

# Trading Sex: Voluntary or Coerced? The Experiences of Homeless Youth

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*This study examined the circumstances surrounding a homeless youth's "decision" to trade sex for food, money, shelter, or drugs. Forty homeless youth in 4 Midwestern states participated in individual, in-depth qualitative interviews. Interviewers recruited youth through both service agencies and street outreach. The findings revealed that approximately one third of the sample had some experience with trading sex, whether it was in the form of having traded sex, having been propositioned to trade sex but having refused, or having friends or acquaintances that had traded sex. Young people's reports indicated that they had traded sex for things they deemed necessary in order to survive (i.e., food, shelter, money, or drugs) and that they did not want to trade sex, but did so because they were desperate and lacked alternatives. Additionally, others were coerced, manipulated, or forced to do so, indicating that the decision to trade sex is not always voluntary. We discuss the implications of these findings in terms of cumulative effects on youths' later development. Directions for future research among this population are also discussed.*

Many homeless youth engage in delinquent activities to survive, given their limited resources and lack of opportunities (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). These deviant subsistence strategies may include stealing, conning, robbing, and trading sex for commodities such as food, shelter, money, or drugs (Van Leeuwen et al., 2004; Whitbeck & Hoyt). Trading sex, however, is often a last resort and is a survival strategy that is typically employed infrequently by homeless youth, compared to other delinquent survival strategies such as conning and stealing (Hagan & McCarthy; Whitbeck & Hoyt).

Homeless youth who trade sex are likely to experience numerous negative health outcomes, such as being sexually victimized, attempting suicide, being depressed, contracting sexually transmitted diseases, and becoming pregnant, among others (Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1999; Tyler, Hoyt, & Whitbeck, 2000). Given these negative outcomes, it is important to understand the circumstances surrounding trading sex among homeless youth in order to inform case workers and service providers who may be able to intervene before this becomes a way of life. Although there has been a wealth of international research on the commercial sexual exploitation of young people in recent years (Barnitz, 1998; Burgos et al., 2003; Chase & Statham, 2005; Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004), the current study is based only on the experiences of homeless youth in the United States. This study addresses questions related to the circumstances under which youth in the U.S. engage in trading sex. Additionally, this study expands and strengthens the existing body of literature in this area. Much of the previous research on homeless youth and

trading sex is now dated and may no longer accurately reflect current circumstances.

Although previous research has typically found that some youth trade sex because of a lack of resources, little is known about the actual circumstances surrounding trading sex. Our contention is that very few youth want to trade sex, but some do so because they are desperate and lack alternatives. This assertion was supported by Hagan and McCarthy (1997), who found that when recalling their initiation into the sex trade, young homeless respondents often associated it with a time when they were especially needy and destitute. Additionally, we believe that some homeless youth trade sex because they are coerced, pressured, or manipulated into doing so, and as such, their decision is not entirely voluntary. Based on a definition posited by Biglan, Noell, Ochs, Smolkowski, and Metzler (1995), aversive behavior such as getting angry, arguing, or using physical force that prompts an individual to engage in a sex act is said to be coercive. Because individuals who experience coercion may be forced to act against their will, coercion is a form of victimization. Based on in-depth interviews with homeless youth in the Midwest, we addressed the circumstances surrounding trading sex and the extent to which the decision to do so is voluntary.

Although rates of trading sex tend to vary, many studies of homeless adolescents have found prevalence rates for trading sex to be less than 20% (Beech, Meyers, & Beech, 2002; Van Leeuwen et al., 2004; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999; Zimet et al., 1995). Similar rates of trading sex have been found among street samples of males and females but higher rates among males in shelter samples (Greene et al., 1999). Further, rates between males and females have also been found to differ depending on the item of necessity for which sex was exchanged. For example, males were more likely to trade sex for money, whereas females were more likely to trade sex for drugs or alcohol (Kral, Molnar, Booth, & Watters, 1997).

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Numerous risk factors for trading sex include having experienced early physical or sexual abuse (Tyler et al., 2000; Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Cauce, 2001), associating with friends who have traded sex (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997), and spending more time out on the street as compared to supervised living arrangements (Greene et al., 1999; Tyler et al., 2000). Many young people who run away from home or foster care may find themselves on the streets with no education or job skills, and they are often forced to find a way to support themselves. In order to survive, some homeless youth have turned to trading sex (Hagan & McCarthy; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999).

Some youth voluntarily decide to trade sex; others, however, experience coercion to do so. Youth may experience coercion from two sources: from the "recipient" of the sexual contact or from a third party. According to Hagan and McCarthy (1997), youth were often exploited by adults who provided care but later demanded "payment" in the form of sex (p. 48). In these situations, the sexual exchange was coerced by the recipient. Other homeless youth are persuaded or coerced into trading sex by a third party such as a friend, boyfriend/girlfriend, or pimp (Hagan & McCarthy; Widom & Kuhns, 1996). Hagan and McCarthy indicated that many women claimed they became involved in prostitution through force or were "turned out" by their boyfriends (p. 143); therefore, some young people are coerced into agreeing to trade sex (regardless of its source). Little research, however, has focused specifically on the circumstances surrounding trading sex among homeless youth and the extent to which the decision is voluntary or coerced.

