

Threads of Resilience: Unraveling the Labyrinth of Agency and Social-Structural Vulnerabilities
in Female Youth Survival Sex through an Institutional Ethnography Lens

by

Leigha Foster

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We acknowledge and respect the Ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Xʷsepsəm/ Esquimalt) Peoples
on whose territory the university stands, and the Ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose
historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

This thesis explores the experiences of self-identifying female youth in Canada, aged 13–24, who have engaged in survival sex—a term used to describe the exchange of sex for basic needs like food, shelter, or money. Using Institutional Ethnography (IE) and an intersectional lens, the study examines how systemic inequities, institutional barriers, and constrained agency intersect in shaping these youths’ decisions. Drawing on secondary sources, including 12 media-based interviews with 11 women who engaged in survival sex during their youth, the study identifies two central themes: (1) Navigating Survival and Agency within Systemic Constraints and (2) Barriers to Exiting and Cycles of Entrenchment. Findings highlight that poverty, housing instability and trauma are key drivers of survival sex, while societal stigma and fragmented systems make exiting incredibly difficult. Despite these constraints, youth demonstrate resilience and agency, often making pragmatic decisions within limited options. The research challenges dominant rescue-oriented narratives by showing that many youths are not coerced but navigating structural failures. This study contributes to current literature by re-framing survival sex as a systemic issue rather than an individual choice, and offers policy recommendations grounded in harm reduction, trauma-informed care, and youth-centered supports. Ultimately, this thesis calls for systemic reform that respects the agency of youth while addressing the structural conditions that shape their lives.

Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee	ii
Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Tables	viii
Acknowledgment	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Identifying the Problem	2
Navigating Survival and Agency within Systemic Constraints	3
Barriers to Exiting and Cycles of Entrenchment	4
Institutional Forces Shaping Youth Experiences	4
Researcher Positionality	4
Research Objective and Questions	5
Thesis Outline	6
Chapter 2: Literature Review	7
Systemic Drivers of Vulnerability	8
Poverty	8
Housing Instability	9
Historical Abuse	10
Educational Disruption	11
Youth Agency and Resilience	12
Institutional Barriers	13
Child Welfare Systems	13

Legal and Social Services	14
Economic Barriers	15
Summary	15
Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework.....	17
Introduction.....	17
Intersectionality	17
Institutional Ethnography.....	19
Chapter 4: Research Methodology	22
Introduction.....	22
Data Collection and Sources	22
Google Search: Online News Media Platforms and Other Reputable Sources	22
Data Refinement: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria	23
Research Data Sources	26
Data Collection Methodology.....	28
Data Analysis	31
Ethical Considerations.....	33
Trustworthiness.....	33
Summary	34
Chapter 5: Findings	35
Introduction.....	35
Interviews in the Media.....	35
Theme 1: Navigating Survival and Agency within Systemic Constraints	37
Economic Survival, Meeting Basic Needs and Agency.....	37

Housing Instability and Survival Strategies	38
Historical Abuse and Escaping Unsafe Environments.....	38
Empowerment and the Duality of Agency.....	39
Theme 2: Barriers to Exiting and Cycles of Entrenchment	41
Stigma and Employment Barriers	41
Inaccessible and Fragmented Support Services	42
Poverty and Housing as Ongoing Barriers	43
Summary	44
Chapter 6: Discussion.....	45
Introduction.....	45
Navigating Survival and Agency within Systemic Constraints	45
Economic Survival, Meeting Basic Needs and Agency.....	46
Housing Instability and Survival Strategies	47
Historical Abuse and Escaping Unsafe Environments.....	48
Empowerment and the Duality of Agency.....	50
Barriers to Exiting and Cycles of Entrenchment.....	51
Stigma and Employment Barriers	51
Inaccessible and Fragmented Support Services	52
Poverty and Housing as Ongoing Barriers	54
Implications and Policy Recommendations.....	56
Summary	59
Chapter 7: Conclusion.....	61
Introduction.....	61

Navigating Survival and Agency within Systemic Constraints	61
Barriers to Exiting and Cycles of Entrenchment	62
Contributions to Literature and Practice	62
Future Research	64
Summary	65
References	67

List of Tables

Table 1: Overview of Research Sources, Authors and Publication Dates.....	27
Table 2: Demographic and Involvement Characteristics of Interview Sources.....	30

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Survival sex, also known as transactional sex, is often defined as the exchange of sex in order to acquire material goods and/or basic necessities, such as food, shelter, and/or drugs (Czechowski et al., 2022). This form of sex work occurs globally and nationally among youth and young adults (Czechowski et al., 2022; Krisch et al., 2019). However, survival sex remains largely misunderstood and overlooked, often conflated with sex trafficking. A study conducted by Covenant House revealed that, of the 641 young people surveyed between 2014 and 2016, “42% of youth who were identified as sex trafficking victims were minors involved in the sale of commercial sex and survival sex but were not forced by a third party to do so” (Murphy, 2016, p. 4). These findings highlight the complexity of survival sex and how misclassification can obscure the experiences of youth who engage in this practice.

The legal and policy frameworks governing survival sex contribute to this misunderstanding. In British Columbia, youth under the age of 18 who exchange sex for money or basic needs are classified as sexually exploited, regardless of their agency or circumstances (Government of British Columbia, 2024). Even for youth over the age of 18, consensual survival sex is often categorized under the same legal and policy frameworks as sex trafficking, leading to further stigmatization and criminalization (Global Network of Sex Work Projects [GNSWP], 2011; Maynard, 2015). Advocacy groups emphasize the importance of distinguishing survival sex from trafficking, arguing that conflating the two erases the agency and autonomy of those involved (Bruckert et al., 2013).

At the heart of this issue lies the tension between systemic inequities and individual agency. Youth involved in survival sex often face overlapping vulnerabilities, including poverty, housing instability, limited education, and social exclusion. These structural challenges shape the

constrained choices available to them. Yet, within these constrained circumstances, youth continue to exhibit agency, resourcefulness, and resilience. This thesis seeks to explore these dynamics by investigating how systemic inequities, institutional barriers, and agency intersect to shape the experiences of youth engaged in survival sex.

Identifying the Problem

Despite increasing awareness of sex trafficking, survival sex remains largely misunderstood and misrepresented in both academic discourse and public policy. Survival sex is often conflated with trafficking and exploitation, leading to policies and interventions that fail to address the nuanced realities of youth who engage in survival sex as a means of survival (GNSWP, 2011; Kempadoo et al., 2017). This misrepresentation has significant consequences, including the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, the erasure of youth agency, and the implementation of services that fail to meet their needs (Bruckert et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the dominant societal narrative portrays youth who engage in survival sex as inherently vulnerable, devoid of agency, and in need of state protection. Scholars such as Garlen (2019), Lansdown (2005), and Ramjewan and Garlen (2020) challenge these assumptions, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of youth agency within constrained circumstances. Lansdown (2005) emphasizes the concept of *evolving capacities*, which recognizes that children and youth have the ability to make decisions influenced by their age, maturity, and lived experiences.

At its core, this thesis seeks to address the gap in understanding how systemic inequities, social vulnerabilities, and institutional barriers intersect to shape the experiences of youth engaged in survival sex. By exploring these dynamics, this research aims to contribute to the development of more effective, youth-centered policies and support services.

Navigating Survival and Agency within Systemic Constraints

Survival sex among youth is often framed as a constrained choice made within limited alternatives. While survival sex is frequently portrayed as a last resort, this perspective does not negate the agency of youth involved. Instead, it underscores a nuanced form of constrained agency, where decisions are made under structural and systemic pressures (Santini et al., 2020). The reality for most individuals is that their decisions are shaped by their circumstances and are rarely made in an environment of limitless choices (Santini et al., 2020).

Research consistently highlights the social-structural vulnerabilities that shape youths' involvement in survival sex. These vulnerabilities include poverty, housing instability, and a lack of accessible resources (Czechowski et al., 2022; Krisch et al., 2019). Poverty remains one of the most significant drivers behind youths' participation in survival sex. Without access to stable income, many youths view sex work as a pragmatic response to financial precarity. Housing instability compounds this vulnerability, as youth who lack secure living arrangements may turn to survival sex as a means of securing shelter (Czechowski et al., 2022; Holger-Ambrose et al., 2013).

A history of abuse—whether physical, emotional, or sexual—also contributes to youth's reliance on survival sex. Abuse disrupts family dynamics, often resulting in youth fleeing unsafe environments and turning to survival sex as a coping mechanism or means of escape (Patton et al., 2014; Wilson & Widom, 2010, as cited in Saewyc et al., 2013).

Despite these structural constraints, youth who engage in survival sex often demonstrate resilience, resourcefulness, and agency. Research emphasizes that agency exists even within constrained environments, as youth navigate their circumstances to secure basic necessities and, in some cases, pursue longer-term goals (Santini et al., 2020).

Barriers to Exiting and Cycles of Entrenchment

Exiting survival sex is often hindered by deeply entrenched barriers, including societal stigma, fragmented support services, financial precarity, inadequate healthcare systems, and housing instability (Ouspenski, 2014; Santini et al., 2020). Stigma remains a significant obstacle, limiting access to employment opportunities and perpetuating cycles of reliance on survival sex for basic needs. The societal shame attached to sex work can discourage youth from seeking help or accessing resources, further isolating them from support systems (Thukral & Ditmore, 2005, as cited in Ouspenski, 2014).

Furthermore, rigid eligibility criteria and the fragmented nature of social services create additional obstacles for youth seeking mental health support, addiction services, or trauma-informed care (Holger-Ambrose et al., 2013; Saewyc et al., 2013).

Addressing these barriers requires systemic reforms, including increased access to stable housing, nonjudgmental healthcare services, trauma-informed mental health care, and flexible educational opportunities (Ouspenski, 2014; Santini et al., 2020).

Institutional Forces Shaping Youth Experiences

Institutions, including child welfare systems and support networks, play a significant role in shaping the experiences of youth engaged in survival sex. Institutional neglect, fragmented services, and punitive measures often exacerbate vulnerability rather than addressing its root causes (Kempadoo et al., 2017; Ouspenski, 2014).

Researcher Positionality

As a white-skinned, cisgender woman, I recognize that I have experienced privileges based on both my racial and gender identity, while also encountering exclusion within systems structured by patriarchal ideals in Canada. However, I acknowledge that I occupy positions of

power within society, and my intersecting identities afford me privileges that are not extended to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), as well as gender and sexual minorities.

Through my work as an outreach worker, I have not only developed meaningful connections with numerous youth who engage in survival sex, but also have close personal friends who currently work in commercial sex. These personal and professional relationships have provided me with insight into the complexities of sex workers' lived experiences and the diversity within this community. As such, as a practitioner-researcher, I approach this work as an ally rather than an expert, ensuring that my research employs empowering language that rejects paternalism, infantilization, and the moralization of sex work. Furthermore, I avoid generalizations or homogenized understandings of the needs and experiences of this population; and instead, recognize the nuances and diversity that shape their realities.

Research Objective and Questions

This thesis investigates the interplay of systemic inequities, institutional barriers, and youth agency within the context of survival sex among self-identifying female youth in Canada, aged 13–24.¹ It explores how systemic forces shape their decisions, the institutional challenges they face, and how they navigate agency within these constraints. By focusing on survival sex as distinct from trafficking or exploitation, this research highlights the resilience and resourcefulness of youth while addressing the broader structural factors that perpetuate their involvement.

This study is guided by the following questions:

¹ In this study, "self-identifying female" refers to individuals who identify as female, including both cisgender and transgender women. While interviewees did not disclose details about their gender identity beyond identifying as female, this research acknowledges the diversity of experiences within this category.

1. What systemic inequities and life experiences shape youth involvement in survival sex, and how do these factors both constrain and enable their agency?
2. What institutional barriers hinder youth from exiting survival sex, and how do these barriers reflect broader systemic failures?

