# DOMESTIC SEX TRAFFICKING OF MINORS IN CARE OF CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES: EXPLORING THE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN THE PROTECTION OF YOUTH

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## ABSTRACT

Domestic sex trafficking is a growing concern across Canada with the majority of victims being minors under the age of 18. Youth in care of Child Welfare (CW) are particularly at risk for exploitation. Much of the extant research on sex trafficking is American based, leaving gaps in our knowledge as to why CW youth are at risk within the Canadian geopolitical and cultural context. With police being central agents in the extraction and protection of victims, they offer unique insights into issues of recruitment, approaches to support victims and barriers to exiting sex trafficking that have not previously been explored. This dissertation consists of three studies examining issues of the domestic sex trafficking of minors. Study 1 is a published systematic review (Baird & Connolly, 2021) that synthesizes literature from 23 peer-reviewed articles on the exploitation processes and tactics used by traffickers in the sex trafficking of minors in Canada and the US. Study 1 describes a sexual exploitation continuum comprising three distinct components; the recruitment context, entrapment strategies used by traffickers, and enmeshment tactics used to prolong exploitation. The reviewed articles highlight the ways traffickers cater their approach to the specific vulnerabilities of the youth they exploit. Study 2 is a published file review (Baird, McDonald, & Connolly, 2020) that narrows the focus of sex trafficking to the Canadian context. Using secondary data from a police agency in southern Ontario, data from 223 victims were examined to explore the elevated risk status of CW involved youth who are victims of sex trafficking compared to non-CW victimized youth. Findings from Study 2 underscore the high-risk status of CW youth, with these youth being recruited at a younger age, more likely to use drugs and alcohol, to have experience of childhood maltreatment, and to have lived in a group home. Traffickers were described to use online platforms and relationships to recruit youth. Study 3 expands on the results of Study 2, by exploring the perceptions of police officers

on a specialized human trafficking team on issues related to CW youth risk for recruitment, barriers to exiting, and their specific approaches to prevention and intervention. This team provided cohesive insights on the unique vulnerabilities of CW youth making them visible to traffickers and invisible within the CW system, various emotional and systemic barriers that prolong exploitation or increase risk for re-entry, and the relationship-focused and victim-centered approaches the team takes in their efforts to extract youth from the sex trade. Implications for practice, policy and research are discussed.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Human Trafficking

Human Trafficking is an umbrella term that encompasses the exploitation of persons for both labour and sex. Human trafficking is defined as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power, or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation." (UNODC, 2007). Sex trafficking is one of the most common forms of human trafficking and involves the selling of persons for sex domestically or internationally. It is a highly desirable crime for traffickers, as it has one of the highest profit margins and lowest risks for convictions (Jones, Engstrom, Hilliard & Diaz, 2007). On the basis of age, all youth are vulnerable to exploitation in sex trafficking, with youth involved with child welfare (CW) being particularly vulnerable to recruitment and exploitation (Landers, McGrath, Johnson, Armstrong, & Dollard, 2017). However, there remain gaps in our understanding as to why CW youth are vulnerable to exploitation and the ways in which they are recruited compared to non-CW youth. Understanding routes into sex trafficking is invaluable information for service providers such as CW agencies and law enforcement. Over the past 14 years, law enforcement agencies across the country have become increasingly aware of the heightened risk of CW youth for sex trafficking victimization and are specializing their approaches to protect youth victims of sex trafficking, yet it is unclear what these targeted approaches are. The goal of the current dissertation is threefold: to synthesize research on the exploitation recruitment and entrapment tactics employed by traffickers in the sex trafficking of domestic minors; to expand the literature and understanding on the characteristics, experiences,

and pathways of CW youth into sex trafficking; and to provide insights into the approaches for prevention and intervention and barriers to extraction of a specialized law enforcement team.

## The Canadian Context of Sex Trafficking

***Estimating Prevalence***. Sex trafficking is known to be rampant across Canada; however, the magnitude of the problem is unknown (Public Safety Canada, 2012). Available statistics generally come from the United States of America but are problematic due to varying definitions of sex trafficking and unreliable, unreplicable methodologies (Fedina, Williamson & Perdue, 2019; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2020; Stransky & Finkelhor, 2012). The hidden nature of sex trafficking presents additional barriers to the acquisition of reliable rates. Sex trafficking involves transient criminal networks that operate out of plain sight, and often invisible even to law enforcement (Duger, 2015; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2020). There are also inconsistencies in the way trafficking cases are classified by law enforcement agencies, likely impacted by the level of training, knowledge and attitudes individual policing agencies have on issues of sex trafficking in their communities (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014). In addition to challenges in estimating rates of an invisible crime, is the fact individuals victimized by sex trafficking often do not report themselves to the authorities as 'victims of a crime' nor do they seek assistance from the authorities at all due to the fear of prosecution themselves (Mcclain & Garrity, 2011). Thus, available statistics are thought to be unreliable and significantly under representative of the current scope of sex trafficking.

***Human Trafficking Laws and Funding in Canada***. Over the last two decades there has been significant public and political interest in the eradication of sex trafficking in Canada. This attention followed the ratification of the Palermo Protocol in 2001, when Canada enacted its first laws against the international trafficking of persons from other countries into Canada in section

118 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA). A few years later in 2005, human trafficking offenses were criminalized in the Criminal Code (ss. 279.01). Since then, several amendments have been made, including the addition of laws specific to the trafficking of persons under the age of 18 (ss. 279.011). Along with legislative changes, federal and provincial governments have allocated funding for initiatives aiming to enhance the identification, protection and support of victims as well as the prosecution of offenders. In 2012, the federal government allotted $24 million dollars for a four-year National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking to support the cause of stopping human trafficking in Canada (Public Safety Canada, 2012). More recently, the federal government implemented a $75 million National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking 2019-2024 (Public Safety Canada 2019). Other governmental initiatives have included national government reports on trafficking in persons and funds for the training and development of specialized human trafficking law enforcement units across Canada.

***Conceptual and Legal Differences Between Canada and the USA***. Given the majority of extant research and literature on sex trafficking of minors originates from the United States, much of our knowledge on the issue is guided by American law. It is important to note that terms and definitions of sex trafficking vary widely between Canada and the US. Canada accepts and has modified the widely used definition of human trafficking provided by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2007). The Canadian law is consistent with the UN requirement for a third-party exploiter (i.e., a trafficker) to be involved in order for a case to be defined as "human trafficking". Canadian modifications include the removal of a requirement for "force, fraud, and/or coercion" by the trafficker and specifies only one exploitive act by the trafficker (e.g., recruitment, transportation, transfer of persons) is necessary. Comparatively, the U.S Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA, 2000) created a definition of

sex trafficking that is specific to minors. This definition requires evidence of "force, fraud, and/or coercion" by the trafficker and expanded the UN definition to include other forms of child sexual exploitation that do not necessarily involve a third-party exploiter (e.g., survival sex) (TVPA, 2000). Given conceptual and legal differences in the definition of sex trafficking between the US and Canada, American sex trafficking research is, in part, ungeneralizable to the Canadian context. As such, there is a need for Canadian- based research to explore the risks, recruitment and pathways for minors into sex trafficking to inform government funded anti-sex trafficking initiatives. Using Canadian definitions of sex trafficking, this dissertation explores issues of sex trafficking among Child Welfare involved youth within an Ontario district.

***Sex Trafficking in Ontario***. Ontario has been cited as a 'hub' for human trafficking in Canada, accounting for roughly 65% of police-reported cases nationally (Statistics Canada, 2016). Seventy-five percent of Ontario's cases of human trafficking for sexual exploitation are within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA; RCMP, 2014), with the Ontario Highway 401 Corridor cited as a geographic short circuit, facilitating the transportation of victims between urban centres with large high paying sex markets (The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking, 2021). Ontario's Hwy 401 Corridor spans 828 kilometres between Windsor to the Ontario-Quebec border and connects large cities within the GTA. Studies 2 and 3 involve data collection and qualitative interviews from a police agency in a region within the GTA that exists geographically along the sex trafficking corridor in southern Ontario.

**Sex Trafficking of Minors**

Sex trafficking is a highly gendered crime, with 98% of survivors being females (ILO, 2012). The majority of victims are recruited as minors, with an average age range between 12 and 14 (Jordan, Patel & Rapp, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). From a developmental lens, youth

possess vulnerabilities such as identity formation, a heightened need for belonging, a desire for autonomy and romantic relationships, as well as poor problem solving that prime them for traffickers' manipulative and exploitive tactics in recruitment (Schwartz, 2015). Traffickers and pimps are highly aware of the developmental vulnerabilities of children and early adolescents and target these vulnerabilities through recruitment and entrapment tactics.

