood is a practical way of addressing the problem. By studying the most effective approaches to exiting CSEC, it might be possible to develop mitigation and prevention strategies that can be adopted by individuals, society, and government/non-government agencies.

This research was motivated by the fact that data detailing the experiences of survivors of CSEC could add insight for programs that aid with exiting commercial sexual exploitation. The information could be valuable in planning CSEC programs. Additionally, CSEC agencies, as well as governmental entities involved in CSEC, could benefit from more comprehensive and descriptive data as presented in this study on what can be effective in these programs. This research could assist in decision-making regarding CSEC policies, laws, procedures, and education of families that have had a loved one involved in commercial sexual exploitation.

1.1. The study

1.1.1. Purpose of the study

As of this writing, there have not been any evidence-based practices identified that indicate efficacy in effectively helping minors successfully exit commercial sexual exploitation (The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, 2016). There are promising practices such as survivor-led programming and harm-reduction, but providers are still at a complete loss as to how to effectively empower a youth to successfully exit. Additional complexities include: (a) slowly increased awareness among youth services organizations; (b) law enforcement, mental health agencies, and medical personnel; (c) the strength and complexities of organized crime; and (d) fragmented local service agencies that are unaware of effective strategies which help a youth with the exiting process. The fact that many minors who have been sexually exploited do not report or seek treatment has created a

barrier to successful curbing of commercial sexual exploitation among the youth (Ives, 2001). There is also a complete lack of understanding on how to effectively work with CSEC to encourage successful exit and a transition out of commercial sexual exploitation or the Life. Women and girls will say they have been in the Life if they were commercially sexually exploited for a while (Common Sex Trafficking Language, n.d.)

Commercial sexual exploitation of minors entails a range of criminal activities that degrade, demean, and threaten the psychosocial and physical wellbeing of these children. Therefore, there is a need to advance the understanding of factors that can assist victims of commercial exploitation to successfully exit the Life. Survivors of the Life who are willing to share their stories are invaluable resources to further expand our knowledge of this extremely vulnerable population.

1.1.2. Research questions

The emphasis of the research questions was to focus on the exiting process and not necessarily any of the psychosocial issues that contributed to being commercially sexually exploited (CSE). Therefore, the primary research question was, "What can be learned from the lived experiences of women who successfully exited childhood commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) and perceive themselves to be functioning well despite this history?" Secondary questions included:

1. How did women who experienced commercial sexual exploitation in childhood describe their perception of functioning well as adults, despite this history?
2. How did women describe their exiting story or process from commercial sexual exploitation in childhood?
3. What, if any, recommendations did they suggest for children who are trying to exit?
4. What, if any, recommendations did they have for professionals working with such children?

2. Literature review

The issue of human trafficking and sexual exploitation is not new. Indeed, there is a whole chapter in the United States (US) code that discusses human trafficking - Chapter 78: *Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA)*. In this Act, a person who coerces another person to engage in a commercial sexual act (CSA) is guilty of exploitation. According to TVPA, CSA refers to any sex act on whose account something valuable is given to any person or received by any person. Commercial sexual exploitation in childhood (CSEC) has been historically closely related to CSA. However, CSEC is the exploitation of minors through prostitution, pornography and physical abuse for financial gains. Since early centuries, some people have been using CSEC as a means of earning a living. History has shown that sexual exploitation has thrived regardless of the complexities of the Life of the victims of sexual exploitation. CSEC adversely affects a victim's health, and psychosocial and physical wellbeing (Clayton et al., 2013). Although there have been studies focusing on sexual exploitation (Adams, Owens, Small, United States & Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2010; OJJPD, 2010) some of which have led to the formulation of laws and regulations such as the TVPA, the issue is still a problem in the US and around the world.

Globally, the International Labor Organization estimates that there are 4.5 million people currently trapped in forced sexual exploitation and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency (OJJPD) estimates sex trafficking to victimize more than 200,000 children in the United States annually (OJJPD, 2016; The Polaris project, 2013). As of this writing, there is no data available on the exiting statistics for CSEC, but there is some data on adults who have been CSE and their exiting process. Adults typically have an age of entry into CSE between the ages of 12–14, and while resources for children are minimal, the resources available for adult are much scarcer (Estes & Weiner, 2001). Once

someone who is CSE hits adulthood, varying factors such as survival sex that entails exchanging sex for basic needs such as food, shelter, mental health issues and trauma, and substance abuse issues begin to play a much larger part in the exiting process. Adults attempting to exit who lack education and job skills or have criminal histories are often unable to gain legitimate employment, thus, they feel compelled to resort to CSE (Cimino, 2012).