Thesis Outline

This thesis adopts an Institutional Ethnography (IE) approach to examine the lived realities of youth engaged in survival sex. Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive review of existing literature, focusing on systemic drivers, institutional barriers, and the interplay of agency and vulnerability. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework guiding this research. Chapter 4 details the data collection and analysis processes. Chapter 5 presents the findings, organized around two themes: Navigating Survival and Agency within Systemic Constraints and Barriers to Exiting and Cycles of Entrenchment. Chapter 6 discusses the findings in relation to existing literature, emphasizing the structural forces and agency shaping youth experiences, along with implications and policy recommendations. Chapter 7 concludes by highlighting the contributions of this research and outlining directions for future studies.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Survival sex, also known as transactional sex, is often defined as the exchange of sex in order to acquire material goods and/or basic necessities, such as food, shelter, and/or drugs (Czechowski et al., 2022). Research findings vary slightly regarding the average age of entry into survival sex; some studies report that the age of onset is between 15 and 16 (Webber et al., 2002, as cited in Miller et al., 2011), while another study reported the age range to be between 13 and 15 (Krisch et al., 2019) and still others found the median age to be between 14 and 17 (Weber et al., 2004, as cited in Chettiar et al., 2010). Regardless of the age of initiation among young people who engage in survival sex, the consequences are profound and adversely impact sexual, physical, and mental health outcomes (Chettiar et al., 2010; Krisch et al., 2019; Patton et al., 2014).

The phenomenon of survival sex, which is often the result of social and structural factors that negate females' social equity, influences their experiences in the sex trade and inhibit their ability to exit (Ouspenski, 2014). The purpose of this literature review is to better understand the social and structural vulnerabilities that increase the likelihood of certain populations being caught up in survival sex or unable to extricate themselves from it. It also aims to investigate youth sex workers' sense of agency and choice. As such, this review examines the social and structural factors that render sex workers vulnerable and at risk, explores the extent to which youth possess and exercise agency and investigates the barriers that hinder or prevent their exit from the sex trade.

The literature for this review was gathered by using a multi-database search, including the University of Victoria's Library Summon, ERIC, and Google Scholar. This was supplemented with information found via Google searches for grey literature, which included individual

organizations, and Government of Canada websites. A combination of key search terms were used including: “teen” or “adolescent” or “youth” and “transaction sex” or “survival sex” or “sexual exploitation” or “sex trade” or “exploitative sex” in conjunction with either “Canada”, “British Columbia” or “Western society”. Research and literature originating from non-Western countries were excluded from this review since their cultural dynamics may differ from those in Canada, potentially producing findings that are not relevant to the experiences of Canadian female youth. Additionally, studies conducted prior to the year 2000 were also excluded.

Systemic Drivers of Vulnerability

Youth involved in survival sex often face a range of systemic vulnerabilities that severely constrain their choices. Research highlights that socioeconomic disadvantages, housing instability, experiences of abuse, and incomplete education increase the likelihood of youth participating in survival sex (Holger-Ambrose, et al., 2013; Maynard, 2015; Patton et al., 2014; Saewyc et al., 2013; Ting & Showden, 2019).

Poverty

Studies have determined that poverty is one of the major contributing factors that compelled youth to engage in the sex trade (Ting & Showden, 2019). Mallory and Stern (2000) found poverty to be a push factor that contributed to their engagement in survival sex. In their study of HIV-related concerns conducted in the United States, all the female participants who had traded sex in order to survive, reported that they had participated in selling sex due to difficult economic circumstances and understood it as a response to financial hardship (as cited in Czechowski, et al., 2022). Likewise, Watson (2011) found that a lack of engagement in the workforce among unhoused young women, resulted in a higher likelihood of them engaging in survival sex.

While these studies establish a strong correlation between poverty and survival sex, they often fail to account for the structural and policy-level factors that contribute to economic hardship. For instance, there is limited discussion on how welfare policies, labour market access, and employment discrimination impact young people's ability to attain financial stability without engaging in survival sex.

Between 2007 and 2016, the Cedar Project conducted a cohort study in Prince George and Vancouver, British Columbia, involving 292 young Indigenous females ranging in age from 14–30 who had used substances (Sharma et al., 2021). Results pointed to the fact that multiple disadvantages rooted in intergenerational poverty and systemic disinvestments could exacerbate the vulnerabilities that go hand-in-hand with being involved in survival sex (ONWA, 2016; Pooyak, 2009, as cited in Sharma et al., 2021). Their study also revealed that single women were 1.9 times more likely to participate in transactional sex work in comparison to those in a relationship, suggesting that being single was an indicator of economic need (Sharma et al., 2021). While this correlation is significant, the study lacks a deeper exploration of how social networks, childcare responsibilities, and access to financial resources influence this trend. It does not address whether single women face additional barriers, or whether having a partner provides financial stability, emotional support, or greater access to employment opportunities.

Housing Instability

In Canada, as in the United States, housing instability has often been cited as a leading cause for the ongoing sexual activities of youth and young adults who participate in the sex trade in order to survive. The increased vulnerability that the threat of being unhoused engenders, often led to their participation in selling sex (Czechowski et al., 2022; Holger-Ambrose et al., 2013).

Between 2005 and 2008, research was conducted in Vancouver, Canada, on 255 street-based female sex workers in order to investigate structural barriers and individual risk factors with regard to their vulnerability when participating in survival sex. The participants were all 24-years old and younger, and all took part in baseline and biannual questionnaires. Over a two-year follow-up period, the determination was that 69% of participants reported 'absolute homelessness' and that youth were independently more likely to experience housing instability in comparison to adult female sex workers (Miller et al., 2011).

The conclusions of a study conducted in Winnipeg, Canada, revealed that the two common factors that contributed to an individual's involvement in street sexual activities were being without a home and precarious housing (Seshia, 2005, as cited in Nonomura, 2020). Furthermore, research has also revealed that the subjugation that involvement in the sex industry brings, was closely linked with housing instability, poverty, and the privation of opportunities for employment and education (Christmas, 2017, as cited in Hodzic & Christmas, 2018).

Historical Abuse

A history of experiencing sexual and physical abuse has been widely cited by scholars as a contributing push factor into active participation in survival sex. Krisch et al. (2019) conducted a 28-country global review of 37 empirical studies related to transactional sex amongst young adults. Across all genders, the results revealed a direct correlation between those who had previously endured maltreatment during their childhood and those who later participated in transactional sex (Choudhry et al., 2014; Dunkle et al., 2007; Edwards et al., 2006B; Svedin & Priebe, 2007, as cited in Krisch et al., 2019).

Similarly, Patton et al. (2014) linked youths' initiation into transactional sex, to past incidences of enduring ill-treatment, and Wilson and Widom (2010) asserted that a history of

experiencing sexual abuse can lead to young people becoming involved in the sex trade (as cited in Saewyc et al., 2013).

Ahrens et al. (2012) conducted a longitudinal cohort study in three Midwestern states in the United States. The participants consisted of 732 young males and females, all over the age of 17 and all were in out-of-home state care. The findings revealed that those who had been sexually molested, were significantly more likely to participate in survival sex as compared to those who had not suffered this form of abuse (Ahrens et al., 2012). Additionally, the data from the interviews, revealed that those who reported a history of being a victim of rape and/or sexual molestation, were more likely to be Caucasian and female. It is worth noting that the research did not include any youth who were incarcerated during the time of the study, which may have skewed results as there is documented evidence that both Black and Indigenous young people are overrepresented in the youth justice system in the United States (Rovner, 2021; Wang, 2021).

Educational Disruption

Another factor that impels young people into participating in survival sex is the negligible amount of education they achieve (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002; Saewyc et al., 2008, as cited in Ting & Showden, 2019). Clarke et al. (2012) determined that involvement in school was a promotive factor in reducing youths' involvement in survival sex (as cited in Patton et al., 2014). This seems to uphold the findings of a study conducted by the McCreary Centre Society, which posits that street-involved youth who were participating in the sex trade, were less likely to be involved in school than those not trading sex (Saewyc et al., 2008). Watson (2011) further confirmed this with her study wherein she found that unhoused young adult women were more likely to participate in survival sex if they had left school prior to completion. However, these studies primarily establish correlation rather than causation, leaving open the question of whether

disrupted education directly leads to survival sex or if broader systemic factors contribute to both.

Of the samplings from students enrolled in Canadian schools, 2%–4% had resorted to trading sex in exchange for money, drugs, or material benefit; however, researchers acknowledge that this number may be underreported (Homma et al., 2012; Lavoie et al., 2010, as cited in Ting & Showden, 2019). In contrast, studies carried out in Canada of undereducated street-involved or unhoused young people, found that 10%–70% of those polled, had participated in the sex trade (Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Mehrabadi et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2011; Saewyc et al., 2008, as cited in Ting & Showden, 2019). These findings highlight an association between low education levels and sex trade involvement; however, whether education disruption is a cause or consequence of survival sex remains unclear.

Youth Agency and Resilience

The results of studies to determine the extent of youths’ ability to exercise agency and choice in the sex trade, are mixed. In their research into child sexual exploitation (CSE), Brown (2019) ascertained that participants exhibited varying levels of control over structural and situational elements that contributed to their involvement in CSE. Similarly, a study of 12 women who had begun selling sex prior to turning 18, revealed that five of them had freely chosen to sell sex and that they had felt a sense of agency in doing so (Dodsworth, 2014).

Conversely, a study of 70 minors who were considered victims of sex trafficking, revealed that not one of them had become involved in sex work out of a ‘fully realized choice’, and as such, their agency had been constrained (Marcus et al., 2014). However, only in a few of the cases was a ‘trafficker’ reported to be responsible for the constraint; rather, it was an intricate set of life crises points that caused them to become involved in the sex trade (Marcus et al., 2014).

According to Kendrick, et al. (2022), the results of their research of young women who participated in transactional sex in Toronto, Canada, demonstrated that “young women’s decisions need to be understood in the context of constraints imposed by systemic inequities” (p. 927).

Institutional Barriers

The barriers youth face in exiting survival sex often reflects broader systemic failures, such as inadequate social services, punitive legal frameworks, and structural discrimination.

Child Welfare Systems

Several studies have revealed that youth who are involved with child welfare are at an elevated risk of participating in survival sex. In Winnipeg, Canada, a research investigation conducted by Seshia (2005), determined that one common factor among individuals involved in street sex, was that they had been placed in multiple care homes (as cited in Nonomura, 2020). Furthermore, Courtney et al. (2007) discovered that youth living in foster care “are 2–4 times more likely to engage in transactional sex compared to their general population peers” (as cited in Ahrens et al., 2012, p. 76). Yet another study of 762 participants conducted by McCreary Centre Society, revealed that 40% reported that they had been in state care at some point in their lives (Saewyc et al., 2013). The results of these investigations align with the findings provided by (Boivin) 2005 and Ringwalt (1998) who determined that street-entrenched youth are more likely to have experienced separation from kin (e.g., foster care) (as cited in Miller et al., 2011). However, these studies do not critically examine how specific child welfare policies—such as frequent placement changes or aging out of care—contribute to youth vulnerability.

According to Palmater (2017) “the child welfare system also serves as a pipeline to child exploitation, sex trafficking and murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls” (as cited in

Sharma et al., 2021, Background, para. 5). Similarly, Cedar Project determined that many of the youth who engaged in transactional sex had often experienced a lifetime of sexual abuse and had spent time in the child welfare system (Sharma et al., 2021).

Legal and Social Services

Once involved in survival sex, youth and young adults face a variety of structural barriers that hinder their transition out of the sex trade. Deering (2012) highlights that social-structural factors, including substance use, colonization, poverty, and experiences of sexual abuse, “enable individuals to subsist within sex work under exploitative conditions and limited choices” (as cited in Ouspenski, 2014, p. 18). Further, Ouspenski (2014) identifies specific barriers faced by transgender and gender-non-conforming sex workers, such as restricted access to housing, health care, and social services. Teenagers, in particular, are often denied agency and access to services due to their age, with available resources frequently shaped by adult perspectives rather than informed by the expressed needs and desires of youth themselves (Ouspenski, 2014).