***The Bioecological Theory of Development.*** Based on the growing literature, it is evident that there are specific factors that place youth at greater risk for recruitment and exploitation and these risk factors can be best understood within bioecological developmental framework that explores different levels of risk and vulnerability (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). This theory posits that children are naturally embedded within multiple systems and environments that influence their development from their home and school to socio-cultural contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Over time, children move through various environmental spheres that have transactional influences on their development. On a macro-societal level, the hyper-sexualization of females in North America continues to promote harmful perceptions of females as sexual objects, which contributes to complacent attitudes towards sexual harassment, power imbalances in relation to sexual activities, and the growing industry in child pornography (American Psychological Association Task Force, 2007; Hanna, 2002; Hardy, Compton & McPhatter, 2013), and the sex trafficking of minors (Egan & Hawks, 2008). At the exosystem level, the social perceptions of youth victims of sex trafficking as prostitutes or criminals have led to the misidentification of victims, making it challenging for prevention and support efforts, and driving the crime underground, which increases the vulnerability of youth (Jones et al., 2007; Jordan, Patel & Rapp, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). At the microsystem level, various early experiences in systems place some youth more at risk for recruitment than others, including involvement with child

welfare. Lastly, several individual factors also place youth at risk of exploitation such as experiences of poverty, homelessness, childhood sexual abuse, physical and emotional abuse, neglect, exposure to intimate partner violence, problematic relationships with caregivers, drug and alcohol abuse, and teen dating violence (Choi, 2015; Countryman-Roswurm, 2012; Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Farley, Lynn & Cotton, 2005; Havlicek, Huston, Boughton, & Zhang, 2016; Herman, 2003; Kotrla, 2010; Moore et al., 2020). Given the specific vulnerabilities of minors for being trafficked, it is important to approach sex trafficking research from a developmental perspective to appropriately explore and understand the strategies traffickers employ in targeting and recruiting minors into the sex trade.

**The Intersection with Child Welfare**

***Child Welfare Risk Factors for Exploitation***. A particularly robust finding across risk-based research studies, is the heightened risk status of CW youth for recruitment into sex trafficking (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Estes & Weiner, 2001; Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010; Gragg, Petta, Bernstein, Eisen, & Quinn, 2007; Williams & Frederick, 2009). One report indicated that 85% of trafficked youth have a history of involvement with CW and 75% have lived in foster care (Gragg et al., 2007). Many researchers have conjectured as to why CW youth are overrepresented among child and adolescent sex trafficking victims. Indeed, experiences of childhood maltreatment, ruptured familial relationships, and experiences of childhood adversity more broadly are all factors and circumstances that place CW youth at risk for exploitation (Simmons-Horton, 2017), as traffickers target youths' unmet needs for love and belonging and positive caregiver relationships (Landers et al., 2017). The association between sex trafficking and child welfare is twofold, insofar as youth extracted from sex trafficking are placed in care of CW and youth in CW are at risk of recruitment during their placement (Bounds,

Julion, & Delaney, 2015; Fong & Cardoso, 2010). However, little is known about the particular characteristics of sex trafficked youth involved with CW and the unique ways in which traffickers access and recruit youth while in care (O'Brien, White & Rizo, 2017), particularly within the Canadian context.

***Considerations for CW Placements***. The exploitive experiences of child and adolescent survivors of sex trafficking are riddled with accounts of abuse, trauma, physical injuries, disease, malnutrition, and infections (Landers et al., 2017; Raymond, Hughes & Gomez, 2001; Spear, 2004). Additionally, victimized youth are at risk for re-entry into sex trafficking and drug use (Clawson et al., 2009; Reid, 2010). When youth are extracted from sex trafficking, they are most often placed in care of a child welfare agency. Given the unique needs and complex mental health issues of youth sex trafficking survivors, special consideration for placements (e.g., specific foster care homes), as well as services (e.g., trauma-focused care) is imperative (Fong & Berger- Cardoso, 2010; Landers et al., 2017; Williams & Frederick, 2009). Although tailored placements within CW for victimized youth do not currently exist in Canada, there is preliminary evidence for the efficacy of therapeutic foster care that consists of foster parents specifically trained for the supervision and care of victimized or at-risk youth (Landers et al., 2017; Shuker, 2015). With this dissertation I have aimed to expand the understanding of CW youths' characteristics and routes of entry into sex trafficking that can inform CW prevention and intervention efforts through early identification of risk, warning signs of victimization, and the development of evidence based therapeutic foster care placements. More specifically, Study 1 provides a synthesis of available research on the recruitment and entrapment strategies employed by traffickers in their ploy to exploit youth. Study 2 uses police gathered data from victims' files to identify specific characteristics and trafficking experiences of sex trafficked CW youth.

Lastly, Study 3 explores law enforcement insights on the risks of CW youth for recruitment, their specific policing approaches to prevention and intervention, as well as barriers to exiting.

**The Intersection with Law Enforcement**

Police officers are central figures in the process of extraction and protection of CW victimized youth, yet their role and approaches to policing child sex trafficking is understudied (Farrell et al., 2019). Based on this gap in the literature, there has been a call for research on police responses to the domestic sex trafficking of minors, as their interactions with youth are crucial in determining whether youth receive access to adequate supports (Williams, 2015). Police operate within communities and in conjunction with agencies, and thus are the bridge between victims and the services they need (Williams, 2015). At the same time, youth who are exploited are often reluctant to seek assistance from law enforcement, and in fact avoid interactions sending them further out of sight of police (Lavoie, Dickerson, Relich & Quas, 2019).

***Youth Reluctance to Engage with Police***. A number of reasons may explain victimized youths' hesitancy to engage with police. From a developmental perspective, there are age-normative reductions in youths' disclosures of risky behaviours and experiences to adults, as part of their drive for independence and experimentation (Lavoie et al., 2019). During this developmental phase, adolescents assume greater independence and as a result, assume more responsibility for their own decision making. However, given age, experience, and developmental neuro-cognitive vulnerabilities, youth can fail to recognize when the decisions they make are being manipulated by others (Grandpre, Alvaro, Burgoon, Miller, & Hall, 2003). As a result, youths' entry into the sex trade is not one of sound decision making and consent, rather a manipulative pathway of targeted recruitment and entrapment strategies employed by

traffickers who prey on youths' developmental vulnerabilities. Youths' relationship with their trafficker also complicates their willingness to engage with police. They may view the relationship with their trafficker as romantic, or a friendship, and as such, loyalty fuels their reluctance to disclose information (Reid, 2016; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2010). Moreover, exploited youth are often purposely put in situations by their traffickers that make them complicit in or committing crimes for which they can be charged, keeping them silent, controlled and far away from police (Dalley, 2010; Reid, 2016; Williams, 2015).

***Policing Approaches to Sex Trafficking***. Available research on policing approaches to sex trafficking is overwhelmingly American and thus, not based on Canadian laws, leaving gaps in understanding of police knowledge and approaches to the sex trafficking of minors within the Canadian context. American research on the topic suggests policing approaches are largely reactive in responding to issues of sex trafficking within their communities, rather than preventative (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014). Given there are no standard protocols for organizational law enforcement in responding to human trafficking, some police agencies may rely on more traditional 'vice' methods, such as the power of arrest, when confronting victimized youth (Barrick, Panichelli, Lambdin, Dang, & Lutnick, 2021). In fact, some research suggests a delinquency lens has fueled both the misidentification of victimized youth and patterns of prosecuting victims of sex trafficking (Farrell et al., 2019; Halter 2010). However, being arrested can be counterproductive to policing efforts, as it undermines trust in the police and prevents youth from seeking police support in the future (Dank et al., 2017). Moreover, negative interactions with police have been identified as a contributing factor for prolonged exploitation (Love et al., 2018). Taken together, interactions that victimized youth have with police are influential in determining whether youth will engage with police. As a result, traditional

delinquency approaches and an emphasis on the prosecution of offenders, has been suggested to be damaging when working with victims of human trafficking. Rather, victim-centered approaches focused on connection and building trust are considered important in police responses to sex trafficking (Farrell et al., 2019). Given geopolitical and cultural differences between the United States and Canada, there is a need for research on Canadian policing approaches to sex trafficking to reflect imminent issues of trafficking within Canada's borders.

**Current Dissertation**

The trafficking of domestic minors is a significant growing concern across Canada, with some populations including child welfare youth being at greater risk of recruitment. As such, there is a demand for research to explore the risks and pathways into sex trafficking of domestic minors to inform prevention and intervention initiatives. Moreover, due to the hidden nature of sex trafficking and ethical reporting obligations of researchers, previous research is riddled with methodological challenges such as sampling bias, calling for alternative unbiased data sources to obtain information about trafficked victims. With new specialized law enforcement teams emerging across the country, there is a wealth of untapped knowledge from police files and officers themselves on risks and the pathways into sex trafficking and policing approaches to the protection of trafficked youth.

This dissertation is a compilation of three studies. The first study is a systematic review on the recruitment and entrapment of domestic minors into sex trafficking in Canada and the United States (Baird & Connolly, 2021). The second study uses secondary data from a specialized human trafficking policing unit's files and supplementary information from Child Welfare to enhance our understanding of the characteristics of trafficked females within a Canadian context, by conducting a comparison of those with and without CW involvement

(Baird, McDonald & Connolly, 2020). The third study utilizes qualitative data from interviews with eleven officers on the specialized HT police team to explore their knowledge of CW youth recruitment, barriers to exiting and policing approaches. There are bridging chapters (Chapters 3 and 5) between each study and a general discussion (Chapter 7) synthesizing the main findings across studies, and a discussion on the policy and practice implications of these research findings.