### METHOD

Young people were interviewed by full-time survey researchers employed by a larger longitudinal project. Interviewers worked through homeless youth shelters to collect data and serve as referral sources for homeless youth in crisis. This created greater access to youth and minimized the impression of an intrusive researcher. The shelters were chosen as part of the M.I.N.K consortium (Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas), which are the region 7 services for youth in the Midwest. Interviewers were instructed to approach shelter residents and locate eligible respondents in areas of the cities where homeless youth congregate. Interviews were conducted in shelter interview rooms, quiet corners of restaurants, and libraries. All interviewers had over two years of experience interviewing and interacting with homeless young people and were familiar with local street cultures (e.g., knowing where homeless youth congregate and the kinds of services available to them).

All interviews were audiotaped and lasted approximately one hour. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions; each interview was transcribed verbatim. Study procedures were explained and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Based on interviewer reports, approximately 95% of young people who were

approached for an interview and who met study criteria agreed to participate in the study. To preserve confidentiality, all names of respondents have been changed. Respondents were paid \$25 for the interview. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

### Participants

This investigation was based on a subsample of data obtained from semi-structured interviews with 40 homeless youth (16 males; 24 females) as part of a larger longitudinal study. Study eligibility required young people to be between 19 and 21 years of age and homeless. This narrow age range was used because the study was part of a larger ongoing project with a goal of examining the transition to young adulthood, which typically includes respondents over the age of 18 years.

### Measures

The definition of "homeless" mandated that the youths currently resided in a shelter, lived on the street, or were living independently (e.g., temporarily staying with friends) because they had run away, had been pushed out, or had drifted out of their family of origin.

We defined "trading sex" as exchanging sex or sexual acts for items such as food, shelter, money, or drugs. Additionally, we differentiated between whether the exchange of sex was voluntary or coerced. This coercion may have come from the person involved in the exchange, from a third party who may have also benefited from the exchange, or both. Hence, during any given interaction, the homeless youth may have been subject to coercion from more than one source.

Questions for the qualitative interview focused on three main areas. The first area began with general questions about the age at which respondents first left home and how they became homeless. Many of their reasons for leaving home were related to negative family dynamics. This led into the second area, which focused on the family histories of respondents (e.g., childhood maltreatment, familial criminality, and substance use). Respondents were asked if they had ever been physically abused or sexually abused while living at home. Young people who answered yes were then asked to tell the interviewer about what happened if no information was volunteered. Almost all young people who were abused, however, volunteered their stories without being prompted. Respondents were also asked about how often the abuse occurred and who the perpetrators were. Additionally, youth were asked if any family members used alcohol or drugs and whether they were involved in criminal activity. For those respondents who answered yes, interviewers then asked them who was involved (i.e., specific family member[s]), what type of substances they used, how often, and the type of criminal activity in which family members were involved. Questions toward the end of the interview focused on youth's experiences on the street (e.g., victimization, crim-

inal offending, survival strategies). Youth were specifically asked if they had ever traded sex and if they were coerced or pressured to do so. They were further probed regarding the circumstances surrounding their experiences of trading sex, including location, who they were with, their relationship to the other person involved in the exchange, and so on.

### *Coding and Theme Construction*

The goal of this study was to examine in-depth the circumstances surrounding trading sex among young homeless people and to address whether youth who trade sex do so voluntarily or through coercion. In order to do so, both raters read through the accounts of each of the 40 respondents and identified all interviews that included information on trading sex. This resulted in a subsample of 13 respondents (approximately 33% of the sample). Based on this open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), codebooks were independently developed by each rater in order to specify criteria for inclusion in three categories: those who had traded sex, those who had friends/acquaintances that had traded sex, and those who had been propositioned to trade sex but did not. Once these initial codebooks were developed by each rater, they were compared and standardized. This technique is consistent with methodology proposed by Carey, Morgan, and Oxtoby (1996). Each rater then independently placed the 13 respondents within these three main categories and results were again compared; interrater reliability was found to be 100%. Subsequently, life histories were developed for each of these respondents to condense pertinent information for further analysis. In this way, the past experiences and current situations of the respondents could be more easily compared both within and across the three categories, and common patterns could be identified. Within these categories, themes began to emerge, such as coercion to trade sex and the availability of resources. After these themes were agreed upon by both raters, the coded and categorized interviews were searched for particularly telling passages and these were pulled out for inclusion in the text. More passages were identified than could be included in the manuscript, and thus agreement was reached by the raters about which quotes were the most exemplary, and only those were included.