Mandatory reporting laws present further barriers for young people in the sex trade as these mandates strip them of their agency and voice and often dissuade youth from accessing resources and supports out of fear of involvement with social welfare agencies (Ouspenski, 2014). Young adults and youth alike, who engage in sex work and are either unhoused and/or living with addiction, often face additional barriers as there are limited resources that address their specific and unique needs (Miller et al., 2011).

Indigenous youth are also among those who often face unique barriers to exiting the sex trade, including services that are not culturally appropriate and attitudes from organizational staff and service workers that are oppressive, paternalistic, and judgmental (Ouspenski, 2014). Cedar Project found that among Indigenous women, a lack of culturally safe health services along with

racism and discrimination were repeatedly cited as barriers to accessing substance use treatment (Benoit et al., 2003, as cited in Sharma et al., 2021).

For women involved in street-based survival sex, the fear of policing and violence displaces them to side streets and industrial settings, which pushes them further away from social and health supports (Shannon et al., 2007, as cited in Sharma et al., 2021). Even when services are available to individuals in the sex trade, they are often fragmented and difficult to navigate (Hodzic & Christmas, 2018). This includes government supports, which have been cited as being difficult for sex workers to access due to a lack of awareness of existing programs and because those in the sex trade have their attention solely focused on survival (Hodzic & Christmas, 2018).

Economic Barriers

Structural inequities, such as wage disparities and limited access to job training programs, present significant challenges for youth attempting to exit the sex trade. These obstacles are often compounded by the stigma associated with sex work, as well as the repercussions of having a criminal record. Thukral and Ditmore (2005) noted that many sex workers face additional difficulties, including a lack of experience in preparing resumes and addressing employment gaps caused by their involvement in the sex trade (as cited in Ouspenski, 2014). These barriers collectively limit their opportunities for education and meaningful employment, further entrenching their reliance on survival sex.

Summary

This literature review underscores the systemic and structural factors driving youth involvement in survival sex, the institutional barriers that perpetuate reliance on the sex trade, and the ways youth navigate agency within these constraints. Poverty, housing instability, childhood trauma, and disrupted education emerge as central drivers, while systemic failures in

child welfare, legal, and social services exacerbate these challenges. Despite these barriers, youth demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness, highlighting the interplay between agency and systemic oppression.

The gaps in the literature—particularly in exploring the intersections of systemic vulnerabilities and youth agency—underscore the need for further research. This thesis addresses these gaps by investigating how systemic inequities shape youth involvement in survival sex, the role of institutional barriers, and the ways youth exercise agency within structural constraints.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework

Introduction

To furnish an analytical foundation for this research thesis, the conceptual frameworks of Institutional Ethnography (IE) and intersectionality were employed. The intent is to reveal the intersecting social and structural vulnerabilities that shape the lives of female youth and young adults who are or have been immersed in the sex trade. IE allows for the unravelling of the institutional practices and structures that impact these youth, while intersectionality sheds light on the interconnecting systems of power and oppression that shape their experiences. This foundation provides a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted realities young sex workers endure and explores their experiences through a sociological and intersectional lens that transcends the superficial layers of their experiences.

Intersectionality

This research draws on Crenshaw's (1989) Intersectionality Theory to examine the social-structural vulnerabilities that place youth in precarious social and economic situations, increasing their risk of becoming involved in survival sex. One of the major assumptions of intersectionality is that social categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability intersect and interact with each other, thereby shaping individuals' experiences in unique and complex ways (Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2017). Intersectionality recognizes that these categories are not separate or additive but are interconnected and mutually constitutive. Another key assumption is that power operates within intersecting and overlapping systems of oppression, meaning individuals may experience privilege and disadvantage simultaneously due to the interlocking nature of these systems (Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2017).

To build on this, aspects of Showden and Majic's (2018) Matrix of Agency and Vulnerability, which draws on an intersectional framework, were utilized. This matrix decenters sex as the analytical lens for understanding why some youth resort to selling/trading sex; instead, the youth population are the central focus. They argue that focusing on sex, moralizes youth's engagement in the sex trade to the detriment of engaging in structural analysis. Conversely, decentering sex allows for attention to be drawn to the conditions of structurally induced vulnerabilities and marginalization that 'push' young people into the sex trade (Showden & Majic, 2018). Therefore, sex—and the demand for it—is not the causal push factor into the sex trade (Showden & Majic, 2018).

By studying why youth trade sex through an intersectional lens rather than an individual one, a systemic diagnosis shifts the focus onto the "interaction effects" of different "axes of power in constructing vulnerabilities and resources for young people" (Showden & Majic, 2018, p. 115) while also attending to youths' agency. Showden and Majic (2018) emphasize the importance of understanding youth agency as a multifaceted concept that encompasses the ability of young individuals to make choices and act within their social contexts. In the context of youth in sex work, they argue that agency should not be narrowly defined based on traditional notions of autonomy, but rather should be recognized within the constraints and complexities of their lived experiences. Showden and Majic (2018) highlight the significance of recognizing agency as existing along a continuum, acknowledging that youth engaged in sex work may exercise agency in various ways, even when their options are limited by structural inequalities and systemic barriers. They also emphasize the need to adopt a more nuanced understanding of agency that takes into consideration the intersecting factors that shape the lives of youth who participate in sex work, including socio-economic disparities, stigma, and exploitation.

Acknowledging agency, even if it is understood as ‘constrained agency’, helps to eliminate paternalism and infantilism in research and approaches (Cojocaru, 2016, as cited in Nagy et al., 2020). Furthermore, Hunt (2010) and Maynard (2015) posit that using ‘rescue narratives’ and portraying individuals as lacking choice, agency, or voice, invites colonial interventions “while depoliticizing systemic disenfranchisement” (as cited in Nagy et al., 2020, p. 83). According to Showden and Majic (2018), using an intersectional lens succeeds in placing the focus on the social and economic needs of young people, instead of on the dangers or meaning of sex. It also emphasizes why certain populations of youth are particularly vulnerable to becoming involved in the sex trade, and how these structural vulnerabilities shape their experiences; hence, their participation in the sex trade is a system-level failure rather than an individual one (Showden & Majic, 2018).

Institutional Ethnography

The second framework employed in this research is guided by tenets of Institutional Ethnography (IE), developed by Canadian feminist and sociologist Dorothy Smith in order to provide a more accurate portrayal of women’s experiences (Balcom et al., 2021). IE emphasizes the importance of studying individuals’ actual experiences as they perceive them, while validating the order, meaning and knowledge they have about their own lives (Balcom et al., 2021). This method of inquiry utilizes the everyday experiences of people as entry points to uncover how institutions organize and govern their lives (Devault, 2006, as cited in Balcom et al., 2021).

The objective of IE is to explore the invisible social relationships that underpin people’s experiences, using their everyday activities as a starting point (Smith, 1987; 2002; 2009, as cited in Webster et al., 2015). By doing so, it reveals how an individual’s daily routines in a specific

local setting are influenced by larger social institutions situated elsewhere (Ng et al., 2013, as cited in Balcom et al., 2021). Central to the logic of IE is the understanding that people's experiences are organized and shaped by larger power relations known as ruling relations (Wright & Rocco, 2017). These ruling relations, such as legislation and governing boards, serve as textual venues through which power is created and perpetuated across various societal sites (Wright & Rocco, 2017).

The purpose for using IE is to uncover and challenge “the ideological and social processes that produce experiences of subordination [for individuals]” (Devault & McCoy, 2001, as cited in Wright & Rocco, 2017, p. 1659). Rather than simply determining what happens within the IE paradigm, ethnographers seek to understand how this modality works and how all its parts are put together (Kearney et al., 2019, as cited in Balcom et al., 2021). The starting point for an institutional ethnographer is to study the realities of people's everyday experiences, while the endpoint connects those experiences to the social organization(s) governing the local setting (Quinlan, 2009, as cited in Balcom et al., 2021).

For this research study, texts containing factual material were compiled from an array of Canadian online media sources that depict vivid personal stories of female youth's experiences having to do with their life as sex workers during their youth. Employing an IE-informed approach, these local texts were analyzed to establish connections between youth involved in the sex trade and the institutional structures that shape their involvement, experiences, and capacity to transition out of survival sex. This method was also utilized to explore how the lives of female youth engaged in the sex trade are influenced by the larger sociopolitical context in which they are situated and included an examination of their agency and the extent to which it is exercised. The predominant perception that youth lack agency in the sex trade is intricately woven into

institutional discourses and practices. Mainstream institutions, presented as objective and universal, may inadvertently overlook the systemic disadvantages faced by these teens and fail to recognize their autonomy and resilience. By unpacking the institutional intricacies, this research sheds light on the structures that impact teen sex workers and challenges the prevailing perception of their lack of agency in this context.

In line with Dorothy Smith's perspective, everyday experiences serve as a means to discover embodied knowledge derived from those who have lived experience; thereby, making individuals who participated in the sex trade during their youth, the experts from whom valuable insights can be gained (Caspar et al., 2016). As such, this investigation is grounded in their concerns and experiences, ensuring their voices are prioritized and heard.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

Introduction

Using secondary research content, grounded in an Institutional Ethnography (IE) framework and an intersectional lens, this investigation delves into the experiences of Canadian females who engaged in survival sex during their youth. The secondary sources consisted of 12 articles based on interviews conducted with 11 women who, as youth had navigated the complexities of the sex trade. These journalistic sources include news media platforms, a grassroots organization that provides support to sex workers, and an online research library and information centre. Ultimately, this methodology unravels the intricate web of social and structural vulnerabilities that sex workers must endure and informs child and youth care practices and policies. The following sections delineate the systematic approach employed in data collection, refinement, analysis, and discusses the ethical considerations that shape the trajectory of this inquiry.

Data Collection and Sources

The selection of data sources and the data collection process are both meticulously designed to ensure the robustness and integrity of the research findings.

Google Search: Online News Media Platforms and Other Reputable Sources

Google search emerged as the primary data collection search engine for retrieving secondary data that aligns with the research objectives. In order to gather the most relevant and comprehensive information possible, each search word or phrase was deliberately chosen to target pertinent information from the far-reaching and wide variety of Canadian news outlets and other platforms available on the internet as discussed below.

Mainstream News Media Platforms.

The availability and accessibility of broad-based news media platforms proved indispensable in facilitating access to an abundance of secondary information based on the experiences of individuals who currently are, or have in the past, been involved in the sex trade as youth. These digital spaces—pervasive due to the internet’s far-reaching influence—have evolved into vital hubs for communication and information-sharing within marginalized communities, such as those impacted by the sex trade. Leveraging data from these platforms has provided a rich tapestry of narratives and experiences, thereby offering profound insights into this subject matter.

Other Reputable Internet Sources.

To enhance the data retrieved from mainstream news outlets, additional information was sourced from a grassroots organization that provides support to sex workers, as well as from an online research library and information centre. The interviews found on these websites complement the narratives collected from mainstream news media platforms. This comprehensive approach provides a more thorough understanding of the subject matter.

Data Refinement: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The data that was collected underwent a rigorous refinement process guided by predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Each Google search was conducted in English and targeted Canadian female youth between the ages of 13 and 24 years. This criterion is essential for aligning the research with established standards in the field, thereby facilitating accurate comparisons with existing literature and enhancing the findings' relevance within youth-specific contexts. Since the Google search engine constitutes about 83% of all internet searches (Bianchi, 2023), the rationale for utilizing Google as the primary search engine stemmed from the

necessity to focus on the most-searched and readily accessible internet-based media that the average consumer frequently uses. Since public opinion wields considerable influence on national policy, procedures, and the allocation of resources, understanding how youth involved in the sex trade are portrayed in these media outlets is of paramount importance.