2.1. Overview of CSEC

2.1.1. Prevalence of contemporary CSEC in the United States

In June of 2003, the FBI launched the *Innocence Lost Initiative* due to the fast growing problem of domestic commercial sexual exploitation of children (Smalley, 2003). The *Innocence Lost Initiative* identified 13 cities functioning as hubs for CSEC including the California Bay Area, Las Vegas, Minneapolis, and Dallas. Since the founding of the *Innocence Lost Initiative* (as of June 2012) the FBI has had over 1010 trafficking convictions and has recovered over 2100 children from a life as exploited victims of prostitution. It is a national problem that likely goes far beyond the 13 cities and requires growing awareness (Halpern & Hardie, n.d.). According to the *Polaris Project* (2016):

In 2016, an estimated 1 out of 5 endangered runaways reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children were likely child sex trafficking victims. Of those, 74% were in the care of social services or foster care when they ran. (p. 1)

2.1.2. The child next door: Domestic psychosocial determinants

Within the United States, CSE victims come from all backgrounds, sexes, nations and economic levels. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJPD), the average age of entry into CSE is 12–14 years of age (Adams et al., 2010). In a 2011 report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, over 95% of sex trafficked victims were female, and over 54% were 17 years of age or younger (as cited by OJJPD, 2016). Challenging popular belief or bias, data indicates that 20% of victims are Caucasian, 20% are Hispanic, and 33% are African-American, statistics that challenge popular belief or bias. The data indicates that over 77% are United States Citizens or permanent U.S. residents and less than 15% were undocumented or qualified aliens (Banks & Kyckelhahn, 2011).

Although research has indicated that most CSEC victims tend to be female, recent literature has expanded that view to include men and boys. While the focus of this Literature Review is on females, it is important to note that a study conducted by Bryan (2014) in New York City, determined that 40% of CSEC cases in the city involved male victims. The disparity in reporting is most likely because males tend to not have a pimp or exploiter, and rather self-exploit for survival sex.

The commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) of children has many contributing factors, which include childhood sexual abuse, early sexual initiation, family facilitated sexual exploitation, and emotional abuse (Ahrens, Katon, McCarty, Richardson, & Courtney, 2012). According to Ahrens et al. (2012), youth who have a history of child sexual abuse, and have been in the foster care system have a higher chance of being vulnerable to the manipulations of an exploiter for sex trafficking. In their study, Ahrens et al. found that if the youth had a history of child sexual abuse, the chances of engaging in transactional sex, and particularly within a year of emancipation, increased substantially. However, this finding was statistically significant only for females, not for the males involved in the study. Another study by Abramovich (2005) indicates that the prevalence of childhood sexual

abuse is two to three times higher than that of the general population. However, the researcher also noted various studies that indicate the childhood sexual abuse is not prevalent in various studies of adult prostitutes. In support, Bagley and Young (1987) studied ex-prostitutes ($n = 45$) and non-prostitutes ($n = 36$) and found that 76% of ex-prostitutes were sexually abused as children and 46.7% had an early initiation to sex, mostly before 15 years.

2.1.3. Poverty

Economic vulnerability as expressed in poverty coupled with race and gender influence the presence of oppression and inequality in the American society. The intersections of each of these conditions taken together provide a more accurate picture of the incredible disparity that exists in social groups in the United States. The FBI has identified various hubs in the United States for the commercial sexual exploitation of children and these include Atlanta, Oakland, and Minneapolis (Walker, 2013). The commercial exploitation of children and youth in urban areas characterized by extreme poverty, further identified by the over identification of a single ethnic group (i.e. African American) as an indicator that poverty, race, and the degradation of females through sexual exploitation intersect.

Poverty, in its purest form, is seen in the inability to meet basic human needs, which include food, shelter, and clothing. Human beings are driven by necessity to ensure their own survival including illegal or degrading means if no other avenues are available. When analyzing poverty and race, the intersection where they often meet is in what is called the inner city. For purposes of this review, inner city is defined as an area where there is an overconcentration of poverty that interacts with racial discrimination (Wilson, 2012).

