



# 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), cases of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) have increased considerably in the United States over the past few years, with over 1.1 million reported cases (ECPATUSA, 2017), 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.

E-mail address: [acorbett@saybrook.edu](mailto:acorbett@saybrook.edu).

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

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