## RESULTS

### *Youths' Experience With Trading Sex*

Seven youths in this study had direct experience with trading sex for food, shelter, money, or drugs. With one exception, those who traded sex grew up in abusive families where they experienced physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, or neglect. Additionally, some reported serious familial substance misuse problems. Further, most had been removed at least once from their parents' care and placed in a series of foster homes, group homes, treatment facilities, and outreach shelters. As a result, these youths' life histories can be character-

ized as highly unstable and often troubled.

For example, Jackie experienced various forms of childhood maltreatment, including sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect perpetrated by both her biological mother and father. Subsequently, Jackie had numerous foster care placements before she was eventually adopted. After experiencing sexual abuse by her adoptive father, she experienced multiple transitions between shelters, foster homes, group homes, and the streets. The abuse that characterized Jackie's early life history continued into her later life; she was involved in a physically abusive relationship with a boyfriend and also experienced sexual victimization by different men while out on her own. Some of these victimization experiences happened within the context of trading sex; Jackie reported "being manipulated into having sex" in exchange for a place to stay on several occasions. Because of this manipulation, these particular experiences of trading sex can be said to have been coerced. Jackie explained,

I was sexually assaulted by some asshole named [TJ] cuz it was, um, a place to stay, and he has a habit of getting young girls who are naïve and just trying to make it, or so to speak, and getting them extremely drunk and extremely under the influence, and then he takes advantage of them. And it's not the first time. It's happened several times.

Initially, Jackie thought TJ's offer of a place to sleep was genuine (i.e., free from coercion and "no strings attached") and that sleeping indoors would be safer than staying on the streets because it would remove her from the weather and protect her against physical and sexual assault. In reality, Jackie's stay at TJ's house was conditioned upon her willingness to have sexual intercourse with him. In her efforts to avoid victimization, Jackie inadvertently placed herself in a situation that ultimately led to sexual coercion and victimization.

After Jackie became aware of the manipulation and coercion that some men use, she took a very strong position against trading sex; she was adamant about not wanting to be taken advantage of again. Her experiences indicate that trading sex may be anything but voluntary.

Jackie decided, after having these experiences, that she would rather sleep outside, where she would be less likely to experience this type of exploitation. She added that she could protect herself from physical harm, but was less prepared for coercion and manipulation. According to Jackie,

When I was on the streets . . . I never got robbed, never got assaulted physically 'cuz I always had a knife or a big chain so people didn't mess with me. And plus robbery isn't a big deal. I can defend myself against that, but it's the manipulation and the tendency to get young girls inebriated that some of the assholes [use] . . . I had no other way to stay off the streets, and then basically I learned, you know, [that] the streets aren't so bad. I'd rather sleep in a cubby hole, warm and safe, then to deal with an asshole . . . at his house. 'Cuz you never know if he's going to try to hurt you or manipulate you to have sex with him.

Candy also experienced abuse growing up. She was removed from her parents' home due to childhood abuse

and spent approximately five years in foster care before moving back in with her biological father. She subsequently dropped out of school and began a physically violent relationship which lasted for almost five years. She reported, "I never called the police on [my boyfriend]. I never did nothing because I thought it was supposed to be like that." Candy had also been raped on two occasions. Given the physical and mental abuse that Candy experienced in her family, it is not surprising that the abuse she received from her boyfriend and the sexual victimization she experienced from other men appeared normative to her. Candy was 16 years old the first time she traded sex and implied that it was not voluntary; she was pressured into it by a female peer. As is evident below, it was difficult for Candy to admit to trading sex. She was quick to point out that she did not have sexual intercourse with the men during the exchange, and that she has only done "it" (i.e., traded sex) once. According to Candy,

[W]e seen these two guys at their house, working on their cars, and [my friend], she's a big old flirt, so she said something and she told me to stop, pull over or whatever, so I did. She went up there and she started talking to them, and so I got out too and we was talking and we had no gas, no food, no money, no nothing . . . I didn't exchange sex for money. It was pretty much I let them fondle me, I guess you would say for money. And I went, I went down on a guy [performed oral sex] for money at the same time . . . my friend . . . she did the dirty with both of them, and so when it was all said and done we probably had like \$200. But that's the only time I ever did that.

This quote implies that Candy did not want to trade sex for money but may have felt pressured from her friend to do so. It is possible that if her friend had not been there, Candy would not have been placed in this situation. This is consistent with the work of Hagan and McCarthy (1997), who argued that as youth become embedded in criminal street networks, they are exposed to criminal mentors and tutors. Criminal mentoring is part of the process through which "opportunities are transformed into action" (Hagan & McCarthy, p. 156). Hagan and McCarthy may view friends and acquaintances as catalysts because their presence and influence may initiate criminal activities that would otherwise not take place. Where Candy simply saw two men working on their cars in a driveway, her friend saw an opportunity to make money and get the things they needed. In this way, Candy's friend was instrumental in her decision to trade sex.