According to the FBI, the commercial sexual exploitation of children seems to be in all areas; however, it seems that it is most concentrated in areas that have significant poverty such as Oakland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and New York (OJJPD, 2016). So, how does poverty result in a young girl becoming a part of CSEC? There are a variety of factors: The breakdown of the family with stress and violence that is indicative of the urban inner-city; The multigenerational lack of viable education in the area; The lack of viable work, forcing men and women in the inner-city's to seek illegal means for food, shelter, and clothing; The breakdown of sexual barriers related to respect and fast money ignites in both the men who become pimps and women who become prostitutes to develop positive feelings that come from others seeing them as living a life of glamour and respectability.

Multi-generational poverty in the inner city provides a vast grooming ground for commercial sexual exploitation. There is desperation for survival, and a lack of well-grounded male and female role modeling. Long-term unemployment creates stress and anxiety on families already under duress. Clearly, attacking poverty would help address some of the growing issues related to the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

2.1.4. Getting out of CSEC: Exiting the Life

The exiting process is extremely complex, and it's estimated that recidivism is quite high; however, as of this writing, there is not any firm data found supporting an exact number. The terminology of *the Life* emerged from the lifestyle; however, it is unknown how and when the shift occurred. It is suspected that the glamorization of pimp culture highlights the lifestyle as something desirable and hence the term *the Life* emerged (Pimping, 2013). Having looked at the factors that contribute to children becoming vulnerable to CSEC, the next section focuses on exiting commercial sexual exploitation. The section looks at

survivors in terms of their characteristics as well as the treatment models that are available for victims of CSEC.

2.1.5. Survivor efforts

Even if the child welfare agencies were not required to intervene with the victims of CSEC under the current California Welfare and Institutions Code (CWIC) Section 300, the truth is that the CWS staff is working with many survivors and victims of such crimes. Understanding the emotional, psychological, and physical harms that are related to CSEC and the Stages of Change Model (SCM) (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997), the youth experience as they try to exit the CSE informs the requirement of many victim services across various agencies and continuum of care response that includes interagency approaches that ought to be utilized. Many systems and agencies have created practices, protocols, and policies to address the concerns of children who are sexually commercially exploited, including law enforcement, judicial systems, education systems, healthcare systems, and welfare systems; however, they often do not work together. Also, of significant issue is that these agencies are not listening to the survivor's themselves, nor engaging with survivors as *subject matter experts* and this creates additional problems when trying to work with youth in the life and understanding what will effectively empower a youth to exit. While many agencies state they engage survivors by hiring them into consulting or training roles, the reality is that there is little to no information on what is effective in treating a youth who is actively in the life of CSE.

2.1.6. Mental health efforts: Models supporting recovery for CSEC

To date, there is little if any evidence-based programming that indicates efficacy with empowering a youth who is currently being CSE to successfully exit the Life. Currently, models such as Survivor-Led Programming, the Harm Reduction Model, the Stages of Change Model, and the Public Health Model have emerged as potential promising practices. Many agencies nationwide focus their programming on the therapeutic processes *after* successful exit such as with Trauma-Focused CBT; however, while a youth is currently being CSE and is actively in the life, the data, research, and programming available are extremely limited.

3. Conclusion

Due to the complicated factors described previously, CSEC victims need to interact with professionals and agencies among many sectors, including courts, public health, schools, mental health, probation, and social services to efficiently develop a system of care. There should be coordination and communication among many victims and providers of support to ensure that youth get all the necessary services. Working with survivors, as *subject matter experts* is vital in understanding this population, what their needs and vulnerabilities are, specifically related to successfully exiting the Life. However, mechanisms that support communication and sharing of information are not in existence among the several services providers and the care systems, which interact with the victims of CSEC. Coordinated efforts might also bring improved collection of data. Such data could inform more effective and targeted intervention strategies for the victims of CSEC.

3.1. Methods

The methodology and research design selected for this qualitative study included semi-structured interviews and the data was analyzed using Breckner's (as cited in Wengraf, 2001) method of thematic analysis. This chapter presents: (a) the researcher's background; (b) the

participant recruitment process including the selection criteria and informed consent; (c) the procedure for conducting the semi-structured interviews; (d) the data collection involving the interview protocol, the semi-structured interview questions, and transcript verification, and (e) data analysis.