The search terms used for collecting the data from Google included:

Youth and sex work	Interviews with youth sex workers
Teens and sex work	Interviews with teen sex workers
Teens and survival sex	Interviews with young adult sex workers
Youth and survival sex	Youth sexual exploitation ²
Young adults and sex work	Teens and sexual exploitation
Youth and transactional sex	Youth and prostitution ³
Teens and transaction sex	Teens and prostitution

The inclusion criteria used in this study are pivotal for conducting a thorough exploration of youth engagement in sex work and survival sex. By specifically selecting terms such as ‘interviews with teen sex workers’, the research is aimed at capturing authentic firsthand narratives from individuals who had been, or at that time were actively immersed in these experiences. Despite the outdated connotations of terms such as ‘prostitution’, it was essential to include them due to their historical prevalence in academic literature, media portrayals, and public discourse. This approach ensures that no relevant data or critical interviews were

² The term “exploited” is employed in this context due to the prevalent use of this characterization in various media sources. It is noteworthy that the media often broadly labels all youth engaged in the sex trade as “exploited”, even encompassing those involved in survival sex. This usage reflects the terminology commonly employed in public discourse and does not imply a specific stance on the nuanced experiences of individuals in the sex trade.

³ The term "prostitution" is employed in alignment with historical usage by older news media when referencing youth involved in the sex trade. It is essential to clarify that I do not personally endorse or utilize this term, recognizing its potential stigmatizing connotations and opting for more contemporary and respectful language in the research.

overlooked, acknowledging the diverse ways in which individuals may be labeled or how they perceive their involvement in sex work.

This study also incorporates terms such as ‘exploitation’, and ‘sex work’ which are often used interchangeably with the term ‘survival sex work’, to describe youth who engaged in survival sex. This inclusion strategy allows for a nuanced examination of circumstances where individuals in the media reports may be categorized as ‘exploited’ rather than explicitly labeled as participants in survival sex. Each narrative was meticulously examined to determine if it indicated involvement in survival sex.

Exclusion criteria were meticulously applied to filter out content involving youth whose entire experience in the sex trade was defined by coercion, deception or pressure from others (such as boyfriends, friends, acquaintances, strangers). This rigorous approach ensures that the study centers on individuals who engaged in survival sex through their own agency within limited circumstances. It offers a clearer understanding of survival sex as a deliberate, albeit constrained, choice influenced by socio-economic conditions and personal decisions. This distinction is crucial for differentiating survival sex from human trafficking or sexual exploitation, which involve severe human rights violations and lack of consent.

Furthermore, the exclusion criteria enables a nuanced analysis of socio-economic factors that influence youths’ participation in survival sex. They highlight structural vulnerabilities such as poverty, limited access to education, and social marginalization. By focusing on individuals who are navigating these challenges within the constraints of limited agency, the study acknowledges their resilience and resourcefulness in making survival-oriented decisions. This perspective challenges stereotypical portrayals of youth in the sex trade as passive victims and recognizes their active role in shaping strategies for survival.

Research Data Sources

The data sources for this research include a variety of media outlets and organizations that provide diverse perspectives on the subject matter. These sources are outlined as follows:

1. CBC News is operated by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Canada's national public broadcaster known for its coverage of national and international news (CBC, 2024). Two articles from CBC News were included in this study.
2. National Post Inc. publishes the National Post, a Canadian newspaper that covers national and international news, including politics, business, and culture (Potter, 2014).
3. Northern Hoot is an online news platform focusing on regional news related to northern Canada (Northern Hoot, n.d.).
4. Montreal Gazette is a daily newspaper that provides local, national, and international news coverage from Montreal, Quebec (Potter, 2017).
5. Victoria News part of Black Press Media, serves Victoria, British Columbia, with community news and information on regional issues (Black Press Media, n.d.).
6. Northumberland News owned by Metroland Media, provides local news for Northumberland County, Ontario, with a focus on community stories (Northumberland News, 2024).
7. Toronto Life published by St. Joseph Communications, is a city magazine covering lifestyle, culture, and current events in Toronto (Toronto Life, n.d.).
8. Montreal CTV News a division of CTV News, offers national and regional news coverage through various media platforms (CTV News, n.d.).
9. The Star published by Toronto Star Newspapers Ltd., is one of Canada's largest daily newspapers, providing coverage of a range of news topics (Toronto Star, n.d.).

10. Peers Victoria Resources Society is a non-profit organization based in Victoria, British Columbia, dedicated to supporting individuals in the sex trade and advocating for their rights (Peers, n.d.).

11. The Homeless Hub is part of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and provides research and information on housing issues in Canada (Homeless Hub, 2024).

Table 1: Overview of Research Sources, Authors and Publication Dates

Sex Workers	Title of Article	Website Name	Article Author	Date of Article
Aubrey	Story of a Child Prostitute	Northern Hoot	Steffanie Petronie	July 28, 2014
https://northernhoot.com/story-of-a-child-prostitute/				
Celine	Sex Work Story	Peers Victoria Resources Society	Celine	May 25, 2016
https://www.safersexwork.ca/sexworkstories-2-celine/				
Dametre Peverill	'We need to do something': Stepping Stone seeks to help youth in sex trade	CBC News	CBC News	March 8, 2018
https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/we-need-to-do-something-stepping-stone-seeks-to-help-youth-in-sex-trade-1.4567707				
Diane	Being an Addict and Working the Streets on Skid Row	Homeless Hub	Diane	2011
https://homelesshub.ca/resource/being-an-addict-and-working-the-streets-on-skid-row/				
M. K.	Nine secrets of a Canadian sex worker: 'I hung out for 20 minutes and left with \$160'	National Post	Prajwala Dixit	November 29, 2019
https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/nine-secrets-of-a-canadian-sex-worker-i-hung-out-for-20-minutes-and-left-with-160				
Maylissa	Hanes: Maylissa joined the sex industry at 15. Now she helps fight against it	Montreal Gazette	Allison Hanes	November 6, 2019
https://montrealgazette.com/opinion/columnists/hanes-invisible-chains-of-quebecs-sex-industry-may-finally-be-exposed				
Michelle	A B.C. woman talks her life in the sex trade	Victoria News	Carli Berry	February 23, 2018
https://www.vicnews.com/news/a-b-c-woman-talks-her-life-in-the-sex-trade/				
Natasha Falle	Former prostitute shares her story with soon-to-be cops	Northumberland News	Northumberland News	November 7, 2006
https://www.northumberlandnews.com/news/former-prostitute-shares-her-story-with-soon-to-be-cops/article_c1ab4f13-af25-51fa-9fad-02880b2a32f9.html				

Natasha Falle	Taken	Toronto Life	Natasha Falle	July 10, 2017
https://torontolife.com/life/taken/				
Rosie	At 17, I became a sex worker. Here's why I decided to leave the trade	CBC News	Malone Mullin	December 29, 2019
https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/rosie-as-told-to-1.5395097				
Valerie	'You carry this shame': Former Montreal prostitute shares her story	CTV News Montreal	CTV Montreal	February 12, 2016
https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/you-carry-this-shame-former-montreal-prostitute-shares-her-story-1.2776196?cache=yes%3FclipId%3D68596				
Wendy Babcock	From selling sex to Osgoode Hall	The Star	Daniel Dale	November 24, 2009
https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2009/11/24/from_selling_sex_to_osgoode_hall.html				

Data Collection Methodology

The sample for this study, taken from various sources including news media outlets, an organization that provides support to sex workers, and an online research library and information centre, consists of content from interviews conducted by various authors with youth or adults who were either involved in the sex trade at the time, or had participated in these activities in the past. Some sources provided their accounts through interviews, while others shared their stories in their own words. The selection process involved identifying reputable sources that contained secondary information and met all three inclusion criteria, i.e., the information was relevant to the research topic, the sources were credible, and their websites contained direct quotes or paraphrased content of interviewees' responses.

The methodology employed in this study followed a systematic approach beginning with the compilation of a comprehensive list of search terms pertinent to youth who were – or had been involved in the sex trade. Each term was systematically entered into the Google search engine to retrieve relevant written materials that aligned with the research criteria. Additionally, Google Alerts—an automated search program—was utilized over an extended period to continuously monitor and notify me of any newly published content relevant to the search terms.

This systematic tracking process included online news articles, blog posts, web pages, and academic research submissions; each contributing to the overall data collection process.

Initially, this approach yielded a total of 20 articles featuring interviews with women who had engaged in sex work during their youth. To ensure the selected articles accurately represented the experiences of youth participating in survival sex, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were meticulously applied. Articles were included if they featured interviews with females who, during their youth, engaged in survival sex without being subjected to external coercion. Conversely, articles were excluded if they focused solely on youth whose entire experience in the sex trade was shaped by coercion, deception, pressure, or manipulation by others, such as boyfriends, friends, acquaintances, or strangers.

Each of the 20 articles retrieved underwent a thorough review process to assess their relevance and adherence to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The review included an initial screening based on titles and brief descriptions for general applicability, followed by a detailed examination whereby each article was read in full to apply the final set of criteria. Articles that focused on youth whose entire experience in the sex trade was characterized by coercion, deception, pressure, intimidation, or trickery were excluded from the dataset. However, articles that included youth who initially engaged in survival sex and later experienced exploitation, as well as those who may have started under coercion but later participated in survival sex, were included.

Following the initial review, the selected articles were organized systematically using an Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet served to capture and categorize the links to potential data, with the link for each article placed under appropriate tabs to indicate which category or status best applied. Organizing them by date and search terms facilitated comprehensive coverage, and

duplicates or irrelevant entries were removed during the review process. After stringently applying the exclusion criteria, a total of 12 articles remained that met the study's rigorous standards.

These final 12 articles were saved both as PDFs and MS Word documents to ensure data integrity and preservation during subsequent analyses. Each document was named according to its corresponding cell number in an Excel database, facilitating easy cross-reference and retrieval. The 12 selected articles, representing a diverse range of experiences within the context of survival sex, underwent further scrutiny to confirm their uniqueness and relevance to the study's objectives.

It is noteworthy to mention that among the set of 12 selected articles, two featured interviewees who both had the same first and last names, as well as similar content and stories. Based on the assumption that these interviews likely originated from the same person, the study acknowledges and clarifies that although referring to 12 interviews throughout the paper, they effectively represent insights from 11 distinct interviewees.

Table 2: Demographic and Involvement Characteristics of Interview Sources

Name of Interviewee	Age When Began Sex Work	Ethnicity	No. of Yrs. Spent in Sex Trade	Location within Canada
Aubrey	13-yr. old	Unknown	4 Years	Vancouver, B.C.
Celine	19-yr. old	Caucasian	10 Years	Unknown
Dametre Peverill	13-yr. old	Unknown	Unknown	Halifax, Nova Scotia
Diane	16-yr. old	Indigenous	15 Years	Vancouver, B.C.
M. K.	19-yr. old	Unknown	10 Years	Eastern Canada

Name of Interviewee	Age When Began Sex Work	Ethnicity	No. of Yrs. Spent in Sex Trade	Location within Canada
Maylissa	15-yr. old	Unknown	10 Years	Quebec
Michelle	23-yr. old	Unknown	3+ Years	Kelowna, B.C.
Natasha Falle ^a	14-yr. old	Unknown	12 Years	Nova Scotia (born)
Rosie	17-yr. old	Unknown	Unknown	Newfoundland
Valerie	16-yr. old	Unknown	2 Years	Montreal, Quebec
Wendy Babcock	15-yr. old	Caucasian	Unknown	Toronto, Ontario

Note.