Mandy was another young woman who experienced physical and sexual abuse in her family. Both of her parents abused illicit drugs, and Mandy ran away from home several times, during which she would either stay with friends or sleep on the streets. Mandy, not unlike Candy, also experienced pressure from friends to trade sex. Initially, Mandy gave very abrupt answers when asked about trading sex. Only when the interviewer probed deeper did Mandy expound on the events that led up to her experiences of trading sex. Below is an excerpt beginning with the interviewer's question:

Q: Did you ever exchange sex for anything?

A: I have a couple of times.

Q: For what?

A: Just for like a pack of cigarettes or something.

Q: Were you coerced into it?

A: In some way yes, but in a lot of way no.

Q: What do you mean?

A: Like my friends will be like, 'do it, do it, do it.' And like I'll be like, 'no I don't want to,' or whatever, and then finally I just give in. Not necessarily that they made me give in or whatever, but I was just sick of being hassled about it . . . like my friend would need a pack of cigarettes or whatever, and then I'd want a pack of cigarettes too . . . and she'd be like, 'just go sleep with this guy for a pack of cigarettes' . . . and I'd be like, 'no,' and then I'd just keep on saying no, and then she just wouldn't, she wouldn't quit bugging me and I'd end up getting in a fight with her. So finally I just gave in.

The exchange between Mandy and her friend reveals the amount and type of pressure that some homeless youth feel when it comes to pleasing those in their peer networks. Mandy felt pressured to trade sex and insinuated that her friend's pressure tactics were relentless. As such, Mandy felt coerced into trading sex but also felt ultimately responsible for her decision. It is important to recognize, however, that if her friend had not pressured her to trade sex, Mandy may not have done so. In other words, it was this push from a friend that led Mandy to trade sex.

Another young woman, Stacey, ran away from home several times between the ages of 9 and 13 due to the emotional and physical abuse that she experienced from her stepmother. Not unlike Jackie, Stacey experienced numerous transitions, including spending time in group homes, foster care, shelters, and on the street. She had been on her own since age 14 and did not finish high school, a fact that she attributed to her numerous transitions. Stacey was in a relationship with a much older man (although he lied to her about his age) who had a crack habit. It was through her relationship with this man that she began smoking crack at age 18. Stacey reported later being coerced by him into selling her body to get money for crack. Stacey discussed how trading sex took away her dignity, but also added, "sometimes I'd have to sell my body to get some money." When asked in more detail about the circumstances surrounding trading sex, Stacey answered,

My boyfriend would convince me to [trade sex] . . . 'cuz I wouldn't want any [drugs] until after. So once my boyfriend got started [using crack] and I got started [using crack] it'd be hard, and I wouldn't want [any crack] but he'd be like, 'go get some money so we can go get some more.' So I'd call up someone and they'd come pick me up or I'd have to go down to the avenue and make some money and stuff like that.

With the influence of her boyfriend, Stacey became addicted to crack. Eventually they both came to realize that one way to make money to purchase crack was to sell Stacey's body. As much of the research shows, many women who are addicted to drugs become involved in prostitution or some form of the sex trade because it is a quick way to make money to support their drug habits (Maranda, Han,

& Rainone, 2004; Martinez et al., 1998). Stacey clearly stated, "I was out there selling my body. I wasn't selling it for money; I was selling it for drugs." Stacey's narrative indicates, however, that the "sale" of her body was often coerced by her boyfriend. Stacey also described a situation in which her boyfriend sold her to his brothers for a small amount of crack. She explains, "He went downstairs and all his brothers came upstairs and I guess they gave him a dime [\$10 worth of crack] a piece to mess with me. . . . I didn't find out until later on that he had done it for drugs." These scenarios reveal how young women may be coerced into exchanging sex by their partners, and how their partners, in turn, may benefit from the exchange. In Stacey's case, her boyfriend benefited by acquiring both drugs and money to purchase additional drugs.

Carol's background was different from the young women discussed previously. Although she did not experience any type of abuse, Carol ran away from home for the first time at age 15 when she discovered that the man she believed to be her biological father was not. She later returned home but continued a cycle of running away and returning home until she was finally thrown out. Carol also reported being expelled from school for selling marijuana. Subsequently, she spent time on the street, at the homes of friends and relatives, and in shelters. For approximately 2.5 years, she was in a physically abusive relationship and was an avid substance user. Being homeless led Carol to become very resourceful in order to survive; she employed an array of deviant subsistence strategies, including trading sex for a place to stay. During her interview, she spoke of turning to an older housed male for help when things got "really bad." Though she reported that she was never coerced into doing so, she knew she could stay at this man's house if she had sex with him. Carol explained her situation:

There was this one guy I met, he was older, and I knew I could go to his house anytime, but I knew I would have to sleep with him if I went there . . . so I never really went there a lot, but when I did I always slept with him just 'cuz I knew then he wouldn't put me out, or tell me that I couldn't be there, or tell me I couldn't take a shower or get something to eat. So if I was doing really bad I would go there . . . I just felt disgusting just 'cuz I knew I had to [have sex with him], you know. I mean it wasn't like he forced me, but I just, like, knew that if I did [have sex] then he would let me stay there or eat or do whatever.