3.2. Procedure

Individuals that consented to be participants were interviewed individually face-to-face. Interviews were semi-structured and were anticipated to last approximately 60–90 min. Participants could choose to be interviewed either in a private room within a library or similar meeting place such as a community center. At the end of the interview, each participant was provided with a resource list constructed by the researcher based on known free services in the area that work with members of this special population.

3.3. Participants

Participants for this study were recruited via the recruitment flyer. Agencies were approached that serve adults over the age of 18 who have been commercially sexually exploited in childhood. There are three agencies in the California Bay Area where recruitment flyers were posted Westcoast Children's Clinic, San Francisco SafeHouse and MISSEY.

3.4. Selection criteria

Potential participants who responded to the recruitment flyer were initially contacted by phone and screened to determine eligibility to participate. The selection criteria were as follows:

- Females between the ages of 21–26
- Reside in the California Bay Area
- Identify as a survivor of commercial sexual exploitation as a child
- Out of the life for at least 2 years
- Report that they are functioning well as an adult
- Comfortable speaking, reading, and writing in English
- Willing to participate in a 60–90 min' audio-taped interview

3.5. Consent

During the face-to-face interview, I, as the primary researcher, thoroughly explained what my proposed research entailed, its potential benefits, and any risks to the participant. I also took the time to allow participants to ask any questions or clarification of anything that might not have been understood. Written consent to participate in the study was obtained from all participants.

3.6. Results

3.6.1. Participant profiles

Ann was a 23-year-old self-identified Hispanic bisexual female who entered the Life at the age of 15 and exited at the age of 17. She disclosed during the interview that she lived with her father when a female friend initially recruited her. She disclosed that both of her parents were addicted to methamphetamine, and that the addiction contributed to early exposure to a highly sexualized environment, which involved her father buying her stiletto boots at the age of 13. She successfully exited CSE after being arrested and agreeing to substance abuse residential treatment as an alternative to incarceration.

Helen was a 23-year-old self-identified African American heterosexual female who entered the Life at the age of 12 and exited at age 17.

She disclosed during the interview that she lived in an intact family unit, and believed she became vulnerable to recruitment because her parents did not teach her to “see her body as a temple” and that they were only focused on “their business and religion”. Her boyfriend recruited her. She successfully exited CSE after getting pregnant with her son.

Tina was a 26-year-old self-identified African American bisexual female who entered the Life at the age of 15 and exited at age 17. She disclosed during the interview that she initially lived with her mom and then her grandmother after her mother's incarceration and was recruited by her boyfriend. She successfully exited CSE after getting pregnant with her son.

Rhonda is a 25-year-old self-identified African American bisexual female who entered the Life at the age of 11 and exited at age 17. She disclosed during the interview that she lived with her mom and grandmother and was recruited by her boyfriend. She successfully exited CSE after getting pregnant with her son; however, she disclosed that she switched to being a drug dealer after her son was born, stating it was *safer*.

Donna was a 25-year-old self-identified African American heterosexual female who entered the Life at the age of 13 and exited at age 17. She disclosed during the interview that she lived with her mother and sister when her female friend recruited her. Her mother was extremely ill, and Donna stated she had to “sell herself” to get money for her mother's medical treatments. She successfully exited CSE after her mother passed away and she felt responsible for her younger sister.

Patty was a 25-year-old self-identified African American heterosexual female who entered the Life at the age of 13 and exited at age 17. She disclosed during the interview that she lived with her mother and younger siblings when a female friend recruited her. She successfully exited CSE after getting pregnant with her son.

Mary was a 24-year-old self-identified African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian mixed race bisexual female who entered the Life at the age of 11 and exited at age 17. She disclosed during the interview that she lived with her mother and older sister when she, too, was recruited by a female friend. She was in the Foster Care System for a few weeks when she was 14 and went to an inpatient therapeutic residential program out of the state when she was 14. She stated the program was unsuccessful. She successfully exited CSE after realizing she “hated the lifestyle” and felt “immense shame” and after she became pregnant with

her first child.

Gabby was a 21-year-old self-identified Hispanic heterosexual female who entered the Life at the age of 17 and exited at age 17. She disclosed during the interview that she lived with her devoted father and her older sister when a female friend recruited her. She successfully exited CSE after getting arrested in a *sting* operation with law enforcement.