^a Natasha Falle is featured in two of the 12 articles included in this table. Both articles document her experiences in the sex trade.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2019) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was used to analyze interviews obtained from online news media outlets and other reputable sources. This approach recognizes that themes do not simply emerge from data but are actively shaped through interpretation and meaning-making. RTA acknowledges that coding is flexible, iterative, and influenced by researcher positionality (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This aligns with the study's intersectional and institutional ethnographic approach, allowing for a deeper examination of the social and structural factors shaping youth experiences in survival sex.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step process, data analysis proceeded as follows:

1. Familiarization with the Data: Interviews were read and reread to ensure a deep understanding of the content and context. This process helped identify patterns and

recurring ideas, while also considering how media narratives shaped the framing of youth experiences.

2. **Generating Initial Codes:** Relevant sections of text were coded based on patterns of meaning rather than surface-level descriptions. Coding remained fluid and evolved throughout the process, allowing for deeper engagement with the data and responsiveness to emerging insights.
3. **Constructing Themes:** Codes were examined for shared meanings and broader significance. Rather than simply grouping similar responses, this step focused on how different codes connected and what they revealed about the structural conditions contributing to survival sex.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Themes were reassessed to ensure they were coherent, well-supported, and reflective of the data. This stage involved refining themes to ensure they captured the complexity of interviewees' experiences, rather than imposing pre-existing frameworks.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Each theme was clearly defined and named to reflect its broader significance within the research context. Theme names were selected to highlight the structural and institutional dimensions shaping youth participation in survival sex, rather than simply describing the content.
6. **Producing the Report:** Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the process to document decisions and track shifts in interpretation. This step ensured transparency and critical engagement, acknowledging the role of researcher subjectivity in shaping the final analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

This approach allowed for a flexible and in-depth analysis that moved beyond surface-level categorization, recognizing the intersection of youth agency, structural barriers, and institutional responses. By emphasizing the constructed nature of meaning, RTA provided a framework for capturing the nuanced realities of survival sex in Canada.

Ethical Considerations

Since this study utilizes secondary research, ethical considerations involved ensuring that the proper citation and attribution of the interviews and narratives, respected the intellectual property rights of the original sources. Therefore, every effort was made to ensure that all sources have been accurately referenced and credited to maintain the integrity of the data.

Showden and Majic (2018) assert that it is important to also be sensitive and thoughtful with regard to the language used to describe findings and the population (youth), “as this has implications for how certain populations are understood and, consequently, treated through policy” (p. 147). As such, disrespectful or stigmatizing terms were avoided in this research paper, except when directly quoting from other literature or interviews.

Trustworthiness

Ensuring the trustworthiness of this research was paramount, particularly given the sensitive and complex nature of the topic. By utilizing secondary source interviews from reputable news media sources and websites for this study, ensured that the data was both credible and reliable. The selected sources included articles from established news outlets, interviews hosted by a non-profit organization with over a decade of experience in providing services to sex workers, and content from the largest national research institute. Each source was thoroughly vetted to confirm its authenticity and relevance, adhering to strict inclusion and exclusion criteria to filter out any content influenced by coercion. The thematic analysis was conducted

meticulously, with repeated readings and coding to ensure that the themes accurately represented the data. Detailed narrative descriptions and definitions of each theme were created, linking them directly to the research objectives. Maintaining a transparent and rigorous analytical process, ensures that the study's interpretations and conclusions are both accurate and meaningful. This rigorous methodological framework, combined with the use of credible and reputable secondary sources, underpins the trustworthiness of the research, and provides a robust and insightful examination of the experiences of youth in the sex trade who participate in survival sex.

Summary

By employing an ethnographic conceptual framework centered on secondary research, this investigation delves into the intricacies of the experiences of self-identifying female youth involved in survival sex in Canada and reveals how institutional influences make it difficult for them to exit from this trade. The study relies predominantly on interviews garnered from online news media platforms and esteemed organizations, including one organization with a 30-year history of serving sex workers, as well as a web-based research library and information centre. This methodological framework provides a nuanced comprehension of the multifaceted challenges and choices confronting young individuals in the realm of the sex trade. The meticulously designed methods used in this study, provide profound insights into the lived experiences of youth engaged in the sex trade. The subsequent chapter elucidates the descriptive results and qualitative findings derived from these methodological endeavors.

Chapter 5: Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents a thorough examination of the qualitative findings derived from interviews conducted by various sources, including news media, a grassroots organization that provides support to sex workers, alongside an online research library and information centre. These interviews offer a diverse range of perspectives and experiences, resulting in a rich and detailed analysis. By centering the analysis on two core themes—(1) Navigating Survival and Agency within Systemic Constraints and (2) Barriers to Exiting and Cycles of Entrenchment — this chapter focuses on the interplay between individual decision-making and the structural conditions shaping survival sex. The narratives collected illustrate how young women maneuver within deeply restrictive circumstances, exercising agency while simultaneously encountering significant institutional limitations.

Interviews in the Media

The findings presented below have been compiled from the results of a comprehensive investigation into the experiences of youth who at the time they were interviewed, had been, or were currently involved in the sex trade. Drawing from a broad range of secondary research enabled the exploration of the extant narratives and personal accounts articulated by current or former youth sex workers. Their descriptive portrayals provide a broad perspective and understanding of the myriad of challenges they encounter, and the intricate circumstances that define their involvement in the sex trade.

The data for this study was compiled from multiple online media sources that featured interviews with females currently involved in or previously engaged in youth sex work. The rigorous selection criteria ensured that the chosen sources, aligned with the study's themes,

originated from credible outlets, and included content from interviews or personal accounts. A total of 12 online articles were compiled, sourced from a variety of news media, a grassroots agency serving sex workers, and an online research library. This dataset incorporates direct quotations from key stakeholders and summarized narratives, providing a comprehensive depiction of the experiences of youth engaged in sex trade activities.

Upon completing a detailed thematic analysis of the interview content, two central themes emerged that encapsulate the experiences and challenges faced by youth involved in survival sex. The first theme, *Navigating Survival and Agency within Systemic Constraints*, explores how youth turn to survival sex as a coping strategy in response to poverty, unstable housing, and abuse. This theme emphasizes the pragmatic decisions youth make within constrained circumstances, highlighting how they exercise agency and resourcefulness while navigating systemic inequities and structural limitations.

The second theme, *Barriers to Exiting and Cycles of Entrenchment*, examines the significant structural and institutional obstacles that hinder youth from leaving the sex trade. These barriers include housing precarity, stigma in employment and support systems, and inadequate social services, which collectively reinforce cycles of dependence on survival sex as a livelihood. This theme sheds light on the systemic failures that perpetuate their involvement, while also acknowledging the resilience demonstrated by youth in navigating these challenges.

Together, these two themes provide a comprehensive view of the complex interplay between survival, systemic inequities, and structural barriers. They illustrate how youth engage in survival sex as a response to immediate needs while also grappling with formidable obstacles to exit. The findings underscore recurring narratives shared by multiple interviewees, alongside unique perspectives that add depth to the analysis.

Theme 1: Navigating Survival and Agency within Systemic Constraints

The first theme explores how youth engage in survival sex as a means of meeting immediate material needs while exercising decision-making and agency within limited alternatives. Youth demonstrate agency through pragmatic decision-making, employing survival sex as a means to secure basic necessities, such as food, shelter, and financial support. This theme underscores the resilience and resourcefulness of youth as they navigate constrained circumstances shaped by poverty, housing instability, and histories of abuse.

Economic Survival, Meeting Basic Needs and Agency

Financial precarity emerged as a central driver of youth engagement in survival sex. Interviewees consistently described turning to survival sex as a last resort to meet immediate material needs when other sources of support were unavailable or inaccessible.

A predominant theme among the interview narratives was the role of financial necessity in driving youth into survival sex. Of the 11 interviewees, 10 identified economic need as the primary factor behind their involvement in the sex trade. One interviewee starkly stated, “It was for survival; I had very low income, I was struggling” (Mullin, 2019, It was for survival section, para. 5). Similarly, a reporter recounting the experience of a former youth sex worker observed, “Money, and the perception it’s ‘easy money,’ is an alluring part of the sex trade. She said she made ‘preposterous’ amounts of money at 17” (CTV Montreal, 2016, para. 4). These narratives underscore the profound impact of financial insecurity, where survival sex becomes a strategic yet constrained response to economic hardship.

For some youth, survival sex represented not only a response to financial constraints but also a means of pursuing long-term goals, such as education. Two interviewees revealed that their involvement in survival sex was motivated by a desire to fund post-secondary education.

Housing Instability and Survival Strategies

Housing precarity was another critical factor driving youth participation in survival sex. Interviewees described trading sex for temporary shelter, highlighting the lack of accessible, stable housing options as a significant structural vulnerability. Two interviewees recounted instances when they had engaged in sexual activities in exchange for a place to stay. One interviewee described her experience, saying,

I couch-surfed at friends' houses, sneaking in through windows and hiding in closets, where they'd bring me leftovers from their dinner. When friends couldn't accommodate me, I hooked up with older men—usually bouncers from clubs, who were easy to seduce—in exchange for food and a place to stay (Falle, 2017, para. 8).

Two females who were interviewed by reporters, mentioned experiencing housing instability, although they did not explicitly cite it as their primary reason for engaging in the sex trade. As paraphrased by a reporter, one of them revealed that at the age of 16 she had “slept on the street and in shelters” (Dale, 2009, para. 18).

Two other respondents cited sex work as their means to pay the rent and to buy other provisions. As one of them recounted, “I still needed to pay for rent, food, my cellphone, and various other necessities” (Celine, 2016, para. 3).

Historical Abuse and Escaping Unsafe Environments

A history of physical and psychological abuse emerged as a recurring factor contributing to youth engagement in survival sex. Seven of the 11 interviewees revealed experiencing abuse, with four explicitly identifying the perpetrator as a family member. These findings highlight how abuse within the home can lead to strained family relationships, pushing youth to flee unsafe environments and, out of necessity, engage in survival sex.

One interviewee described the conditions she faced at home, “My parents were alcoholics, and there was a lot of abusive behaviour and yelling in our home” (Diane, 2011, para.

1). Similarly, a journalist paraphrasing Aubrey’s experience wrote:

When 12-year-old Aubrey ran away from home, she fled from a life coloured with sexual abuse, neglect, emotional battery, and her own attempts to end her life. She ran without a plan and with a hope that anything out there was going to be better” (Petroni, 2014, Part II section, para. 21).

Two other interviewees disclosed experiences of abuse but did not attribute it directly to family members. One interviewee stated, “I didn’t even bat an eye because I was so abused as a child I just thought, well, at least I can make money from it [sex work]” (Hanes, 2019, para. 3). Another revealed, “I had an abusive boyfriend” (Berry, 2018, para. 2).

These narratives illustrate how historical abuse, trauma, and neglect create pathways into survival sex. Youth often viewed survival sex as a means of escaping abusive environments or coping with the trauma they endured. For one interviewee, her past normalized exploitation, “My past wasn’t the greatest, growing up. Everything I was doing felt normal—except there was money being exchanged” (Mullin, 2019, Blocking everything out section, para. 10).

Empowerment and the Duality of Agency

The concept of empowerment emerged as a nuanced aspect of youth involvement in survival sex, illustrating the duality of agency in their experiences. While many youth acknowledged the systemic constraints and limited alternatives shaping their decisions, moments of empowerment were also described. For some, survival sex provided a sense of control, autonomy, and the ability to address immediate needs or even long-term goals. However, these

experiences of empowerment were often fragile and overshadowed by societal stigma, abuse, and the precarious nature of their circumstances.

Among the 11 interviewees, 10 conveyed a sense of agency in their involvement in the sex trade. Some described feeling a newfound control over their lives, which stood in stark contrast to prior experiences of instability or trauma. One interviewee shared, “I had control for the first time in what felt like my whole life, and it was a really good feeling... at that point in my life” (CBC News, 2018, para. 8). Similarly, others described moments of empowerment tied to financial independence or the ability to make decisions within their constrained realities.