Carol was clear that going to this man's house was a last resort and that she took no pleasure in having to engage in this exchange. Nonetheless, Carol voluntarily decided to trade sex for shelter. Her situation was somewhat different from the other women discussed thus far in that in Carol's case, there did not appear to be any coercion or manipulation on the part of the housed man. Given that she was desperate and lacked alternatives, Carol traded sex for shelter as a last resort.

Cindy's experiences of trading sex may be categorized as both voluntary and coerced. Occasionally her decision to trade sex was voluntary, while in other instances, she

was coerced by her boyfriend. Cindy ran away from home for the first time at age 7. Both of Cindy's parents died before she was a teen, and she later suffered physical abuse from her alcoholic uncle with whom she lived. At age 16, Cindy was engaging in self-mutilation and was subsequently admitted to a mental health facility where she received treatment for depression. She then spent time in group homes and shelters, where she met a highly abusive and controlling man, Dylan, who introduced her to illicit drugs. The two of them moved repeatedly from apartments, trailers, friend's houses, shelters, and eventually to the street. They used a plethora of survival strategies, including writing bad checks, stealing cars, conning, and selling drugs. Eventually they both began trading sex for money, food, drugs, and places to stay. Cindy spoke of targeting men at bars and enticing them to take her home with them. This proactive approach suggests that she voluntarily made the decision to trade sex. She was, however, often forced to share the "profits" with Dylan. She reported,

[I would] sit there and pretend, like we'd go to a bar and sit there at the bar and, you know, suddenly a guy would come up to buy me a drink. . . . we'd sit there and, you know, talk [and] finally this guy would get really interested in me and like want to take me in and everything. And me and [Dylan] would pretty much leech off him for awhile. Pretty much I was using [the man] to get money for drugs or to get alcohol or drugs for me and [Dylan] . . . I mean it didn't matter, you know, sleeping with these people or not. Yes, no, staying with them for a few days while making sure that the other of us had another place to stay.

Similarly, Cindy described another situation in which she voluntarily chose to trade sex, this time with a housed acquaintance of hers. She recalled,

And finally [James] was like, 'Well, I guess you could come back to my house, you know, and sleep at my house if you'll sleep in my bed' . . . And you know, if [you] want to stay the night, you know I'm going to want something in return' . . . so I slept with him for a place to stay. I had slept with people for drugs and money . . . I've never slept with anybody for anything else, other than that.

Despite these examples of Cindy's voluntary involvement in trading sex, she also experienced coercion to do so from her boyfriend, including an incident in which he tried to sell her for crack in the projects against her will. This indicates that although trading sex was initially a decision that Cindy made on her own, later in her relationship with Dylan, he attempted to coerce and manipulate her into doing so for his benefit. Cindy gave an account of an attempt by her boyfriend to coerce her into trading sex through the use of physical force. Cindy, however, did not submit at that time. As the following quote demonstrates, Dylan acted as Cindy's pimp, trying to sell her for drugs or money to benefit himself. Cindy recounted their conversation:

And mostly [Dylan] was on the taking side. And I was on the 'have to give-or otherwise lose my life-side.' And I mean, he would take me out to the projects, and he would try to sell me for crack. Literally, tried to, tried to sell me, because several people offered. They'd stand on the corner and say, 'hey, you know, how

much for this?', and I'm like, 'excuse me?' And he'd just be like, 'well, let me talk to her about it.' And we'd walk around the corner, and I'd never, you know, I wouldn't do it, but he would really, really, really try and threaten and hit and everything to get me to do that.

When this strategy proved to be unsuccessful for Dylan, he tried manipulating Cindy in other ways; later in their relationship, he was successful. She explained,

He didn't make me sleep with them, but he made me lead them on. You know, then of course, sleeping with them would kind of come with it because they're not going to sit there and give you stuff and take care of you for absolutely nothing, you know.

Through analysis of the conversation with Cindy, it became clear that she had traded sex on several occasions for drugs, money, and a place to stay. What is more ambiguous, however, is the extent to which her decisions to engage in these acts were voluntary or coerced.