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## Chapter 2: Recruitment and Entrapment Pathways of Minors into Sex Trafficking in North America: A Systematic Review[1]

*Key Words:* Domestic minor sex trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation of children, pathways, recruitment, entrapment, exploitation

Human trafficking is a global problem that has garnered significant international and national attention over the past two decades. In 2000, 140 countries signed onto the Palermo Protocol agreeing that human trafficking is a significant human rights violation and a criminal offence that requires prevention, the protection of vulnerable populations, and the prosecution of violators of the protocol. In North America, both Canada and the United States of America (US) signed onto this protocol and have since passed legislation and policies to combat human trafficking. Sex trafficking became criminalized in Canada in 2005 when human trafficking entered the criminal code under Section 279.01 and in the USA in 2000 with the passing of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA). Sex trafficking is one of the most common forms of human trafficking consisting of the recruitment and exploitation of an individual through use of threats, force, coercion, deception or abuse of power for the purpose of a commercial sex act (United Nation's Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2014). A commercial sex act, as defined by the American Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) (2000) is "any sexual act for which something of value is given or received". Common examples include, prostitution, pornography, sexual massage parlors, and strip clubs. Commercial sex acts may be exchanged for money, drugs, shelter, clothing, or food (Cole & Anderson, 2013; Kotrla, 2010). Sex

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trafficking is pervasive across the USA and Canada (Clawson et al., 2009; Dalley, 2010). Despite various political and social differences between these countries, they are united on the front of combating sex trafficking within their borders and expanding research to support effective evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies.

**Sex Trafficking of Minors**

Minors (under the age of 18) are over- represented among victims of sex trafficking, with the majority of victims recruited between 12-14 years of age (Jordan, Patel, & Rapp, 2013; Smith, Healy Vardaman, & Snow, 2009). Given the elevated risk of minors, research and legislation has begun to focus on the specific issue of the sex trafficking of minors (STM). Consequently, understanding of the risks for recruitment, experiences, and needs of underage victims is growing and important policy actions have been taken. In the past decade, both Canada and the US have passed legislation, reformed laws, and enacted policies to combat issues of the sex trafficking of minors. Legislative changes in both Canada and the US have transformed the way victims are viewed and treated by law enforcement. More specifically, American and Canadian federal consent laws declared minors under the age of 18 unable to consent to commercial sex and have shifted the lens of law enforcement from criminalizing youth in the sex trade to viewing them as victims (Adelson, 2008; Franchino-Olsen, 2019). Language in research on STM has followed suit, shifting from calling underage victims of sex trafficking "teen prostitutes" to "victims of STM".

On the basis of age, youth from all sectors of society are at risk of recruitment into sex trafficking. Developmental vulnerabilities during the adolescent stage such as identity formation, the need for belonging, desire for autonomy, desire for romantic relationships, and evolving problem-solving skills, make youth easily exploitable by traffickers who appeal to these

vulnerabilities (Schwartz, 2015). Based on the growing literature, some youth are at greater risk of recruitment than others. Several risk factors for STM have been identified including, involvement with child protective services (CPS), history of childhood sexual abuse, homelessness, physical and emotional abuse, neglect, exposure to intimate partner violence, problematic relationships with caregivers, drug and alcohol abuse, and teen dating violence (Choi, 2015; Countryman-Roswurm, 2012; Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Farley, Lynn & Cotton, 2005; Franchino-Olsen, 2019; Kotrla, 2010; Landers, McGrath, Johnson, Armstrong, & Dollard, 2017). Traffickers are known to be deeply perceptive of the developmental vulnerabilities of youth and target their unmet needs through strategic recruitment methods.

Simply being a girl places a youth at an elevated risk status relative to being a boy (Estes & Weiner, 2001), with 98% of victims being women and girls (ILO, 2012). Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation due to social norms that cast gendered expectations and power imbalances in relation to sexual activities, with boys being expected to take sexual initiatives. Sexual inexperience, desire for romantic relationships, and insecurity among female adolescents can set the stage for manipulation and exploitation by adolescent boys or men (Hanna, 2002).

Based on the differential needs and situations of youth, the recruitment and exploitation of underage populations is thought to differ from that within adult populations (Bouche & Shady, 2017; Dank et al., 2014). While it may be riskier to traffic a youth due to increased policing efforts in protecting minors and higher sentences for STM, it has been suggested that these risks are offset by the youth being easier to manipulate and control and being highly desired by purchasers, bringing in more money for the trafficker (Dank et al., 2014). Compared to adults, youth have greater needs for protection, less life experience, and are dependent on adults for

basic needs such as food and shelter, making them more vulnerable to traffickers who vow to provide care, protection, and basic needs (Bruhns et al., 2018; Cole & Anderson, 2013). Given youths' physical and emotional dependency on adults, some research has suggested youth are more trusting and less able to identify traffickers' coercive and manipulative strategies to entrap them (Cole & Sprang, 2015). Adult victims, on the other hand, are generally less psychologically dependent on their trafficker (Bouche & Shady, 2017). In addition, literature on the trafficking of adults identifies several risk factors that are more unique to adult victim populations including, needing to financially support dependents, low educational attainment, and having few job skills (Holger-Ambrose, Langmade, Edinburgh, & Saewyc, 2013). Despite differences in adult and underage victim populations, much of the extant research on recruitment for sex trafficking has pooled both underage and adult participants (Bang, Baker, Carpinteri & Van Hasselt, 2014) or examined victimized adults only, limiting our understanding of the sex trafficking of minors specifically (Reid, 2014). In order to translate sex trafficking research into evidence-based initiatives to combat the sex trafficking of minors, it is important for researchers to delineate the specific ways in which traffickers target and recruit youth into the sex trade. The current study synthesizes research that focuses on youth recruitment into sex trafficking North America.

**North American Context of Sex Trafficking**

There have been few attempts to estimate the prevalence of the sex trafficking of minors in North America; however, available statistics are often "guesstimates" rather than reliable rates (Franchino-Olsen et al., 2020; Stransky & Finkelhor, 2012). Available estimates for STM most commonly come from the United States of America, where the rates range from the 1,400 to upwards of 199,000 victims (Banks & Kyckelhahn, 2011; Estes & Weiner, 2001; Snyder &

Sickmund, 2006; U.S. Department of Justice, 2004), with the most commonly cited study estimating upwards of 325, 000 children at risk for sexual exploitation in the USA each year (Estes & Weiner, 2001). However, available statistics are problematic as they often fail to distinguish between domestic and international victims, are based on varying definitions of sex trafficking, are geographically limited, and utilize non-replicable, unreliable methodologies (Fedina, Williamson & Perdue, 2019; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2020; Stransky & Finkelhor, 2012). Researcher error aside, the very nature of the sex trafficking industry presents barriers to the acquisition of accurate statistics. Most significant among these is the fact that trafficking occurs largely underground, within criminal networks that are transient, discrete, and often invisible, even to law enforcement (Duger, 2015; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2020). Difficulty obtaining estimates of an invisible crime is compounded by the fact that many individuals victimized by sex trafficking do not view themselves as victims of a crime and therefore do not report it in any official capacity (Mcclain & Garrity, 2011). Despite flawed and unreliable statistics, STM is known to be widespread across Canada and the US, requiring immediate action and sound research to uncover trends and pathways of youth into sex trafficking including the way traffickers target, recruit and enmesh youth in the sex trade.
(Clawson et al., 2009; Cole & Sprang, 2015; Dalley, 2010).

While STM defies geographic borders, a country's economic environment, geographic positioning, laws, employment rates, per capita income, and historical events shape the industry and individual risk for recruitment (Hepburn & Simon, 2010; O'Brien, 2009). As a result, trends in STM within North America are different from the European context. The permeable borders between European countries allow for easy international movement between proximal countries (Lindstrom, 2004). For example, one report found only 5% of all identified sex trafficked victims

in the United Kingdom (UK) were originally from the UK, which is a stark contrast to the picture of trafficking in North America (NA) where the majority of victims are domestic persons (Baird et al., 2020; Banks & Kyckelhahn, 2011; Mitchell, Finkelhor & Wolak, 2010; RCMP, Human Trafficking National Co-ordination Centre, 2014; Serious Organised Crime Agency, 2013). Given sex trafficking industries vary among countries based on differences in social, geographical, cultural, economic and historical factors, it is not appropriate to generalize understandings of STM across countries that are dissimilar across these factors (Hepburn & Simon, 2010). As such, the current study has a narrow focus to systematically reviewing the recruitment of minors for sex trafficking in two countries, Canada and the US both of which have similar cultural, economic, geographic, and historical contexts.

The domestic sex trafficking of minors is of major concern within Canada and the US (Clawson et al., 2009; Dalley, 2010). While both countries adhere to the standards of affluent and profitable nations that are alluring destinations for international sex traffickers, research consistently shows that domestic youth (i.e., youth trafficked within their country of origin) comprise the majority of underage victims in their respective countries (Baird et al., 2020; Kotrla, 2010; RCMP, Human Trafficking National Co-ordination Centre, 2014). Due to the risks and challenges associated with transporting victims across borders, some research suggests that domestic youth are preferred by traffickers (Smith et al., 2009). In summarizing the literature on recruitment and entrapment it is important to distinguish between international and domestic sex trafficking due to the nuanced differences in the process of exploitation. Comparatively, researchers suggest domestic sex traffickers more often utilize interpersonal relationships and violence to entrap their target and international traffickers rely upon kidnapping, parents' selling their children, and offering false promises of jobs abroad for entrapment (Cecchet & Thoburn,

2014). Understanding the specific ways in which American and Canadian youth are recruited by traffickers and exploited domestically is important in developing effective prevention and intervention strategies.