These narratives underscore how youth exercised agency to navigate their circumstances, often framing their choices as pragmatic responses to systemic inequities. For three interviewees, survival sex was portrayed as a deliberate, voluntary decision. As one respondent stated, “Clearly, I had many options. Still, I chose to start working in the sex industry when I was 19 and a full-time student in university” (Celine, 2016, para. 3).

Despite these expressions of empowerment and choice, the narratives also highlight the limitations and fragility of agency within survival sex. Many youths who felt a sense of autonomy or control over their involvement later grappled with societal stigma, internalized shame, and the violence inherent in their circumstances. One interviewee reflected on how her feelings evolved over time:

At first, I felt relatively neutral about my job, and sometimes even proud of it, but then over time I became quite ashamed of it. I used to tell people openly that I was a student and an escort, but after receiving [a] lot of negative feedback and being gossiped about, I started hiding the sex work part of my life (Celine, 2016, para. 6).

Another interviewee echoed this sentiment, expressing her desire for a different trajectory, “I really wish my life had turned out differently, but I had few options back then” (Diane, 2011, para. 11).

For others, the sense of agency was overshadowed by external pressures and systemic constraints. While some described their involvement as a choice, one interviewee expressed skepticism about the concept of choice itself, “I don’t believe any woman would choose sex work unless there were no other options to choose from” (Petroni, 2014, Part III section, para. 47).

Even those who believed they had made a deliberate choice to engage in survival sex often navigated a landscape of stigma, secrecy, and marginalization. For example, one interviewee chose to remain anonymous in her interview, fearing that revealing her identity could jeopardize her educational pursuits or professional recognition (Dixit, 2019).

Theme 2: Barriers to Exiting and Cycles of Entrenchment

The second theme, Barriers to Exiting and Cycles of Entrenchment, examines the structural and institutional obstacles that hinder youth from leaving survival sex. Despite demonstrating resilience and agency, youth described facing systemic barriers that entrenched their reliance on survival sex as a means of survival.

Stigma and Employment Barriers

Interviewees frequently identified stigma as a significant obstacle to exiting survival sex. The combination of societal stigmatization, gaps in education, and inconsistent employment histories often limited their access to stable and meaningful work opportunities.

Financial instability further compounds this challenge. Precarious or low-paying employment options make it difficult for youth to break free from the sex trade, which, for many,

remains their only readily available source of income. Of the 11 interviewees, five recounted significant challenges in obtaining employment.

One interviewee highlighted the barriers faced by individuals who enter the sex trade at a young age, saying:

Especially if you start [sex work] young, you've never had a job interview, you don't have a resume, and the people who pay you for sex you identify as the same people who would be your boss, so it's hard to think about how [to fit in] (CTV Montreal, 2016, para. 8).

Another interviewee emphasized the additional barriers created by housing instability and location, particularly for those living in marginalized areas, saying

Our society should also make it easier for people who live in the DTES [Downtown Eastside] to work because no one is willing to hire people who have the DTES as their address or who have no address at all (Diane, 2011, para. 12).

Inaccessible and Fragmented Support Services

Youth attempting to transition out of survival sex described encountering fragmented and inadequate support systems. Many services failed to address their unique needs, and some interviewees expressed mistrust or dissatisfaction with institutional interventions.

Of the 11 interview respondents, three shared their experiences, citing either the unavailability or inefficacy of these services. One of them spoke candidly of the lack of services available to her, saying, “there was nowhere for me to go, there was no solution other than to continue doing sex work” (CBC News, 2018, para. 11). Another former sex worker spoke about the difficulties in accessing financial assistance from the government and found that the monetary amount she was provided was inadequate. As Diane (2011) articulated,

The government should make it easier to get on welfare and raise the welfare rates so women do not have to work the streets to survive. Welfare for a single person without disability is \$610, made up of \$375 for rent and \$235 for support. (para. 12)

Even when support systems are in place, they often fall short in their effectiveness. One individual's account vividly illustrates the complexity of this problem. As paraphrased by the reporter, her interactions with various social systems reveal the systemic challenges at play:

Aubrey would spend the next five years bouncing in and out of the treatment/penal system. The youth courts quickly ran out of ideas about how to deal with Aubrey's needs. The youth detention centres weren't equipped with the human expertise or resources to offer appropriate intervention and support to Aubrey. (Petroni, 2014, Part I section, para. 11)

Poverty and Housing as Ongoing Barriers

Youth in the sex trade often face intertwined challenges of poverty and housing instability, with income from sex work frequently serving as their primary means of survival. Of the 11 youth and young adults who shared their experiences, three explicitly highlighted economic factors as a significant reason for their continued reliance on selling sex. Poverty restricts access to stable housing, education, and essential resources, creating a cycle that reinforces dependence on the sex trade. One former sex worker explained, "I didn't really want to be a part of the sex trade anymore, but I had to earn money so I didn't lose my apartment or the things I needed to survive" (Mullin, 2019, Blocking everything out section, para. 12).

The inability to secure adequate financial assistance further entrenches youth in this cycle, leaving them with limited options to meet their basic needs. One interviewee shared, "There was no help for me at 16, there was no way for me to pay my bills" (CBC News, 2018, para. 11).

These findings align with earlier discussions on economic survival and housing instability and survival strategies, where youth described survival sex as a direct response to financial insecurity and the lack of stable housing options (see pages 45-46). The ongoing cycle of poverty and precarious housing conditions not only drives youth into survival sex but also reinforces their reliance on it as a means of economic survival.

Summary

The findings reveal how youth involved in survival sex exhibit agency and resilience as they navigate systemic inequities, despite encountering significant barriers to exiting the trade. The first theme, *Navigating Survival and Agency within Systemic Constraints*, examines how youth turn to survival sex as a response to poverty, housing instability, and unmet material needs. It also highlights the role of histories of abuse in shaping their involvement. Their choices reflect a pragmatic, yet constrained, form of agency shaped by broader structural failures.

The second theme, *Barriers to Exiting and Cycles of Entrenchment*, emphasizes the institutional and societal obstacles that sustain reliance on survival sex. These barriers include stigma, limited employment opportunities, fragmented support services, poverty, and ongoing housing instability.

Together, these themes provide a nuanced perspective on the complex realities faced by youth engaged in survival sex, highlighting both their resilience and the institutional and systemic barriers that constrain their opportunities for change.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter examines the dynamics of survival sex among Canadian female youth, drawing on the findings presented in Chapter 5. Using an Institutional Ethnography (IE) framework, the discussion situates the experiences of youth within systemic structures, emphasizing how “ruling relations”—institutional, bureaucratic, and legal structures—coordinate youth’s lives, constraining agency while fostering resilience and resourcefulness (Smith, 2005). The two core themes, (1) Navigating Survival and Agency within Systemic Constraints and (2) Barriers to Exiting and Cycles of Entrenchment, are analyzed in the context of existing literature to identify consistencies, divergences, and implications for policy and practice.

The discussion addresses two key questions:

1. What systemic inequities and life experiences shape youth involvement in survival sex, and how do these factors both constrain and enable their agency?
2. What institutional barriers hinder youth from exiting survival sex, and how do these barriers reflect broader systemic failures?

These questions are explored through an analysis of the themes and subthemes, shedding light on the complex interplay between systemic constraints and youth agency.

Navigating Survival and Agency within Systemic Constraints

The first theme underscores how youth in survival sex employ pragmatic decision-making to navigate their constrained realities. This theme highlights the resourcefulness of youth in addressing immediate material needs, such as housing, food, and financial stability, while also revealing the systemic inequities that limit their choices. The discussion explores the subthemes to provide a nuanced understanding of how agency operates within constrained circumstances.

Economic Survival, Meeting Basic Needs and Agency

A key contribution of this study lies in its exploration of “survival agency” (Showden & Majic, 2018)—a concept that challenges the binary framing of agency as either entirely autonomous or entirely constrained. The findings illustrate that youth engaged in survival sex often exercise pragmatic decision-making to meet immediate material needs, such as housing, food, and education, within a context of limited options. Financial insecurity emerged as a primary driver of youth involvement in survival sex, frequently framed by interviewees as a last resort to address pressing needs. As one interviewee explained, “I didn’t want to take out student loans.... Doing sex work allowed me to make a significant amount of money in a short amount of time” (Celine, 2016, para. 3).

This perspective aligns with Zembe et al. (2013), who found that transactional sex can serve as a means to achieve financial independence or upward mobility (as cited in NSWP, 2016). However, while youth demonstrate agency in making strategic decisions to address financial instability, their choices remain constrained by systemic inequities. These constraints are shaped by ruling relations—such as student loan eligibility criteria, welfare policies, and employment restrictions—that structure access to financial resources and reinforce youth’s economic precarity. Limited access to education, stable employment, and reliable social supports perpetuates cycles of poverty and reliance on survival sex (Deering et al., 2014, as cited in Ouspenski, 2014). For example, policies that regulate student loans, welfare assistance, and employment eligibility create institutional barriers that limit youth’s financial independence, forcing them to navigate precarious and often exploitative survival strategies. This analysis challenges simplistic views of survival sex as solely coerced or victimized, reframing it as a

strategic response to systemic failures that leave youth without sufficient resources to meet their basic needs.

This finding reflects Showden and Majic's (2018) concept of "survival agency", where decisions are shaped by necessity rather than preference, yet still represent an exercise of individual autonomy within constrained options. Unlike much of the existing literature, which predominantly emphasizes risk factors, this study underscores the duality of survival sex: while systemic inequities shape youth's reliance on the trade, they also demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness in navigating these inequities. By situating these narratives within broader systemic structures, the IE framework provides a nuanced understanding of the economic precarity that underpins youth involvement in survival sex, revealing how institutional policies—such as inadequate welfare programs and limited access to education—perpetuate cycles of poverty and systemic reliance on survival sex.

Housing Instability and Survival Strategies

The findings of this research reveal that the need to maintain stable living arrangements and secure basic provisions often compels youth in Canada and the United States to engage in survival sex. Housing instability emerges as a critical determinant of vulnerability, as the threat of becoming unhoused significantly increases the likelihood of youth turning to survival sex as a means of obtaining shelter (Czechowski et al., 2022; Holger-Ambrose et al., 2013). This was evident in the accounts of several interviewees: two described exchanging sexual activities for a place to stay, another two relied on sex work to pay for rent, and two others used it to meet daily sustenance needs. These narratives illustrate how agency manifests in navigating precarious housing arrangements, as youth make calculated decisions to mitigate immediate risks and secure stability, even within exploitative contexts.

Through an intersectional lens, this study highlights how housing instability intersects with systemic neglect—the failure of institutions, policies, and social systems to provide adequate protections and resources for youth—creating environments where survival sex becomes a necessary strategy. These barriers are reinforced through ruling relations embedded in housing policies, eligibility requirements for shelters, and the prioritization of adult-focused housing programs that exclude youth. Bureaucratic requirements, such as proof of income, identification, or parental consent for youth-centered housing, prevent many from accessing stable accommodations, increasing their reliance on survival sex.

By applying the IE framework, this study reframes housing instability as a structural failure rather than an individual risk factor. This perspective underscores the duality of survival sex as both a reflection of youth resilience and a consequence of systemic barriers that constrain their autonomy. Addressing these systemic failures requires not only increasing access to affordable, youth-centered housing but also implementing trauma-informed, non-punitive interventions that disrupt cycles of housing precarity and reliance on survival sex.