Sophia was a 25-year-old self-identified Caucasian heterosexual female who entered the Life at the age of 8 and exited at age 17. She disclosed during the interview that she lived in the foster care system from the age of 8 and lived in “very abusive foster homes” whose supposed foster parents “pimped her out”. When she was 12, she left her foster home and began living “on the streets”. She successfully exited CSE after her pimp was arrested and she testified against him.

Jayla was a 25-year-old self-identified an African American and Caucasian bisexual female who entered the Life at the age of 15 and exited at age 17. She disclosed during the interview that she lived with her grandmother and two uncles, who were drug dealers, and became homeless “by choice” because she wanted to become a “prostitute” to impress her boyfriend. She successfully exited CSE after getting pregnant with her son.

Ashley was a 25-year-old self-identified Caucasian queer female who entered the Life at the age of 15 and exited at age 17. She disclosed during the interview that she had lived with her father and was recruited by a female friend. She successfully exited CSE after realizing the “extreme shame” she felt living every day, and confided in her father, who provided her with the resources for a successful exit.

Cora was a 25-year-old self-identified mixed race of Pacific Islander and Caucasian heritage. She was a bisexual female who entered the Life at the age of 12 and exited at age 17. She disclosed during the interview that she lived in an intact family unit, and at the age of 15, she ran away from home and became homeless. A female friend recruited her. She successfully exited CSE after getting incarcerated for solicitation.

Camille was a 26-year-old self-identified African American and Caucasian bisexual female who entered the Life at the age of 12 and exited at age 17. She disclosed during the interview that she lived with her mother and two brothers and her boyfriend was the one who initially recruited her. She successfully exited CSE after her brothers found her in a motel and rescued her. Her pimp was arrested and she testified against him.

Table 3
Participant profiles in order of interview.

Name	Age (years)	Ethnicity/race	Racial/ethnic identity	Sexual orientation	No. of years in the Life	Age range
Ann	23	Portuguese	Mix	Hetero	2	15–17
Helen	23	AA	AA	Hetero	5	12–17
Tina	26	AA	AA	Bisexual	2	15–17
Rhonda	25	AA	AA	Bisexual	6	11–17
Donna	25	AA	AA	Hetero	4	13–17
Patty	26	AA	AA	Bisexual	4	13–17
Mary	24	Mix: Black, white, Hispanic	Mix	Bisexual	6	11–17
Gabby	21	Hispanic	Hispanic	Hetero	1	17–17
Sophia	25	Caucasian	Caucasian	Hetero	9	8–17
Jayla	25	Black and White	AA	Bisexual	2	15–17
Ashley	25	Caucasian	Caucasian	Gay	2	15–17
Cora	25	Pacific Islander and Caucasian	AA	Bisexual	5	12–17
Camille	26	AA and Caucasian	American with Ethnic Parents	Bisexual	5	12–17
Mean	25				4	
Median	24				5	
Range	21–26				1–9	

3.7. Emerging themes

3.7.1. Naming of self as outside the Life

The first theme that emerged was that their identified perception of self was very positive. While the participants used differing and various ways to give themselves identifiers, there were many similarities among them. When initially asked this question, all the participants described themselves in a positive way and a few became very emotional describing who they are now.

3.7.2. Connections with family

The participants were asked about their current functioning and what/who helped them. A total of eight participants credited current family connections.

3.7.3. Breaking the cycle

The third theme that emerged involved a desire to *break the cycle* and be better parents than they perceived their parents to be by being aware of the abuse and neglect that contributed to their grooming into the Life.

3.7.4. Embracing the term survivor

The fourth theme involved the term *survivor*. Participants were asked directly their thoughts on the term *survivor*. Eleven of the participants embraced the word as a positive way of describing themselves.

3.8. Describing the Life

The second category was made up of a set of interview questions where participants were asked where they were living upon recruitment into the Life. All the participants expanded on their recruitment experiences and reasons for their survival while in the Life, which included pimp control, and what they saw as contributing factors.

3.8.1. Sex for goods

The first theme in the category emerged during the inquiry about their definition or description of the concept being in the Life. The first theme that emerged involved the phrase, *in the Life*, as being forced to have sex for goods such as money, clothes, food or other necessities or wishes.