**Current study goals**

Given emergent issues of domestic STM in North America, federal and local governments wish to develop evidence- based approaches to combat sex trafficking and protect domestic youth. For example, a provincial government in Canada invested 307 million dollars towards anti-human trafficking initiatives and the American federal government awarded over 100 million dollars for human trafficking initiatives and survivor supports. Research on STM has increased over the last decade, including the specific ways in which traffickers target, recruit, and exploit *youth* for commercial sexual exploitation. Recent research has also shifted to focusing on domestic trafficking rather than international trafficking from other countries, expanding understanding of STM in North America. Understanding the process of recruitment for youth into sex trafficking is invaluable information for service providers and law makers developing prevention and intervention initiatives. The goal of this study was to systematically synthesize the research on the recruitment process employed by traffickers in the sex trafficking of domestic minors in the US and Canada. Based on this synthesis, an overarching framework that explains the broader process of recruitment of domestic minors into sex trafficking is proposed.

## Method

This systematic review included articles that examine the recruitment process of domestic youth into sex trafficking within the American and Canadian context. Inclusion criteria were predetermined and documented in a protocol guiding the review process. The protocol was

developed and agreed upon by both authors. To be eligible for inclusion in the present review, studies were required to be original research studies with quantitative and/or qualitative data and analysis, published in English between January 1990 and June 1 2020. Articles published in 1990 onwards were selected as these articles would be reflective of the changes that ensued with the international agreement and signing of the UN CRC on the definition of the sexual exploitation of children. The selected period also represents the time frame when the majority of research on sex trafficking was published. Based on the geographical, social and political similarities that impact criminal patterns of sex trafficking, the current study included studies focusing on minors trafficked within the US and Canada. Studies were required to include data pertaining specifically to the recruitment and grooming of minors (youth under the age of 18), as previous research has highlighted that the recruitment of adults is different from minors (Bouche & Shady, 2017). Studies were excluded when the age group of victims was unclear or when data were collapsed across ages. Given prior research suggests the trafficking of minors across borders (i.e., international sex trafficking) is qualitatively different from the domestic trafficking of minors (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014), eligible studies for the current review specifically explored domestic sex trafficking and articles were excluded if domestic and international trafficking cases were not parsed. A broad range of study designs and methodologies were included.

**Search Procedures and Study Selection**

A comprehensive search was conducted of five electronic databases: PsychINFO, Sociological Abstracts, Social Services Abstracts, Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), and Nursing and Allied Health Database. Alternate terms for sex trafficking were used in order to capture articles using delinquency language (e.g., teen prostitution) and consensual or

transactional language (e.g., sex work, sex trade). Likewise, several terms were used to capture the concepts of trafficker recruitment and grooming strategies. Boolean operators “AND” and “OR” were used to combine sex trafficking, recruitment and age terms. The search strategy comprised of the following key words: ("Human Traffick*" OR "Sex Traffick*" OR "Trafficking in Persons" OR "commercial sex* exploit*" OR child sex* exploit* OR "anti-trafficking" OR Prostitut* OR "Sex Work" OR "Domestic minor sex trafficking" OR "DMST" OR "sex trade" OR "sex* exploit*") AND (coerc* OR "coercive control*" OR recruit* OR groom* OR entrap* OR deceit OR deception OR forc* OR threat* OR "sexual grooming" OR "abuse of power") AND ("young person" OR juvenile OR "young people" OR minor* OR child* OR teen* OR adolescen* OR youth* OR "under 18" OR "at risk populations" OR "predelinquent youth"). Additional publications and gray literature were identified through a backward search of the references cited in articles reviewed for inclusion.

The initial screening of titles and abstracts was completed by the first author. Articles were excluded during this phase if obviously ineligible. Full text screening was completed by two reviewers independently. Both reviewers screened the full text of articles retrieved to assess for eligibility. Reviewer decisions were compared, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. A third reviewer was included when consensus was not reached.

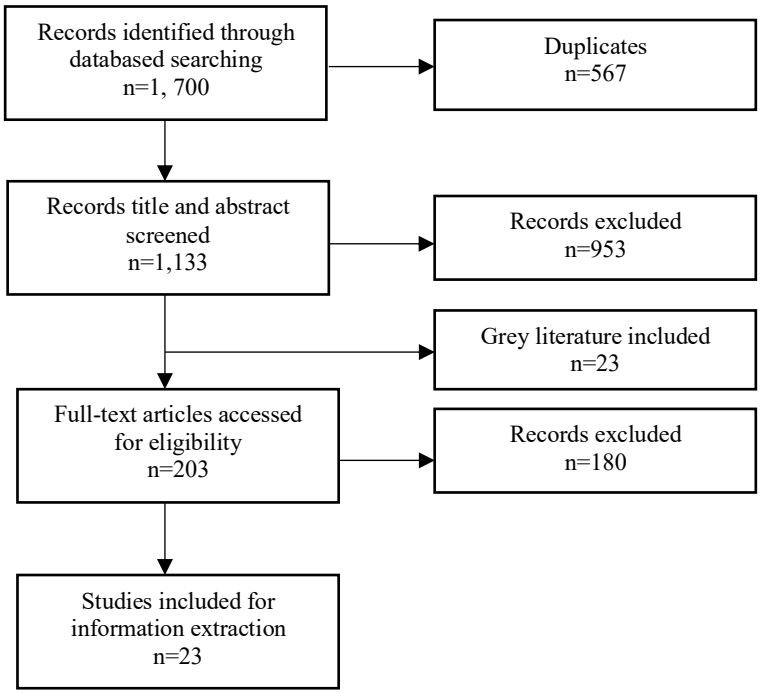
## Results

### Search Results

Database searches generated 1,700 publications, of which, 1,133 were unique publications after removing duplicates (n=567). The initial title and abstract screen eliminated 953 articles. 180 articles were retrieved for full text screening and an additional 23 articles from the gray literature were included for the full text screen. After the two reviewers independently

reviewed the remaining 203 articles, 180 were excluded due to not meeting one or more of the following eligibility criteria: did not speak about sex trafficking (e.g., exclusive focus on rape or labour trafficking) or recruitment and entrapment strategies (n=117), adult and minor victim samples were grouped in the study (n=9), study grouped international and domestic trafficking samples (n=21), the study samples were not Canadian or American (n=8) or were duplicate reports (n=2). Book and movie reviews, opinion pieces, systematic and scoping reviews and all other study designs that did not involve the analysis of primary or secondary data were excluded (n=23). While many studies were excluded for failing to meet several eligibility criteria (e.g., grouping adults and minors and location of study), if the article did not study sex trafficking or recruitment and entrapment strategies it was excluded primarily on these criteria alone. In total, 23 studies met our inclusion criteria (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1.* Systematic Review PRISMA Flow Diagram



## Study and Sample Characteristics

Eighteen peer-reviewed articles, two government reports and three dissertations met inclusion criteria. Twenty of the twenty-three studies utilized American samples and three used Canadian samples. Thirteen studies used qualitative methods, nine of which involved retrospective interviewing. Seven articles involved mixed method designs, three utilized secondary data analysis. The majority of included studies were published 2012 or after (n = 19) and the remaining studies were published in 2002 (n= 1), 2009 (n=2) and 2010 (n=1). The 23 studies included data from individuals trafficked as minors (n=18), stakeholders (n=7), and active or previously self-identified pimps (n=2), with some studies using data from two of the aforementioned three categories. Stakeholders included, government agency, law enforcement, NGO representatives, and adolescents with knowledge about the domestic sex trafficking of minors (i.e., having participated in selling sex, provided services to sexually exploited youth, or knew a family member involved).

Eighteen of the 23 studies include demographic information on victims or survivors of sex trafficking. Overall, studies included African American or Black (n= 13 studies), Caucasian or White (n=13), Hispanic (n=7), Asian-American (n=2), South Asian (n=1), Indigenous or Native (n=3), mixed race ( n=8), other (n=1). Eleven articles reported on the gender of victims. Samples were predominantly all female (7 out of 11 studies), with only 4 studies including male or transgendered participants. Only 2 articles provided data on sexual orientation.

# Findings

Findings from the reviewed articles support an exploitation continuum comprising of three components: the recruitment context, methods of entrapment, and enmeshment.

## The Recruitment Context

**Characteristics of traffickers.** In the articles reviewed for this paper, traffickers, pimps and recruiters are terms used interchangeably to define the individual(s) who initially introduce the minor into the sex trade. Traffickers or pimps are described to either take on the recruiting role themselves or use recruiters to seek out vulnerable youth (Dalley, 2010; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Williamson and Prior (2009) note traffickers may use previously exploited youth to recruit. Traffickers were identified as most commonly male; however, female traffickers were also reported and participate in the recruitment and exploitation of minors (Reid, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Females may also be involved in the exploitation of youth as recruiters who work for a trafficker. Females in this role, commonly referred to as the "bottom girl", are often exploited themselves by the trafficker and attain relative status within the trafficker's network by taking on responsibilities of recruiting new girls into his/her "stable" (Roe-Sepowitz, 2019; Smith et al., 2009; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Four articles highlight that traffickers may also be gang members or organized crime affiliates (Dalley, 2010; Reid, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019, Smith et al., 2009).