Historical Abuse and Escaping Unsafe Environments

This study provides a nuanced understanding of how a history of abuse by parents or caretakers shapes youth trajectories into survival sex, not merely reaffirming established links between trauma and the sex trade but expanding on these narratives through an IE framework. The findings reveal that abuse often acts as a catalyst, compelling youth to seek escape from harmful environments. Among those interviewed, seven shared accounts of traumatic experiences, with four disclosing abuse within their families. While these findings resonate with existing literature, which documents the correlation between childhood maltreatment and later involvement in transactional sex (Krisch et al., 2019; Patton et al., 2014; Wilson & Widom,

2010, as cited in Saewyc et al., 2013), this study goes further by examining how systemic failures exacerbate vulnerabilities and constrain youth choices.

Through the IE framework, this research situates youth experiences within broader institutional contexts, emphasizing how the absence of accessible, trauma-informed interventions leaves youth with few options but to turn to survival sex as a means of escape and survival. Ruling relations—embedded in social services, child welfare policies, and legal frameworks—dictate the availability and accessibility of support systems, shaping how youth navigate these institutions. Diane’s (2011) narrative, for example, illustrates how systemic neglect, coupled with childhood trauma, drives youth into the sex trade in search of autonomy and stability. These real-world accounts highlight how institutional safety nets, rather than providing meaningful support, often reinforce cycles of vulnerability.

By applying an intersectional lens, this study also highlights the complexity of agency in these contexts. While the youth demonstrated resilience and intentionality in escaping abuse and forging survival strategies, their choices were constrained by intersecting systemic barriers, such as poverty, stigma, and inadequate social supports. This perspective challenges simplistic victim-centered narratives and reframes survival sex as both a strategic response to systemic inequities and a reflection of institutional neglect.

This analysis adds depth to the understanding of trauma and survival sex by shifting the focus from individual circumstances to the systemic conditions that perpetuate these cycles. It underscores the urgent need for trauma-informed, youth-centered interventions that address the root causes of vulnerability and provide pathways for youth to escape harmful environments without resorting to survival sex.

Empowerment and the Duality of Agency

The findings reveal a complex interplay between agency and constraint in the lives of youth engaged in survival sex. While moments of empowerment were genuine and meaningful, they occurred within a precarious context structured by ruling relations that govern access to financial resources, social supports, and economic opportunities. These systemic inequities, reinforced by societal stigma and external pressures, shape the conditions under which youth navigate their circumstances. This duality underscores the resilience and resourcefulness of youth who, despite significant barriers, demonstrate agency in negotiating their realities.

For some interviewees, survival sex provided moments of empowerment, often tied to a sense of financial independence or control over their lives. One interviewee shared, “This first encounter was empowering since she was being paid for something she knew how to do” (Northumberland News, 2006, para. 12). These accounts suggest that, within constrained choices, youth found ways to assert agency and reclaim a degree of control.

However, this empowerment was often fragile and fleeting, frequently undermined by societal judgment and systemic inequities. Many interviewees described feelings of shame, isolation, and marginalization, illustrating the delicate balance between moments of empowerment and the oppressive forces shaping their realities. This aligns with Dodsworth’s (2014) observation that agency in survival sex is inherently precarious, shaped simultaneously by internal resilience and external barriers.

Overall, these narratives highlight the dual nature of agency in survival sex—youth exercise autonomy and resourcefulness while navigating deeply entrenched structural constraints that continue to limit their choices and opportunities.

Barriers to Exiting and Cycles of Entrenchment

The second theme explores the structural and institutional barriers that hinder youth from exiting survival sex. Despite demonstrating resilience and agency, interviewees described encountering systemic obstacles that entrenched their reliance on survival sex as a means of survival.

Stigma and Employment Barriers

This study expands on existing research by examining how societal stigma, compounded by systemic barriers, creates significant challenges for youth attempting to exit survival sex. While previous studies have documented the difficulties these youth face in securing stable employment and accessing education, this research deepens the discussion by situating these experiences within broader institutional contexts, using an IE framework. The findings reveal that gaps in education, inconsistent work histories, and pervasive discrimination do not simply reflect individual struggles but are shaped by institutional hiring practices, background checks, and accreditation processes that systematically exclude youth with non-traditional work histories.

For many interviewees, the sex trade was not just a temporary means of survival but often their primary—and sometimes only—source of income. This precarious reliance on the trade highlights how systemic inequities tether youth to survival sex. This aligns with the observations of Thukral and Ditmore (2005), who identify stigma, criminal records, and limited employment-related skills as critical barriers to transitioning out of the sex trade (as cited in Ouspenski, 2014). The institutionalized exclusion of individuals with gaps in employment, criminal records, or undocumented work histories functions as a ruling relation that reinforces labour market precarity and limits pathways to stable employment. Policies that require professional references,

impose background checks, or prioritize candidates with uninterrupted employment histories further disadvantage youth attempting to transition out of survival sex.

By applying an intersectional lens, this research underscores how societal stigma intersects with other structural inequities—such as poverty and the lack of accessible educational opportunities—to disproportionately affect marginalized youth. This perspective reframes stigma as not just an individual challenge but as a deeply entrenched structural barrier embedded within institutional practices and policies.

The IE framework allows for a critical reframing of societal stigma as part of a broader institutional landscape that systematically marginalizes youth with histories in the sex trade. Addressing these barriers requires comprehensive, youth-centered interventions that challenge stigma both at the societal level and within institutional systems. These interventions must include accessible vocational training, trauma-informed employment supports, and anti-stigmatizing policies that provide sustainable pathways to stable employment and education.

By situating the issue of stigma within systemic structures, this study contributes a deeper understanding of how institutional practices reinforce the marginalization of youth in survival sex. It also emphasizes the pressing need for systemic reforms that address not only the immediate barriers faced by these youth but also the broader inequities that perpetuate their exclusion from stable and equitable opportunities.

Inaccessible and Fragmented Support Services

This study highlights how fragmented and ineffective support systems leave youth engaged in survival sex without viable alternatives, providing new insights into how institutional practices exacerbate these challenges. Eligibility restrictions, funding priorities, and service intake criteria function as ruling relations that determine which youth can access social supports

and under what conditions. Interviewees expressed frustration with the unavailability or inadequacy of essential services such as housing programs and financial assistance. One interviewee starkly remarked, “There was nowhere for me to go, there was no solution other than to continue doing sex work” (CBC News, 2018, para. 11). These accounts illustrate how systemic gaps fail to address the immediate and long-term needs of youth, perpetuating reliance on survival sex.

While existing literature recognizes that inadequate social services exacerbate vulnerability (Ouspenski, 2014), this study extends the discussion by exploring how institutional processes and funding priorities contribute to these systemic shortcomings. Of the 11 interviewees, three openly described significant difficulties in accessing effective support systems, further demonstrating how institutional neglect perpetuates cycles of marginalization. For example, one interviewee’s attempts to navigate various social services ultimately led to incarceration in the adult penal system at just 13 years old, underscoring the failures of interventions designed to support youth in crisis (Petroni, 2014).

Using the IE framework, this study examines how funding mechanisms and policy narratives systematically undermine support for youth engaged in survival sex. The increasing dominance of “trafficking” and “exploitation” narratives in funding allocations has diverted resources away from harm-reduction-based programs led by sex worker organizations, which often provide non-stigmatizing, inclusive support (Santini et al., 2020). This shift prioritizes programs with “exiting” or “victim support” mandates, overshadowing initiatives that respect the autonomy and diverse needs of sex workers. Consequently, youth who may not wish to exit sex work entirely—or who seek support without stigma—are excluded from these services (Santini et al., 2020).

Through an intersectional lens, this study highlights how restrictive funding priorities reinforce harmful narratives that frame sex work as inherently problematic while failing to address the broader structural inequities—such as poverty and housing instability—that drive youth into survival sex. Programs that focus solely on “exiting” perpetuate the misconception that only those perceived as lacking agency or options are deserving of assistance (Ouspenski, 2014). This stigmatizing approach further marginalizes youth and limits their access to resources designed to improve their well-being.

Moreover, existing services for unhoused or substance-dependent youth involved in survival sex are often poorly adapted to their needs, as they frequently rely on adult-centric models that fail to incorporate the perspectives and lived experiences of the youth themselves (Miller et al., 2011; Ouspenski, 2014). This study highlights how these systemic inefficiencies, combined with stigmatizing service models, leave youth without adequate resources to transition out of survival sex.

These findings underscore the urgent need for cohesive, youth-centered, trauma-informed, and non-stigmatizing support systems. Interventions must go beyond simplistic solutions to address the structural barriers that perpetuate vulnerability, including poverty, housing instability, and discrimination. By framing these issues within the broader institutional landscape, this study contributes to the growing recognition that sustainable change requires systemic reforms, including equitable funding models, harm-reduction-based programming, and the active inclusion of youth voices in policy and service design.

Poverty and Housing as Ongoing Barriers

This study builds on existing research by demonstrating how poverty and housing instability intersect to perpetuate youth involvement in survival sex. While prior literature has

identified poverty as a key factor compelling young individuals to remain in the sex trade (Deering, 2012, as cited in Ouspenski, 2014), this research extends the discussion by situating these experiences within broader systemic structures using an IE framework. The findings reveal how economic precarity and institutional failures — structured through ruling relations that dictate access to financial and social supports—leave youth with few viable alternatives, forcing them to rely on survival sex as a means to meet basic needs such as housing, food, and education.

Interviewees described being trapped in the trade due to financial instability and the lack of alternative income sources, emphasizing the cyclical nature of survival sex. For some, the sex trade was not merely a temporary solution but their primary means of financial survival. One interviewee shared how sex work was her only option for financial stability (CBC News, 2018), illustrating the "revolving door" effect that keeps youth in the trade and limits opportunities for upward mobility. This highlights not only the impact of poverty but also how ruling relations embedded in social policies, housing regulations, and employment restrictions constrain their ability to transition out of survival sex.

These findings reinforce earlier discussions under Theme 1: Navigating Survival and Agency within Systemic Constraints, where youth described poverty and housing instability as central drivers of survival sex. As explored in the subthemes on economic survival and housing instability and survival strategies, the absence of stable income sources forces youth into survival sex as a means of meeting their basic needs. The precarious nature of housing further intensifies this vulnerability, as temporary or unstable living arrangements increase the likelihood of engagement in the sex trade. However, these factors do not only shape the initial entry into survival sex—they also serve as powerful forces that sustain youth within it.

The IE framework allows for a reframing of these challenges as systemic failures rather than individual shortcomings, emphasizing the institutional neglect that perpetuates economic precarity and housing instability. For example, inadequate welfare rates and minimum wages fail to provide a safety net for youth in financial crisis, while those without access to welfare programs face heightened vulnerability (Ouspenski, 2014). These systemic issues are compounded by financial barriers such as accumulated debt and inconsistent employment histories, which further limit opportunities for youth to exit survival sex.

By situating the intersection of poverty, housing instability, and systemic neglect within a structural framework, this research underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms. Addressing these barriers requires not only sustained funding for housing and financial support programs but also the development of trauma-informed, youth-centered policies that address the unique and intersecting vulnerabilities faced by those involved in survival sex. These findings contribute to the broader discourse by emphasizing the institutional dimensions of poverty and housing instability, highlighting how ruling relations shape access to resources and reinforcing the critical need for coordinated, equity-driven interventions to disrupt the cycles of survival sex reliance.

Implications and Policy Recommendations

Youth engaged in sex work confront a myriad of challenges that demand proactive policies and interventions. To effectively address the complex issues they encounter, several initiatives and policy recommendations that can guide the way are described as follows.

Firstly, policymakers and child youth care workers must focus on establishing youth-centric programs that empower young individuals by actively involving them in their design and implementation. By redefining the power dynamics within youth-focused services, these programs can facilitate a more holistic approach that caters to the unique needs and preferences

of youth in the sex trade. This strategy aligns with recommendations from Ouspenski (2014), which stresses the importance of both individual and structural changes within support systems.