Katie was the final young person in the sample who reported trading sex. Katie's background was similar to most of the other young women examined. She lived with her physically violent and substance-abusing mother until she was 14 years old, when she ran away from home. Katie was also sexually abused by her uncles. She spent time in foster care, group homes, a drug treatment facility, and with numerous older men. Katie willingly discussed the trading sex in her past and frequently mentioned during the interview that she stayed with many different "unknown older men" where she "had sex with them and did drugs with them." Katie began stealing to get the things she needed while on the street, and by age 16, she began having sex with men for money and drugs. She reported that she had a long list of men's phone numbers, any of whom she could call if she needed anything. Katie stated, "If I ever need anything, a ride somewhere, if I needed money, if I needed anything, I could usually call somebody. I had a whole lot of people's numbers."

Based on her interview, it appears that Katie voluntarily chose to trade sex as opposed to being coerced into it like many of the other women discussed. Unfortunately, the cycle of violence that began in her childhood continued for Katie on the street, where she endured physical and sexual victimization from many men because, in her words, men thought of her as "their property." When asked how she obtained shelter, she replied, "I didn't. I would stay in motels if people would buy it for me, but other than that I would just, I would wait outside and wait for a guy to drive by or something and hope that they'd take me home with them." Katie also admitted to trading sex for drugs, especially for embalming fluid, which she used on a daily basis. When asked how she would get it, Katie replied, ". . . a guy. Have sex with him for it." Substance use may be a way of coping with the negative feelings that arise from trading sex. Concurrently, the need to use substances may lead youth to trade sex in order to obtain drugs. It is possible that while Katie was under the influence of drugs, it was easier for her to sell her body. Also,

being addicted to drugs may have led her to this activity. Thus, Katie's situation mirrors what is often illustrated in the literature; there appears to be a cyclical or reflexive relationship between substance use and involvement in the sex trade (Norton-Hawk, 2001).

Although Katie voluntarily chose to be involved in the sex trade, she was occasionally coerced into having sex when she did not want to. Specifically, when asked if she had ever been coerced into having sex, Katie replied, "There was times when I would have sex with the same guys, but then they'd keep wanting me to and wanting me to, and I didn't want to, but I still did it anyways. I think I was kind of scared, but at the same time I was the one doing it, so." It is possible that because she had traded sex several times in the past, she felt as though she had little right to protest the advances of men. It is also possible that because she was known as someone who traded sex, and because she had previously had sex with these men, they felt a sense of entitlement, perhaps reasoning that because she was trading sex with other people, she should also be willing to have sex with them.

### *Youth Who Were Propositioned for Sex*

Among the sample, four young people (three males and one female) had been propositioned to trade sex but had refused to do so. All four of these youths had experienced one or more types of maltreatment during their childhoods. One of these youths, Vanessa, explained that her mother had serious substance abuse problems and had spent time in the penitentiary for selling crack. Vanessa was placed in foster care at age 5, and she stayed in several different homes before being adopted. Vanessa began running away from her adoptive parents' home at age 14 and also spent time in a group home and on the street during this period. Vanessa reported that she had never traded sex, but explained that she was frequently propositioned by her friend's uncles to have sex with them for money.

Although research finds that homeless adolescents who experience abuse are at higher risk for trading sex (Tyler et al., 2001; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999), this was not the case for Vanessa. Given her history of child maltreatment, how was Vanessa able to avoid trading sex while others in similar situations were not? One possible explanation is that she had options with regards to obtaining shelter. For example, Vanessa discussed staying with various extended family members. She stayed with a relative until she, in her words, "wore out her welcome" and would then move on to a different relative. The youth who traded sex for a place to stay may not have had the shelter options that were available to Vanessa. It is possible that if Vanessa did not have relatives with whom she could stay, she, too, may have had to make the decision to trade sex.

Shane, another youth who reported being propositioned, had spent time in shelters, group homes, and a transitional living facility; it was during his stay at a youth shelter, however, that a man propositioned Shane to perform oral sex for money. Shane declined and reported that he had

wanted to beat this man up for making such an offer, but that he left instead. When Shane did not have a place to stay, he spent time at the house of a friend who still lived with his parents. Not unlike Vanessa, it appears that Shane may not have been desperate enough to resort to trading sex because he, too, had options when it came to finding a place to stay.

Another youth, Michael, suffered from severe abuse from both his mother and father. His parents later separated, and his mother claimed she had trouble controlling Michael's behavior, so he was placed in a group home at age eight. He reported being in numerous fights and being permanently expelled from school in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade for severely beating a fellow student. Michael began to support himself financially by selling a variety of illicit drugs. Although he had never traded sex, Michael said he had thought about it. He also reported having been propositioned for sex in exchange for accepting a ride while hitchhiking. He reported,

[T]here was a couple times where, you know, uh, somebody that was, uh, not straight that tried to get me to do a couple of things with them. And it's like, you know, 'hey no, if you keep on bugging me I'll get out. I'll catch the next ride you know.' They never did really, you know, try anything. There was one guy that, uh, actually put his hands on my leg but, you know, I kind of pushed it away. He put it back and I pushed it away again. Say 'you touch me again and I'll get out of this vehicle. I don't care, you know, I'll catch the next ride.' Eventually he stopped.