**Youth relationship with trafficker.** Several different types of relationships between the trafficker/recruiter and youth are cited by the reviewed articles. The most commonly cited relationship being a romantic one as cited among 18 of the 24 reviewed studies (Anderson, Coyle, Johnson & Denner, 2014; Bruhns et al., 2018; Baird, McDonald & Connolly, 2020; Cecchet & Thorburn, 2014; Corbett, 2018; Dalley, 2010; Edinburgh, Pape-Blabolil, Harpin & Saewyc, 2015; Gibbs, Hardison Walters, Lutnick, Miller & Kluckman, 2015; Moore et al., 2020; Nixon, Tutty, Downe, Gorkoff & Ursel, 2002; Perkins & Ruiz, 2017; Reed, Kennedy, Decker & Cimino, 2019; Reid 2016, Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Tidball, Zheng & Creswell, 2016; Wells, Mitchell & Ji, 2012; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Three studies identify

"boyfriends" as the most common recruiter of youth into the sex trade (Gibbs et al., 2015; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009), particularly among older youth ages 16-17 (Moore et al., 2020). The second most commonly cited relationship type is a friend (15 studies) (Bruhns et al., 2018; Baird et al., 2020; Cavazos, 2015; Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Corbett, 2018; Dalley, 2010; Marcus et al., 2014; Moore et al., 2020; Nixon et al., 2002; Perkins & Ruiz, 2017; Reed et al., 2019; Reid, 2016; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Wells et al., 2012), with two studies finding friends to be the most common recruiter (Moore et al., 2020; Nixon et al., 2002). Friends are identified as both male and female, long- time friends, or 'false friends' met shortly before entrapment (Anderson et al., 2014; Corbett, 2018; Reed et al., 2019; Rosenblatt, 2014). Eleven studies cite family members to be recruiters or traffickers for the sexual exploitation of minors, including, fathers, mothers, siblings, or foster parents (Bruhns et al., 2018; Baird et al., 2020; Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Corbett,2018; Dalley, 2010; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Marcus et al., 2014; Perkins & Ruiz, 2017; Reed et al., 2019; Reid, 2016, Smith et al., 2009; Wells et al., 2012). Perkins and Ruiz (2017) distinguish between urban and rural youth, noting that rural youth tend to be trafficked by family members whereas urban youth tend to be trafficked by friends. Reid (2016) found mothers to be the most common type of family member initiating youth into the sex trade. Other cited relationships include, roommates, schoolmates (Dalley, 2010), boyfriend of a friend (Perkins & Ruiz, 2017), buyers or "Johns", employers, drug dealers (Marcus et al., 2014; Reid, 2016) and acquaintances (Moore et al., 2020; Nixon et al., 2002; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Five studies cite strangers, who have no prior bond with the youth, as recruiters (Baird et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2020; Reid, 2016; Rosenblatt, 2014; Wells et al., 2012). Rosenblatt (2014) highlighted a common tactic is for traffickers who are strangers to pose as a neighborhood boy, friend, or safe person in a local area.

**Youth characteristics**. Six studies reference the significance of sex trafficked youth coming from impoverished households with unmet financial needs (Bruhns et al., 2018; Corbett, 2018; Moore et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2019; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). In addition, involvement with child welfare and childhood experiences of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse is common across many of the reviewed articles (Baird et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2018; Perkins & Ruiz, 2017; Reed et al., 2019; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Tidball et al., 2016; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Seven studies emphasize that traffickers will identify and attend to youths' unmet needs for love, care and attention, low self-esteem, their desire to escape homelife, or need for a parent-like figure to fill their basic needs of food, clothing, security and shelter (Anderson et al., 2014; Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Corbett, 2018; Moore et al., 2020; Perkins & Ruiz, 2017; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Four studies identify that youth living in group homes and shelters are at enhanced risk for recruitment (Baird et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2009; Tidball et al., 2016; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Four studies pinpoint runaway youth or homeless youth as vulnerable to sex trafficking recruitment (Anderson et al., 2014; Perkins & Ruiz, 2017; Reed et al., 2019; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Similarly, Dalley (2010) highlights that youth leaving First Nations communities to larger cities are prime targets for recruiters and traffickers in Canada. In addition, Cecchet and Thoburn (2014) found sex trafficked youth retrospectively reported having lived in neighbourhoods with prostitution prior to being recruited themselves. Four studies classify risky youth behaviours such as substance use or addiction issues and independent sex work placing youth at risk of recruitment (Bruhns et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2020; Perkins & Ruiz, 2017; Reed et al., 2019). Youth with intellectual disabilities are cited as a group at enhanced risk of deception, manipulation and exploitation by a trafficker (Reid, 2016; Dalley, 2010; Marcus et al., 2014). For example, Reid (2016) described a

victimized youth with an intellectual disability struggling to decipher between a 'John' and a boyfriend.

**Location of initial recruitment.** Six studies cite youth being recruited at various locations such as at bus stops, homeless shelters, outside juvenile justice centres, outside schools, malls, nightlife, social gatherings, employment, in the neighborhood, at the park, on the street, at corner stores or even within their own home (Baird et al., 2020; Dalley, 2010; Moore et al., 2017; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Williamson & Prior, 2009). However, initial contact via the Internet was cited by more studies (n=7) than other recruitment locations (Baird et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2018; O'Brien & Li, 2020; Rosenblatt, 2014; Tidball et al., 2016; Wells et al., 2012). Internet facilitated recruitment occurs when traffickers access youth by frequenting online platforms popular with youth and using strategies such as initiating interpersonal relationships or even deceptively posing as an old friend (O'Brien & Li, 2020; Rosenblatt, 2014). Wells and colleagues (2012) noted online recruitment cases are more common among younger juveniles ages 14 and 15. Several specific internet-based applications are cited as locations where youth are recruited including Facebook, Snapchat, Tinder, Kik, Instagram, Whisper, Craigslist and online multi-player video games (Baird et al., 2020; O'Brien & Li, 2020, Tidball et al., 2012). Youth who post sexually explicit images or independently sell sex online are targeted within these cyber spaces by a pimps/ traffickers (Dalley, 2010; O'Brien & Li, 2020).

**Methods of Entrapment in the Exploitation Continuum**

Entrapment refers to the strategies or tactics used by traffickers to engage with youth and recruit them into sex trafficking (Baird et al., 2020; Reid, 2016). Two strategies emerged from

the reviewed studies on how youth are entrapped by traffickers into sex trafficking: relational tactics and aversive tactics.

**Relational tactics.** Most commonly cited (15 studies) among all trafficker entrapment methods, is the "boyfriend" scheme, also referred to as "romancing", or "Romeo pimping" (Anderson et al 2014; Cavazos, 2015; Corbett, 2018; Dalley, 2010; Gibbs et al., 2015; Marcus et al., 2014; Moore et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2019; Reid, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Tidball et al., 2016; Wells et al., 2012; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Several articles suggest that traffickers target youths' desire for love and belonging, particularly those who have unmet needs in this domain, by establishing a seemingly loving and caring relationship, under the guise of being a boyfriend (Cavazos, 2015; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Smith and colleagues (2009) further elaborate that the romance scheme cultivates control over the victim by establishing an unwavering allegiance to the trafficker, making them more likely to succumb to propositions to sell sex. Furthermore, many of the articles suggest traffickers who pose as a loving boyfriend, may "sell the dream" of a life together, appealing to the youths' desires for stability, shelter, material things, and/or a lavish life (Anderson et al., 2014, Cavazos, 2015; Corbett, 2018; Dalley, 2010; Gibbs et al., 2015; Marcus et al., 2014; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019; Smith et al., 2009). Five articles make reference to some or all of the following: romancing or grooming the youth with attention, drugs, gifts, money, dates, intimacy, and asking her about her goals for the future (Baird et al., 2020; Corbett, 2018; Reid, 2016; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Tidball et al., 2016). Gifts and money may function as a way to make the youth feel accomplished after trafficker has sex with her and creating associations between sex and receiving material items or money (Smith et al., 2009). Several articles noted that the subsequent shift from romance to exploitation may involve force and/or coercion (Dalley, 2010;

Edinburgh et al., 2015; Reed et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2009). Williamson & Prior (2009) coined the term "bait and switch" to describe this coercive tactic of appealing to youths' unmet needs and subsequently exploiting them for their own financial gain. Other cited coercive strategies included propositioning the youth to selling sex as a way to make money for themselves (Marcus et al., 2014; Reid, 2016) or as a favour for the trafficker/boyfriend or their future together (Anderson et al., 2014; Gibbs et al., 2015). For example, a sex trafficked youth may believe they are selling sex in order to raise money for the couple to buy a home and a car, believing in the possibility of marriage and children at the end (Gibbs et al., 2015). Gibbs and colleagues (2015) describe a process whereby some youth are led to believe they are selling sex just one time for their boyfriend and are continually exploited thereafter.