The significance of providing youth with stable accommodations when facilitating their transition out of the sex trade cannot be overstated. Therefore, policymakers must ensure that affordable housing is available to displaced sex workers and that they are provided some measure of economic security upon their exit from this industry. Reducing poverty levels and enhancing access to education for these individuals is also imperative and aligns with the guidelines proposed in the NSWP (2016) publication and the Ouspenski (2014) publication which emphasize that secure housing is a cornerstone for successfully transitioning out of sex work.

Creating specialized services and safe spaces for youth in the sex trade, is another crucial step that can foster an uplifting environment where peers can exchange information, provide mutual assistance, and access essential services. According to Chabot (2012), by implementing these recommendations, policymakers can ensure that these designated spaces promote a sense of community and facilitate the necessary support networks for these young individuals.

Accessible mental health services also play a vital role in dealing with the psychological challenges that these teens and young adults encounter due to their job description. Therefore, as recommended by Hannington et al. (2008), policymakers should consider implementing drop-in counselling services through sex work organizations that are accessible, flexible, and free from additional barriers for this already marginalized group (as cited in Ouspenski, 2014).

Due to the crucial role that financial stability plays in empowering sex workers, policymakers should advocate for additional financial resources and enhanced support systems for those in this trade. According to Hannington et al., (2008), policy improvements should

include measures that make it easier for youth to access income assistance, care and/or funding for those who are disabled, and financial guidance programs that are geared towards addressing their unique circumstances (as cited in Ouspenski, 2014).

It is also essential for policymakers to distinguish between children who are abused or exploited and youth—who through their own volition—work in the sex trade. Therefore, in line with the guidelines proposed by Kempadoo et al. (2017) a more effective course of action must be adopted that is tailored to provide sex workers with the necessary supports and the protection they need.

To effectively assist youth who are involved in transactional sex activities, it is also imperative that policymakers address the systemic injustices that contribute to sex workers' vulnerability. According to a publication by Santini et al. (2020), this would involve introducing policy reforms that would minimize societal stigmatization, discrimination, economic disadvantage, gender inequality, racial bias, and the remnants of colonial history that perpetuates violence and impedes sex workers' access to crucial services. By attending to these underlying systemic issues, comprehensive support structures can be established to uplift and protect this marginalized population.

Limitations

Like all research endeavors, this investigation is not without its limitations. For instance, having no interview transcripts or audio recordings to reference, made it necessary to rely on other authors' inclusion criteria when compiling the data. In regard to this study, which focused on the perspectives of key stakeholders, without the transcripts to refer to, it is possible that some of the content written by the authors—other than the quotes—had inadvertently been misinterpreted or misrepresented. Since the media contributes to how the public perceives sex

workers, any literary slant they may have introduced into their written works can potentially broaden the scope of existing systemic issues for those in the sex trade. On a similar note, any journalistic bias or subjective tones can also skew the accurate portrayal of the interviewees' viewpoints. Therefore, since the analysis did not extend to evaluating the specific tone of the journalists' written works nor the contextual framework in their articles, it is not reasonable to assume that all the content from the interviewees' interviews were fully captured, since crucial elements may have been omitted. Additionally, it is pertinent to note that some of the interviewees' experiences as portrayed in this study may not fully represent the current social and economic circumstances, as they were based on accounts from previous years.

Summary

This research examined the intricate dynamics shaping the experiences of Canadian females, ages 13 to 24, who are or were involved in survival sex during their youth. Using an IE perspective, the study illuminated how systemic inequities and structural realities intersect with individual agency, creating complex pathways that entangle youth in the sex trade. The analysis of interview data revealed deeply interconnected societal issues, institutional barriers, and personal struggles that influence the daily lives of these young women, emphasizing the multifaceted challenges they face.

The findings provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between youth agency and systemic constraints, illustrating how resilience and resourcefulness emerge within contexts of profound vulnerability. While youth exercise agency to navigate survival sex, their choices are shaped and constrained by systemic failures such as poverty, housing instability, and inadequate support structures. These systemic influences not only perpetuate cycles of reliance on survival

sex but also highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions that address the root causes of their precarity.

This study underscores the critical importance of systemic reforms and comprehensive approaches that prioritize the holistic well-being and empowerment of youth involved in survival sex. By addressing structural barriers and creating supportive policies, these interventions can provide marginalized youth with viable pathways out of the sex trade and toward sustainable futures. Ultimately, the findings advocate for a more equitable and inclusive social framework that confronts the underlying inequities driving survival sex, ensuring that these young individuals are equipped with the resources and opportunities necessary to thrive.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Introduction

This thesis has examined the intricate relationship between systemic inequities, institutional barriers, and youth agency within the context of survival sex among self-identifying female youth in Canada, aged 13–24. Utilizing an Institutional Ethnography (IE) framework and analyzed through an intersectional lens, the study investigated how social, economic, and institutional forces collectively influence the lived experiences and choices of youth engaged in survival sex. By embedding interviewee narratives within broader structural and institutional frameworks, this research sought to dismantle misconceptions, expose systemic failures, and highlight the resilience and agency demonstrated by these youth.

Through a detailed analysis of interview narratives, two central themes emerged: (1) Navigating Survival and Agency within Systemic Constraints and (2) Barriers to Exiting and Cycles of Entrenchment. These themes illustrate both the remarkable resilience of youth and the formidable structural and institutional forces that perpetuate their vulnerabilities. The findings underscore the complex duality of constrained choices and agency, revealing how youth strategically navigate adverse circumstances while confronting persistent barriers embedded in broader societal structures.

Navigating Survival and Agency within Systemic Constraints

The study revealed that youth engaged in survival sex often make pragmatic and resourceful decisions to navigate structural constraints. Economic insecurity, housing instability, and historical trauma emerged as significant drivers compelling youth into survival sex. Yet, despite these profound vulnerabilities, interviewees demonstrated agency and resilience in their efforts to meet basic needs, secure housing, and achieve a sense of control over their lives.

Economic survival was frequently framed as a pragmatic choice, with interviewees describing survival sex as a necessary response to immediate financial needs, limited employment opportunities, and barriers to formal education. Housing instability further exacerbated these challenges, as inadequate access to affordable housing and youth-centered support services often left survival sex as one of the few viable options for securing shelter. Additionally, historical trauma, often stemming from experiences of abuse and familial instability, played a significant role in pushing youth into survival sex as a means of escape and survival.

Barriers to Exiting and Cycles of Entrenchment

Exiting survival sex proved to be fraught with systemic and institutional barriers, including societal stigma, fragmented support services, financial precarity, and housing instability. Stigma emerged as a significant obstacle, limiting access to stable employment, education, and social support. Youth described pervasive discrimination, inconsistent work histories, and gaps in education as major barriers to transitioning out of survival sex. Support services, while available in some form, were often fragmented, underfunded, and poorly tailored to the unique needs of youth in survival sex. Many interviewees expressed frustration with the lack of accessible mental health services, affordable housing options, and flexible support programs.

Economic instability and housing precarity further compound these challenges, creating cyclical dependencies on survival sex as a means of survival. Institutional neglect, exacerbated by funding models that prioritize narrow definitions of victimhood, further marginalized youth who sought non-stigmatizing, harm-reduction-based services.

Contributions to Literature and Practice

This research contributes to the growing body of scholarship on survival sex by providing a nuanced understanding of the interplay between systemic inequities, institutional barriers, and

youth agency. Through the application of an IE framework and an intersectional lens, this study moves beyond dominant narratives that conflate survival sex with trafficking, offering a reimagined perspective on how structural factors shape youth experiences. By highlighting the agency of youth within constrained circumstances, this research reframes survival sex as a strategic response to systemic failures rather than a consequence of victimization, coercion, or moral failing. It challenges the reductive notion of youth as passive victims and instead underscores their resilience and resourcefulness in navigating deeply inequitable systems. The findings expose the systemic shortcomings embedded in housing, employment, and social services, revealing how these institutional failures perpetuate cycles of reliance on survival sex.

This study also critiques existing approaches that emphasize "saving" youth from survival sex through punitive or paternalistic measures. These approaches often neglect to address the structural drivers of vulnerability—such as poverty, housing instability, and discrimination—and instead reinforce stigmatizing narratives that marginalize youth further. By shifting the focus away from "saving" measures and centering youth voices and lived experiences, this research advocates for policies and programs that respect youth autonomy and address the broader inequities that underpin their involvement in survival sex. This requires moving beyond a deficit-based framework and instead recognizing the systemic barriers that constrain choices while fostering more equitable opportunities for youth.

From a practical perspective, the findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, service providers, and advocacy groups working with youth engaged in survival sex. This research emphasizes the importance of prioritizing non-judgmental, trauma-informed, and youth-centered approaches that do not criminalize or stigmatize youth but instead support their immediate needs and long-term goals. Interventions should be designed to empower youth by

addressing structural inequities—such as access to housing, education, and stable employment—rather than focusing solely on removing them from the sex trade. By situating youth narratives within broader institutional contexts, this study calls for the development of holistic and sustainable support systems that emphasize empowerment, resilience, and social inclusion.

Ultimately, this research underscores the need for systemic reforms that go beyond moralistic or "saving" frameworks and instead focus on creating structural conditions that enable youth to exercise genuine autonomy and achieve long-term stability. By addressing both the immediate needs of youth and the systemic inequities that perpetuate their reliance on survival sex, this study contributes to the growing call for equitable, inclusive, and harm-reduction-focused approaches in policy and practice.

Future Research

Future research that pertains to youth who participate in the sex trade should address critical gaps identified in the existing literature. As Krisch et al. (2019) and Miller et al. (2011) contend, there is a limited amount of research that explores the macro-level factors that influence youth's participation in transactional sex. The confluence of structural factors, such as child protection programs, wealth redistribution policies, and gender equality measures, necessitates further investigation in order to better understand their direct association with youths' involvement in the sex trade.

The dearth of studies that examine the experiences of young women engaged in survival sex, especially in comparison to adult counterparts, also points to the need for further research that delves into the individual, structural, and social factors that shape their experiences (Miller et al., 2011). Tyler and Johnson (2006) noted the persistent scarcity of research that focuses on the circumstances surrounding unhoused youths' involvement in the sex trade and the complex

dynamics of their decision-making processes. This gap emphasizes the ongoing need for studies that assess the degree of agency that youth truly have in deciding to enter the sex trade.

Furthermore, it is imperative that future research gives precedence to youth sex workers' firsthand accounts that portray the gradation of their experiences amidst dynamic social and economic landscapes. This temporal dimension is essential not only for comprehending the reasons behind their entry into the sex trade, but also for recognizing their active role in decision-making amidst challenging circumstances. Therefore, more current and/or relevant interviews are needed of youth sex workers as they are indispensable when it comes to capturing the ever-changing social and economic dynamics that influence their choices. This approach would ensure that research on this subject is both relevant and responsive to the evolving landscape over time and broadens our awareness of the intricate factors that influence this vulnerable population.

Additionally, the exploration of education as a preventive factor in sex work merits attention. Understanding how educational initiatives can serve as protective factors against youth becoming involved in the sex trade is essential for designing comprehensive strategies and alternatives that empower youth. By expanding the scope of research in these directions, scholars can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding youth engagement in the sex trade and inform more effective strategies for support and intervention.

Summary

This thesis has illuminated the deeply interconnected dynamics of survival sex, demonstrating how systemic inequities and institutional failures shape the choices and experiences of youth. While youth engaged in survival sex face immense barriers, their resilience, resourcefulness, and agency remain central to their narratives. Addressing the root causes of survival sex requires a holistic approach—one that moves beyond criminalization and

stigmatization to prioritize systemic reforms, trauma-informed care, and meaningful youth participation in policy and program development. By centering the voices and experiences of youth, society can create pathways toward equity, dignity, and sustainable futures for those navigating survival sex. This research serves as a call to action for policymakers, service providers, and society at large to recognize the humanity, agency, and resilience of youth engaged in survival sex—and to work collaboratively toward creating a more just and equitable world for all.

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