Although the driver attempted to coerce Michael into trading sex, Michael had other options available (e.g., he could get another ride); therefore, it made it easier for him to decline the offer to trade sex. Michael also had alternatives with regards to obtaining shelter, money, and drugs because of the income generated from his drug sales. Given that Michael had access, albeit limited, to the items for which youth typically trade sex, he was less likely to be in a situation where he had no choice but to accept an offer to trade sex.

John had also been propositioned for sex while on the street. He described his biological parents as "alcoholics and druggies," and as a result of their substance use, John was adopted at age 5. He later entered the foster care system at age 10 because his adoptive parents could not handle him, given John's drug and alcohol problems. At the time of the interview, he continued to struggle with substance use problems, such as pressure from peers to use drugs, but had succeeded in remaining sober. Although he had never traded sex, John admitted that he had been approached many times by men who wanted to have sex with him and who were willing to pay. He reported that he would never exchange sex for anything and became somewhat agitated during the interview when asked about it. John appeared very adamant about not trading sex, regardless of the situation.

John spoke of relationships with numerous friends. It is possible that with the assistance of his friends, he was able to survive without resorting to trading sex. Also, John

spoke of utilizing the services of numerous organizations; he was willing to accept help from agencies and stay in shelters. Perhaps his willingness to accept this assistance helped him avoid desperate situations that may have otherwise led John to trade sex.

### *Having Friends/Acquaintances Who Trade Sex*

The final group of youth analyzed included those who had friends or acquaintances who had traded sex. Two young men, Joe and Jody, explained that some of their friends/acquaintances had traded sex, although they themselves had never done so. Joe, a drug dealer, said many women that he had encountered habitually traded sex for drugs. Because it is likely the women Joe described used drugs frequently and were possibly addicted, trading sex may have been seen as one of the few remaining ways they could obtain money and drugs. This is consistent with literature arguing that trading sex is often associated with drug problems (Huba et al., 2000; Martinez et al., 1998).

Jody also dealt drugs and had done so for many years. When asked whether or not he had ever exchanged sex, he replied that he had not, but that he knew people who had. He claimed, "Sex and stuff is the least of my worries when I was on the streets. Making it from when you wake up til when you go to sleep, that's your worry." Both Joe and Jody had access to a constant supply of drugs, and given their incomes from selling drugs, they had money to purchase food, clothing, and shelter when the need arose. Because of these resources, they were less likely to have been in a position where they needed to trade sex out of desperation.

The final youth who reported having a friend or acquaintance who had traded sex was Vanessa. This respondent was also included in the previous section regarding youth who had been propositioned to trade sex but never had. Vanessa spoke of a friend who traded sex on a regular basis; "That is how she gets her electric bills paid." Vanessa did not agree with her friend's lifestyle, and thus chose to leave the situation and go elsewhere. As was argued earlier, it is possible that because Vanessa had the option to leave and go elsewhere (i.e., to family members' houses), she was able to avoid trading sex.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine, in depth, the circumstances surrounding trading sex among young homeless people and to address whether youth who trade sex do so voluntarily or through coercion. Additionally, we sought to examine whether anyone else benefited from the exchange in addition to the youth providing sex and the person receiving sex, as well as why some homeless youth trade sex while the majority of them do not. Approximately one third ( $n = 13$ ) of the original sample had some experience with trading sex, whether it was in the form of having traded sex, having been propositioned to trade sex but having refused, or having friends or acquaintances who had traded sex. Young people's reports

indicated that they had traded sex for things they deemed necessary in order to survive (i.e., food, shelter, money, or drugs) and that they did not want to trade sex, but did so because they were desperate and lacked alternatives. It should be noted that although other explanations are possible, youth in the current study only reported on those related to survival. Finally, others were coerced, manipulated, or forced to trade sex, indicating that the decision to trade sex is not always voluntary.

The coercion or pressure to trade sex that six women experienced was often instigated by a friend or partner. In fact, two of the respondents may not have exchanged sex in a particular situation if their friends had not been present. Based on the work of Hagan and McCarthy (1997), friends and acquaintances may be viewed as catalysts because their presence and influence may initiate criminal activities that would otherwise not take place. In this sense, friends may be instrumental to youth trading sex. In addition to coercion from peers, three young women experienced coercion to trade sex from their boyfriends. In these cases, male dating partners exploited their girlfriends by pressuring them to trade sex and forcing them to share the "profits." These men were thus provided with items they deemed necessary with little or no cost to themselves. These young women succumbed to pressure and manipulation from their boyfriends to trade sex because they were desperate, frightened of being beaten up, or both.