Numerous articles (10/23 studies) reference 'befriending' tactics utilized in the entrapment of youth into sex trafficking (Bruhns et al., 2018; Cavazos, 2015; Dalley, 2010; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2020; O'Brien & Li, 2020; Reed et al., 2019; Reid, 2016; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Two studies reference traffickers' strategic use of other girls in his 'stable' (i.e., children, youth, adults he is exploiting) to recruit new youth (Edinburgh et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2009). These girls are tasked with the job of befriending other girls, recruiting them for the pimp, training them, providing them with basic needs, and even advertising their services (Cavazos, 2015; Reed et al., 2019; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019; Smith et al., 2009). Peer recruitment is cited as particularly effective in the process of normalizing the selling of sex and operating as a role model by teaching youth the 'ropes' of the sex trade (Moore et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2019; Reid, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019). For example, the female peer may suggest selling sex as a good way to make money and/or set up 'double dates' to ease the new girl into independent sex work (Bruhns et al., 2018; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Reid, 2016).

Alternatively, friends may use peer pressure as a way to get youth to conform and sell sex (Dalley, 2010; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2019; Rosenblatt, 2014). Reid (2016) finds peers may appeal to prior drug addictions and suggest selling sex as a means to access drugs. Alternatively, O'Brien and Li (2020) describe that traffickers themselves may assume the peer/friend role during recruitment, online friendships and arranging for in person meetings is a common first introduction.

Less commonly referenced are biological family or foster parent traffickers (5/24 studies) who utilize their position of authority in entrapping the youth in sex trafficking (Corbett, 2018; Dalley, 2010). Two studies found that familial pimping accounted for the youngest victims (Marcus et al., 2014; Reid, 2016). Familial traffickers were cited to use force or coercion in the context of recruitment (Corbett, 2018; Dalley, 2010). According to Marcus and colleagues (2014), 'familial pimping' is the most coercive type of relationship, with parental authority and family loyalty acting as coercive strongholds over the child (Marcus et al., 2014; Rosenblatt, 2014). In one case presented by Edinburgh and colleagues (2015) a mother initiated her daughter into the sex trade by coaching her on how to perform sexual services. Another case example by Marcus and colleagues (2014) recounted a foster father who initiated his foster daughter into commercial sex by insisting she contribute to the household by having sex for money with his friends. Alternatively, non-familial traffickers may mimic parenting-like dynamics and a pseudo-family environment during recruitment during recruitment (Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

**Aversive Tactics**. According to Baird and colleagues (2020) the use of aversive tactics in the process of entrapment is less common than grooming and luring tactics such as providing the youth with gifts, drugs, and attention. Thirteen studies made reference to traffickers who utilize aversive tactics including violence and coercion (Baird et al., 2020; Bruhns et al., 2018; Cavazos,

2015; Dalley, 2010; Gibbs et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2020; Nixon et al., 2002; O'Brien, 2018; Reed et al., 2019; Reid, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019; Rosenblatt, 2014; Williamson & Prior, 2009). While some studies highlight a shift from grooming to violence, particularly in the context of a romancing recruitment strategy (Dalley, 2010; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Reed et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2009), other recruitment tactics involve traffickers who are violent from the onset, most commonly referred to as 'Gorilla/Guerilla Pimps' (Dalley, 2010; Gibbs et al., 2015; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Cited Gorilla pimp tactics include: abduction, torture, drugging, gang rape, removing youths' identification, threats and sexual violence in forcing youth to have sex with men for money (Bruhns et al., 2018, Dalley, 2010; Moore et al., 2020; Nixon et al., 2002; Reid, 2016; Rosenblatt, 2014; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Three studies describe traffickers' use of financial abuse where a youth is forced to sell sex for money as a way to pay back her trafficker owed money for drugs or other goods and services (Nixon et al., 2002; Reed et al., 2019; Reid, 2016). For example, Reed and colleagues (2019) describe an instance where a youth began to sell sex as a way to pay back the trafficker for the drugs he provided her. Dalley (2010) discusses traffickers' use of blackmail to compel youth into adhering to their demands to begin selling sex. For example, the trafficker may stage a gang rape, photograph the event and then threaten to expose the pictures to family and friends (Dalley, 2010). Two studies reference a more insidious aversive tactics including slowly pushing sexual boundaries or desensitizing youth to non-consensual sex by repeatedly sexually abusing them (O'Brien, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Roe-Sepowitz (2019) reports 18.1% of the study's reviewed cases involved a trafficker using sexual assault to condition youth to non-consensual sex during the process of entrapment.

**Enmeshment in Sex Trafficking**

Reid (2016) explored recruitment of minors into sex trafficking and identified that within the continuum of recruitment there was a distinct enmeshment process serving to prolong exploitation beyond the recruitment phase due to specific barriers from exiting. Of the reviewed articles, 17 supported this concept of enmeshment as distinct from the initial recruitment when detailing the ways youth are recruited into sex trafficking and exploited over a period of time (Anderson et al., 2014; Bruhns et al., 2018; Cavazos, 2015; Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Corbett, 2018; Dalley, 2010; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Marcus et al., 2014; Nixon et al., 2002; O'Brien & Li, 2020; Perkins & Ruiz, 2017; Reid, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Three clusters of factors that facilitate enmeshment emerged from the literature: control factors, dependency factors, and youth factors. The former two themes refer to the trafficker related factors that promote prolonged exploitation of youth. 'Youth factors' refers to youth-driven barriers to exiting.

**Control factors.** Fifteen of the reviewed articles make reference to control factors whereby youth feel unable to leave their exploitive situation due to feeling fear, shame or like they are 'owned' by their trafficker (Anderson et al., 2014; Bruhns et al., 2018; Cavazos, 2015; Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Corbett, 2018; Dalley, 2010; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Marcus et al., 2014; Nixon et al., 2002; O'Brien & Li, 2020; Reid, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Marcus and colleagues (2014) cite 'Gorilla pimps' who use aversive tactics that induce fear as the most difficult to leave. Several studies reference specific control methods including: rape, burnings, violence, psychological abuse, intimidation, withholding documents, threats to the youth or their family's life, impregnating the youth and threatening their pregnancy or child (Anderson et al., 2014; Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Corbett, 2018; Dalley, 2010; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Nixon et al., 2002; O'Brien & Li, 2020;

Reid, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). More specifically, Reid (2016) describes several intimidation tactics including forcing youth to watch others getting raped or being beaten until miscarriage. Two studies referenced blackmail tactics, such as exposing/threatening to expose explicit images, or making them complicit in a crime, to instill shame and fear to control youth over a long period of time (Dalley, 2010; Reid, 2016). A commonly referenced control method is systematic isolation by the trafficker. Traffickers will disorient youth by moving them around from place to place, assuming control of their cell phones, limiting access to the internet, confining them to hotel rooms, withholding documents, and moving them far away from family and friends (Bruhns et al., 2018; Cavazos, 2015; Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Dalley, 2010; O'Brien & Li, 2020; Reid, 2016). Three studies referenced the initiation of the 'trauma bond' as a powerful control factor (Reid, 2016; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith and colleagues (2009), the trauma bond is facilitated by the cycling of intimacy and violence to establish coercive control. According to these three studies, the trauma bond drives loyalty to the trafficker and provides hope amidst violence that the loving behaviours will return (Reid, 2016; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Reid (2016) describes the loyalty youth have for their trafficker fosters feelings of obligation and responsibility for the wellbeing of their trafficker. For example, Reid (2016) described one youth's feelings of responsibility over the arrest of their trafficker and subsequent refusal to testify against him.

**Dependency factors.** Eight studies made reference to dependency factors that serve as barriers to youth exiting the sex trade and leaving their trafficker (Cavazos, 2015; Corbett, 2018; Dalley, 2010; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Marcus et al., 2014; Reid, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019; Smith et al., 2009). Dependency factors cited in the articles include, impregnating the youth, being the sole provider of basic needs, nurturing drug addiction ('drug bondage'), or creating

'debt bondage' by requiring hefty exiting fees to leave or pay back old debts to the trafficker (Dalley, 2010; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Reid, 2016; Smith et al., 2009). In fact, drug addiction is one of the most commonly cited barriers to exit (Cavazos, 2015; Dalley, 2010; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Marcus et al., 2014; Reid, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019). According to two studies, traffickers may also supply youth with drugs in order to create dependency on them (Corbett, 2018; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019). Baird and colleagues (2020) found that youth with prior drug use were more likely to be supplied with drugs during recruitment.

**Youth factors.** Five studies reference youth factors that prolong exploitation and act as barriers to exiting (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Marcus et al., 2014; Perkins & Ruiz, 2017; Reid, 2016; Rosenblatt, 2014). Three studies describe youths' relationships to their trafficker and/or other exploited youth that may resemble romantic, friendship, or family attachments as significant factors prolonging the exploitation of the youth and keep them enmeshed (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Marcus et al., 2014; Reid, 2016). For example, youth were cited to stay with their trafficker due to a reluctance to leave their friend who was also involved (Rosenblatt, 2014). Contrary to the typical narrative of sex trafficking victimization, Marcus and colleagues (2014) highlight that nearly all of their participants had increasing agency over their sex work over time which acted as a barrier to exiting the sex trade, as youth sold sex independently or recruited pimps for the facilitation of their services and for protection. Perkins and Ruiz (2017) emphasize that victimized youths' strong need for love was a barrier to exiting, noting that many youths felt love and care in the trading of sex for money, despite understanding the exploitive nature of the sex trade.