3.8.2. Surviving the game

When being asked to describe the term the Life, all the participants endorsed language that gave emphasis to the powerlessness they felt while in the Life and feelings of being in a constant state of survival, which emerged as the second theme.

3.8.3. Pimp control

Ten of the participants spoke about pimp control, which became the third theme in the category. The participants who worked for pimps noted that they were constantly under threat.

3.8.4. Wanting to be loved

None of the participants were asked directly about reasons for recruitment into the Life; however, all the participants mentioned the desire to be loved and look good.

3.8.5. Contributing family factors

The sixth theme in this category involved family functioning at the time of entry in CSE. There were three different types of contributing family factors: *family dysfunction*, *lack of attention/supervision*, and *family recruitment*.

3.8.6. The grooming process

All 13 participants discussed how they were groomed and recruited into the Life. Seven of the participants were recruited by a female

friend, and 5 were recruited by a boyfriend. Sophia's foster father recruited her when she was 8 years old.

3.9. The exiting process

These questions produced 12 themes, which identified distinctive responses regarding the challenge of the exiting process. In analyzing the participants' exit of commercial sexual exploitation, one can observe that exiting is not just a mere decision to leave. However, several variables, both external and internal, seem to have influenced the victim's aptitude to exit and not reenter commercial sexual exploitation.

3.9.1. Naming one who exited

The first theme identified words to describe someone who was in the Life but not anymore. This theme is relevant, as 11 participants had described themselves as someone who has exited CSEC, and then followed with describing someone else who has exited the Life.

3.9.2. Others depending on me

When asked about the participant's experiences with exiting, including how often they attempted to exit, the dependency of others became the second theme in this category as 6 participants discussed barriers to their ability to exit.

3.9.3. Exiting not profitable

When asked about the participant's experiences with exiting all the participants talked about how challenging it was to successfully exit and obtain legal employment due to their history of being in the Life, which became the third theme for this category.

3.9.4. Fear keeps you in

When asked about the participant's experiences with exiting all the participants mentioned fear as a barrier that kept them in the Life, which became the fourth theme in this category.

3.9.5. Thinking about leaving

When asked about the participant's experiences with exiting 11 of the participants mentioned early desires to exit the Life, which became the fifth theme in the category.

3.9.6. The importance of family

When asked about the participant's experiences with exiting, 12 of the participants mentioned family in some form, as the primary motivator for their successful exit. The role of family emerged as the sixth theme with two separate forms of quality connections: emotional support and physical/tangible support.

3.9.7. Pending motherhood

When asked about the participant's experiences with exiting 6 of the participants, successfully exited *the Life* due to pregnancy, and two of them stated they had not seriously considered exiting prior to discovering they were pregnant.

3.9.8. Wanting to be free

When asked about the participant's experiences with exiting all the participants reported that the violence and trauma they endured impacted them greatly. The eighth theme involves wanting to be free of psychological and physical violence.

3.9.9. Sustaining exit

When asked about the participant's final experiences with exiting all the participants mentioned the difficulty of not re-entering the life due to poverty and homelessness, which became the ninth theme.

3.9.10. Professional systems not accessed

The tenth theme involves a lack of contact with professional

systems. Eight participants disclosed that while they had singular contacts with law enforcement, they also disclosed they had zero engagement with professional systems such as therapy, social services, and educational counseling. Only one observed that the criminal justice system and the mandatory rehabilitation and counseling therapy services assisted her in exiting commercial sexual exploitation successfully.

3.10. Participants' recommendations

The purpose of this section was intended to help professionals, family, and friends as well as law enforcement understand what would have been helpful during the time participants were in the Life and their exiting process.

3.10.1. Active listening

Participants were asked for recommendations for professionals, family and friends and 10 responded with active listening or something similar.

3.10.2. Encouragement

When asked to elaborate on what they would have wanted to hear from professionals, family, and friends, 9 stated encouragement, as the action of giving someone love, support, or hope, which is vital for these women.

3.10.3. Non-judgment

When asked to elaborate on what they would have wanted to hear from professionals, family, and friends, 9 also stated “non-judgment.” For survivors of CSEC, it's essential for them to feel like they are good, and not treated like garbage.