Despite the distinction between coerced and voluntary involvement in trading sex, some incidents are difficult to classify. Although two of Cindy's experiences with trading sex were categorized as voluntary and two as coerced, this distinction was difficult to make. In some situations, it appeared that she voluntarily traded sex, while in other instances her decision was heavily influenced by her boyfriend. It is also possible that what was classified here as voluntary was, in fact, coerced; she may have been coerced into agreeing to trade sex. More specifically, perhaps because she was previously coerced by her boyfriend, she learned to acquiesce rather than to risk violence from him. Given the complicated circumstances surrounding trading sex, the coercion she experienced would unlikely have been detected using traditional quantitative methods. The methods used in this study, which go beyond those employed in previous research examining correlates of trading sex, allowed us to examine the circumstances surrounding trading sex and to learn more about this process.

There was also evidence that trading sex leads to sexual victimization. One young woman, Katie, reported experiencing pressure to have intercourse with men she was not interested in sexually. It is likely that because she had engaged in sex with these same men in the past and because they were aware that she traded sex, they felt a sense of entitlement. Thus, although Katie had not been coerced into trading sex, she had been coerced into having sex with these men and received nothing for "the exchange."

There was also a small group of youth ( $n = 4$ ) who were propositioned to exchange sex but never did so. Thus the question remains, why do some homeless youth trade sex while the majority do not? One likely explanation is that those who did not trade sex had other options and resources available. For example, youth who had not traded sex spoke about having places to stay, which included the homes of extended family members or friends. Two youths who had been propositioned but did not trade sex spoke about their extensive service utilization. It is possible that because they allowed these service agencies to aid them in their search for food/shelter/jobs, they avoided desperate situations that may have otherwise resulted in trading sex. Additionally, it is possible that those youth who did not trade sex did not have coercive and manipulative partners; perhaps if they had, they may have succumbed to trading sex.

Finally, there were three youths who had friends or acquaintances who routinely traded sex, though the respondents themselves had not. Once again, perhaps these respondents were able to avoid trading sex because they had other alternatives available. Two of these individuals, for example, sold drugs; thus, they likely had money to purchase food, shelter, clothing and other items that they deemed necessary for their survival. The final youth who reported having a friend who had traded sex had extended family members on whom she could rely for a place to stay. Because of this availability of shelter, she did not have to resort to exchanging sex.

Although previous research has been mixed in terms of the percentage of males and females that trade sex (Greene et al., 1999; Halcon & Lifson, 2004; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999), the results of this study revealed that all seven youth who reported trading sex were female. It is possible that trading sex was underreported by males because of the stigma attached (Koken, Bimbi, Parsons, & Halkitis, 2004). Additionally, prior research on homeless youth and trading sex has employed quantitative methods; therefore, previous findings may not be directly comparable to the current study. That is, given that the nature of the current study included asking details surrounding trading sex, males may have been less likely to disclose than in survey research where they are giving a simple yes/no response. Another problem with comparing studies using different methodologies is the sample size. Quantitative studies typically have much larger samples than those utilizing qualitative methods; therefore, it is possible that if we had interviewed more youths, we may have identified males who traded sex. The current study had a significantly larger number of females compared to males, which may have also influenced this gender bias.

Finally, two separate but interrelated factors, childhood sexual abuse and gender stratification, would lead one to expect higher rates of trading sex among females compared to males. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, girls are sexually abused about three times more often than boys (Sedlak &

Broadhurst, 1996), and sexual abuse is related to trading sex among homeless youth (Tyler et al., 2001). Our findings are consistent with this research. Additionally, women and girls generally experience far less power at both the interpersonal (Lorber, 1998) and the societal level (Risman, 1998). Because of this power differential, females may more often find themselves in desperate situations and may be less able to defend themselves against coercion. Further, because females are often reduced to sex objects in American society, young homeless females are likely to use their sexual object status as a resource for survival (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004).

Given the numerous negative health outcomes (e.g., contracting sexually transmitted diseases, dependence on illicit drugs, being sexually victimized) associated with trading sex (Greene et al., 1999; Tyler et al., 2000), it is important to learn more about this process so case workers and service providers can intervene before it becomes a way of life. Our study goes beyond previous research, which has typically examined correlates of trading sex, by examining the experiences homeless young people have had with trading sex. Additionally, this study adds to the literature by providing information on the circumstances surrounding trading sex, the nature of the interaction (i.e., voluntary vs. coerced), and the role that partners and peers play in the youth's decision to trade sex. Future qualitative studies on homeless youth are needed to delve more deeply into the process of trading sex and to understand the nuances associated with voluntary versus coercive sex. Many young homeless people are initially exploited in their families, as well as later within the context of life on the street. These early negative familial relations, in conjunction with the emotional and physical damage caused by homelessness in general, and trading sex in particular, may have cumulative effects on their later development, resulting in long-term physical and psychological problems. Finally, given their lack of resources and their coercive relationships with partners and peers, trading sex is likely to remain a viable, although damaging, way for homeless youth to survive.

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