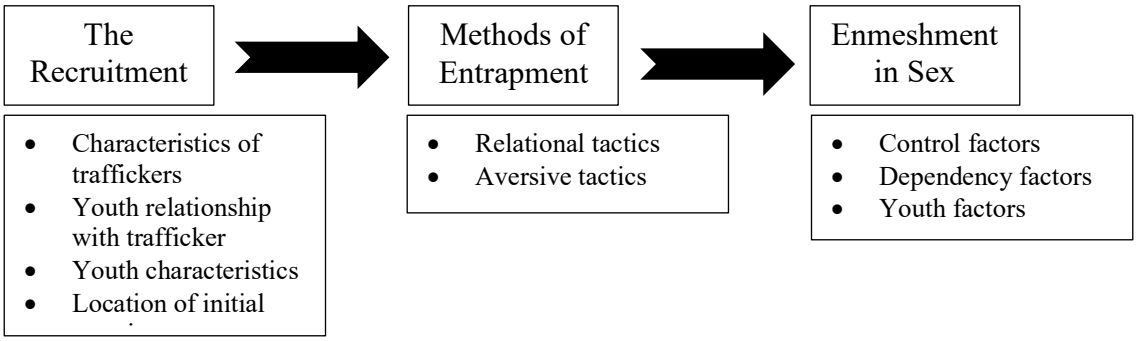
## Discussion

The increased attention and research on sex trafficking has begun to uncover the widespread and horrific nature of the crime. Existing data on the trends of STM identify domestic youth as the primary victims of sex trafficking within Canada and the US, with the average age of recruitment between 12 and 14 years of age (Jordan, Patel, & Rapp, 2013; RCMP, Human Trafficking National Co-ordination Centre, 2014; Smith, Healy Vardaman, & Snow, 2009). STM is widespread across Canada and the US, occurring in all regions including micropolitan, metropolitan and rural communities (Cole & Sprang, 2015). Federal and local governments are aware of the emergent sex trafficking issues and are funding initiatives to protect youth. A necessary component of these efforts is an empirical understanding of the specific ways in which domestic youth are recruited for exploitation in order to inform prevention and intervention initiatives. The purpose of the review was to synthesize empirical studies presenting information on the recruitment of domestic minors into sex trafficking within North America.

The synthesis of the articles for the present review supports a notion of exploitation occurring on a continuum involving trafficker entrapment and enmeshment tactics to recruit youth and prolong exploitation (See Figure 2). More specifically, the proposed exploitation continuum comprises three distinct, but not mutually exclusive, components: the recruitment context, entrapment strategies utilized by traffickers, and enmeshment tactics. The concept of a continuum incorporates the understanding that exploitation occurs in sequence, from targeting victims to victim entrapment and enmeshment in the sex trade. However, an exploitation continuum is not synonymous with an exploitive template used by traffickers for each victim. Rather, the reviewed articles highlighted that pathways into sex trafficking are individualized and strategically catered to each victim according to their context, vulnerabilities and

characteristics. Thus, the context of the youth, shapes the trafficker's use of entrapment and enmeshment tactics, with some of the same tactics for entrapment and the initial exploitation of youth being used to enmesh youth and keep them within the trafficker's control. Importantly, the exploitation framework proposed by the present review fills a significant gap in the literature by identifying the specific ways in which traffickers target youth, exploit their vulnerabilities in facilitating their entrapment into sex trafficking, as well as prolonging their exploitation through enmeshment.

*Figure 2.* Exploitation Continuum




While much of the extant research on sex trafficking pools samples of adult and minor victims, the present review supports the view that traffickers target youth specific characteristics and contexts in the process of exploitation and thus, exploitation should be understood within the youth context separately (Bang et al., 2014; Reid, 2014). Youth are prime targets for traffickers, as they are more dependent on others for basic needs than adults and they possess developmental vulnerabilities that are easily targeted in the process of exploitation (Bruhns et al., 2018; Cole & Anderson, 2013; Schwartz, 2015). Findings from the reviewed articles highlight that traffickers use luring and manipulative strategies to specifically target groups of youth living in the most precarious of situations, with a history of adverse childhood experiences, unmet needs and

exhibiting risky behaviours (e.g., Baird et al., 2020; Bruhns et al., 2018; Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Dalley, 2010; Perkins & Ruiz, 2017; Reed et al., 2019; Reid, 2016; Smith et al., 2009). Youth specific contexts targeted by traffickers include youth living in foster homes, group homes or are runaways. Moreover, traffickers target locations where youth spend unsupervised time such as, malls, around schools, parks and above all, online (Baird et al., 2020; Dalley, 2010; Moore et al., 2020; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Williamson & Prior, 2009). While it is clear that the characteristics and contexts targeted by traffickers in the reviewed articles are youth specific, future research should systematically compare the recruitment of adults and youth to further delineate the differences.

With the continuum framework as a background, findings of this review present an evidence-based understanding of pathways into STM that can inform prevention initiatives to eliminate recruitment. Prevention efforts may be most effective online, as online avenues were the most commonly cited location where a youth initially meets their trafficker or is recruited (Baird et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2018; O'Brien & Li, 2020; Perkins & Ruiz, 2017; Rosenblatt, 2014; Tidball et al., 2016; Wells et al., 2012). Youth are known to spend copious amounts of time each day online, connecting with individuals they don't know, and some engage in risky online behaviours such as sending sexually explicit images that set the stage for recruitment (O'Brien, 2018; O'Brien & Li, 2020). Indeed, it is increasingly common for youth to have friends exiting only in cyberspace (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008) and traffickers take advantage of the anonymity of online connections in their efforts to target and entrap youth (O'Brien & Li, 2020). With the increasing presence of technology in youths' lives, the evolving creation of new online applications to connect with others, and evidence of trafficker infiltration of these online avenues, prevention initiatives should involve information sharing with youth,

families and agencies about internet safety, red flags, parental monitoring and privacy online (O'Brien & Li, 2020).

Youth education on exploitive, unhealthy relationships emerged as a key direction for prevention, based on the relational entrapment strategies identified in the reviewed articles. Several red flags can be extracted from the proposed exploitive continuum that should be incorporated into the education of youth. In particular, romantic partners were the most commonly cited recruiter or trafficker (e.g., Gibbs et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2020; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). The shift from a caring romantic relationship to an exploitative relationship is filled with warning signs such as, promises that never come to fruition, being told they owe money to their boyfriend (i.e., debt bondage), having their phone taken away, being isolated from friends and family, being blackmailed, desensitizing youth to non-consensual sex through rape, and violence (e.g., Anderson et al., 2014; Dalley, 2010; Gibbs et al., 2015; Nixon et al., 2002; Reed et al., 2019; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019; Smith et al., 2009). In fact, the shift can be insidious, with the trafficker using grooming strategies such as providing attention, drugs, gifts, money, dates, intimacy and subsequently utilize various manipulative or coercive strategies to compel the youth to sell sex (Baird et al., 2020; Reid, 2016; Smith et al., 2009). Education on the risks of sex trafficking should be widespread across North America, youth should be aware of the ways in which traffickers target youth, exploit their romantic desires and shift the relationship into exploitation. It is the belief of the authors that schools, agencies such as child welfare and homeless shelters are important venues for such knowledge dissemination, as this is where youth from the most vulnerable circumstances are located.

In addition to identifying directions for effective prevention and early identification, the continuum framework, and enmeshment tactics more specifically, can be used to inform

intervention initiatives to extract youth from the sex trade and prevent re-entry. The concept of enmeshment, a term coined by Reid (2016), within the proposed exploitation continuum highlights the ways in which traffickers cunningly cultivate dependency and control over their victims to prolong their exploitation. Trafficker enmeshment tactics draw attention to the complexity of sex trafficking victimization including, the trauma endured by victims and the psychological attachments keeping youth under the control of their trafficker. For example, becoming pregnant, being financially or drug reliant on their trafficker, having hefty debts to pay their trafficker (i.e., exiting fee) are all dependency factors keeping youth exploited (e.g., Corbett, 2018; Dalley, 2010; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Marcus et al., 2014; Reid, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019; Smith et al., 2009). Alternatively, control factors such as, violence, intimidation, blackmail, and systemic isolation leave youth feeling unable to leave their trafficker due to feeling fear, shame or like they are owned by their trafficker (E.g., Bruhns et al., 2018; Cavazos, 2015; Marcus et al., 2014; O'Brien & Li, 2020; Reid, 2016; Williamson & Prior, 2009). The cycling of intimacy and violence by some traffickers can facilitate the development of a trauma bond, driving victim loyalty towards the trafficker and acting as a barrier to exiting (Reid, 2016; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). As a result of these dependency and control factors, youth may perceive a lack of alternatives to their life with the trafficker, making it challenging to take steps in leaving their exploitive relationship/situation (Cavazos, 2015; Marcus et al., 2014; Reid, 2016).