3.10.4. Don't leave when we push

Participants were asked what has helped with their recovery from being in the Life, and 12 responded with, “Don't leave when we push you away.” Due to the constant losses and trauma survivors of CSEC experience, it's not surprising that they would create walls and barriers around their emotions and feelings to avoid further pain.

3.11. Anecdotal findings

3.11.1. Treated like garbage by the legal system

An anecdotal theme to emerge included feelings related to interactions with law enforcement. Only 2 participants mentioned they had been in juvenile hall for solicitation, and both stated that the arrest and incarceration was incredibly damaging to them emotionally and left them with great feelings of shame.

3.11.2. I thought I was grown

Another anecdotal theme that appeared based on how they were treated when they were recruited. All the participants except 2 stated that there was nothing that someone could have told them when they were in the Life to help them either avoid being recruited into the Life or help with exit.

3.12. Summary of findings

Exiting the Life is an extremely complex, multi-faceted process. All the participants successfully exited the Life, but many stated that if life's circumstances changed drastically, they could see themselves going back into the Life if necessary. Most of the participants appeared to be marginally stable with regard to employment and housing, and all stated they had a commitment to trying to stay out of the Life. They all expressed that they struggle to obtain gainful employment and housing, with a few of the participants stating they were homeless; one was living in her car and another was living in motels.

4. Discussion

We are survivors. Strong soldiers in a long hard war, but the outcome is that we are glad to survive and defeat what was designed to break us. It fits me because I could have let it take me down and lose myself. I survived something I didn't know how to prepare to survive. I took a chance believing that it was something to advance my level in the game (I wanted to sell drugs) and be more of a boss. But I survived because it was designed to break me and weaken my mind as a woman and what my chances at life could be –Jayla.

This study encompassed three broad intentions, namely: to describe the process of exiting and healing from the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) from the perspectives of survivors; to inform policy and program development; and to suggest directions for future research related to this population.

Regarding basic descriptors of experience in the commercial sex industry, the sample from this study is consistent with a national sample as described by [Estes and Weiner \(2001\)](#), which found some CSEC were directly exploited by traffickers and some operated primarily independently, though most were controlled by a pimp or trafficker at some point during their tenure in CSE. While most were exploited locally (the San Francisco Bay Area), a few voluntarily disclosed they were trafficked to other nearby cities in regional trafficking networks, similar to [Estes and Weiner's](#) estimates. None of the participants were internationally trafficked, whereas [Estes and Weiner](#) estimated international trafficking to be about 10% of the national CSEC industry. Overall, the experiences of this sample appear to be remarkably representative of the experiences of the American CSEC population. In many studies on CSEC, generalizability is limited by the fact that samples were usually drawn from service-connected, treatment-seeking, or easily visible street-based subsets of the CSEC population. This sample differed from others in that it included individuals who were not connected with the social service system while they were involved in CSEC. This subset of the CSEC population is rarely featured in the extant literature on intervention and policy development, and, therefore, this study sheds valuable light on the needs of youth who might not have access to currently available resources.

While there is a significant body of literature on risk factors and sequela of

CSEC involvement, the literature on evidence-based intervention services for CSEC is much smaller, and research on the individual internal process of exiting CSEC is nonexistent. Therefore, many themes that emerged across participants' narratives represent new salient findings that have not yet been explored in the scientific literature.

4.1. Contributions of the study

While the purpose of this study was to solely examine the exiting process, many additional components arose from the interviews. It's important to recognize the incredible strength it took for these amazing women to share their most personal stories. A safe space was created and they felt that they had stepped into a space free of judgment. All the women thanked the researcher to allow them to share their story, their way, in their own words. Ann said, “I haven't spoken of the Life since I left. It's bringing up so many feelings for me, most of which is immense joy and happiness that I am alive and got out”. Most representative, Gabby said, “I have always been too ashamed to discuss my past, thank you so much for doing this study and listening to my story. I hope it helps”.

It is vital to understand the incredible importance of family connections as they resonated throughout. While family was defined in many ways from a parent, to a grandparent, to an aunt or uncle, to an unborn child, family was the single most prevalent theme throughout every interview. While much of the existing literature espouses various models, including survivor-led programming and traditional therapy,

none of the participants mentioned any programming or therapeutic modality that assisted with their successful exit. This finding leads one to believe that, at the most primal, basic level, family connections are the most powerful and impactful, and create the biggest motivators for change.

Conflicts of interest

None.

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