Agencies, including law enforcement tasked with the extraction of youth from the sex trade should be assessing for these dependency and control factors keeping youth victimized and subsequently identifying ways they can holistically support youth and meet their needs to break dependency on their trafficker. For example, providing youth with financial stability, housing,

childcare, and mental health support are a few of the potential supports to be in place in the process of extraction. A cornerstone for effective holistic intervention initiatives is interagency collaboration to ensure survivors receive coordinated services. For example, the Human Trafficking Prevention Intervention Strategy (H.I.P.S) is a Toronto-based collaboration of twenty agencies (e.g., homeless shelters, child welfare agencies police services) with goals to build partnerships between sectors, coordinate care and include improve community capacity and responses to sex trafficking. However, effective survivor interventions do not only require capacity for service, rather a deep understanding of the psychological complexity of sex trafficking enmeshment can allow service providers to approach youth with empathy in their efforts to keep them safe and prevent re-entry. Indeed, the present review offers this understanding, highlighting the barriers to exiting in financial, emotional, and psychological domains.

**Limitations**

This review was conducted systematically and rigorously and followed the PRISMA guidelines for systematic reviews; however, there are limitations to be considered. First, while the authors of this review conducted an extensive, multi-strategy, high sensitivity search to attain all possible studies, it is possible that not all available studies were found and included in this review due to terms not used in our search or databases unexplored. Second, during the review process, the authors emailed the authors of studies where the sample was unclear (e.g., were adult victims pooled with minors? Were internationally trafficked victims included in the sample?), however if no response was attained, those articles were excluded from the present review. Third, the review only included studies published in the English language due to a lack of translation resources.

## Conclusions and Future Directions

This review presents the first synthesis of research on the recruitment process of domestic North American youth for sex trafficking. Importantly, the review fills a significant gap in the literature by identifying a framework for the exploitation continuum that involves a series of entrapment and enmeshment tactics that intersect with youths' vulnerabilities and circumstances (see Table 1 for summary of critical findings). Information derived from the studies draw attention to the vast and brutal experiences of victimized youth and the circumstances making it challenging for youth to leave their trafficker. This study should serve as a call to action for governments, agencies, NGOs and front-line workers to use empirical evidence to support their programs, policies and practices (See Table 2). Illuminated by this study are the large hurdles faced by victimized youth to exit the sex trade and the multifaceted needs of survivors from the most basic needs, such as shelter, money, food and clothing, to more complex psychological, medical and emotional needs. Indeed, the unmet needs of survivors were the circumstances leaving them vulnerable to traffickers' recruitment tactics in the first place. Therefore, policies and post-exit programs need to support youth systematically and holistically in order to truly support their exiting.

An important backdrop to the issue of STM in North America is the shift in discourse from sex trafficked youth as criminals (i.e., "teen prostitutes") to survivors/victims of a crime which followed the criminalization of sex trafficking and federal consent laws between 2000 and 2008 in Canada and the USA. With a change in legislation, came a shift in the way policy makers, law enforcement and researchers began to view victimized youth as needing protection rather than punishment. While beyond the scope of the current paper, it is interesting to note a clear acceleration of research on the recruitment and enmeshment of minors involved in sex

trafficking following the legislative changes promoting the decriminalization of victims. In fact, all articles included in the present review were published 2002 and later, after the passing of the TVPA in 2000. Future research should further examine the political and practical implications of this shift in discourse.

While research on risk and vulnerability have highlighted the enhanced risk for LGBTQ+ youth for recruitment into sex trafficking (e.g., Choi, 2015; Fedina et al., 2016), the reviewed articles largely failed to include diverse samples of youth identifying as LGBTQ+. Thus, it remains unclear if traffickers utilize similar or different tactics in the recruitment, entrapment, and enmeshment of LGBTQ+ youth. Future research should focus on understanding the pathways to exploitation and experiences of LGBTQ+ youth involved in sex trafficking. By delineating the unique experiences and needs of diverse youth populations exploited by sex trafficking, prevention efforts and intervention programs can better tailor their services to reflect the potentially unique needs of exploited youth. Future research on sex trafficking should also continue to explore on the recruitment of domestic youth in North America, the role of familial trafficking, and identify similarities and differences in the recruitment of adults and minors, domestic and international victims and evaluate post exit programs aiming to support survivors.

*Table 1.* The Exploitation Continuum: Summary of Critical Findings

| The Recruitment Context |
|---|
| Who are Traffickers?<br>- Traffickers are most commonly male.<br>- Traffickers and recruiters most commonly cited as romantic partners or friends.<br>- Other cited relationships including, family, roommates, school mates, boyfriend of a friend, buyers or 'Johns', employers, drug dealers and strangers<br>Youth Characteristics<br>- Youth with unmet financial, love and belonging or basic needs.<br>- Child welfare involvement and experiences of childhood maltreatment.<br>- Runaway youth and youth in homeless shelters.<br>- Other cited youth risk factors include, drug addiction, independent sex work, being First Nations or Indigenous and having an intellectual disability.<br>Initial Location of Recruitment<br>- Most commonly cited recruitment location is online.<br>- Other locations include, bus stops, homeless shelters, outside schools, malls, nightlife, social gatherings, employment, in the neighborhood, at the park, at corner stores or even within their own home. |
| Methods of Entrapment |
| Relational Tactics<br>- Boyfriend scheme (i.e., 'Romeo pimping') most commonly cited tactic.<br>o Boyfriend recruiters/traffickers "sell the dream" of a life together, provide unmet needs, groom with attention, love, gifts, drugs, money.<br>o Eventual shift from romance to exploitation involves manipulation and/or force.<br>- 'Befriending' tactic may include other girls working for trafficker pose as friend in recruitment or friends may normalize selling sex, operate as a role model in sex trade or use peer pressure to get youth to sell sex.<br>- 'Familial pimping' cited as the most coercive and accounts for the youngest victims., where parental authority and family loyalty act as coercive strongholds.<br>Aversive Tactics<br>- Aversive tactics include, blackmail, financial abuse, pushing sexual boundaries, abduction, torture, drugging, gang rape, removing youths' identification, threats and sexual violence in forcing youth to have sex with men for money.<br>- Aversive tactics used during shift from grooming to violence or upon first encounter. |
| Enmeshment Process |
| - Control tactics: Fear, shame, feeling 'owned', experiencing threats, intimation, blackmail, systemic isolation, trauma bond, loyalty to trafficker.<br>- Dependency factors: Trafficker nurturing drug addiction, trafficker is sole provider of basic needs, pregnancy, debt bondage<br>- Youth factors: Youth relationship/attachment to trafficker, need for love, increased agency in sex work. |

*Table 2.* Practice, Policy and Research Implications

| |
|---|
| Practice<br>- Given the significance of online platforms for recruitment, prevention initiatives should take place online.<br>- Prevention initiatives should involve knowledge dissemination with youth, families, school staff, law enforcement, child welfare agencies and homeless shelters about pathways into sex trafficking, internet safety and red flags.<br>- Youth education on unhealthy and exploitive romantic relationships should be an important piece of academic curriculum in early adolescence. |
| Policy<br>- Interagency communication and collaboration is necessary to ensure survivors receive coordinated services.<br>- Policy attention is needed in efforts to provide victimized youth with financial stability, housing, childcare, and mental health support.<br>- Regional law enforcement agencies should develop specific human trafficking divisions that are well educated and equipped to support the extraction of youth from sex trafficking.<br>- Policy attention and funding is needed to support the development of trauma-informed aftercare for youth survivors of sex trafficking. |
| Research<br>- We call on researchers to study the pathways to exploitation and experiences of LGBTQ+ youth involved in sex trafficking.<br>- Future studies need to further delineate the route of exploitation by familial traffickers, identify similarities and differences in the recruitment of adults and minors, as well as domestic and international victims. |

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## Chapter 3: Focusing in on the Canadian Context and Child Welfare Involved Victims

The primary goal of Study 1 (Chapter 2) was to synthesize the available research on the process of recruitment for domestic minors into sex trafficking within Canada and the United States. The synthesis of the 23 reviewed studies converged on the notion of a recruitment continuum comprising three components: the recruitment context, entrapment strategies utilized by traffickers, and enmeshment tactics used to prolong exploitation. This framework offers a new understanding about the ways in which traffickers' strategies for exploitation intersect with youths' developmental and relational vulnerabilities and circumstances. It speaks to importance of early identification and prevention by focusing on youths' vulnerabilities and risks that are targeted by traffickers (e.g., social media use, child welfare involvement) as well as the importance of a holistic and interagency approach to intervention. Government agencies (e.g., Child Welfare), NGOs and frontline workers who work with exploited youth need to be aware of the enmeshment youth have with their traffickers, the hurdles they face in exiting, and the psychological, emotional and material needs that must be met to promote successful reintegration into a new life.

Two major gaps in the literature were identified during the synthesis of the literature for Study 1, that informed the research objectives of Study 2. First, while Study 1 highlighted the heightened risk of recruitment among child welfare involved youth, it was unclear how traffickers specifically target these youth, what characteristics or circumstances put them at risk, and how the recruitment process is similar or different from youth not involved with child welfare. Particularly for youth removed from the care of their family of origin, it can be hypothesized that foster care and group homes present additional risks for vulnerability to traffickers and opportunities for recruitment. This differential knowledge is critical when

considering the policy and practice implications for child welfare agencies as they utilize government funding to target the protection of their youth. It is imperative that CW agencies have empirical evidence regarding youth risk and pathways into sex trafficking to inform their efforts in developing prevention and intervention initiatives (Samarasinghe & Burton, 2007). Second, Study 1 focused on the American and Canadian contexts for the domestic sex trafficking of minors. However, the majority of available research was American with 20 of the 23 reviewed studies utilizing American data. Thus, Study 1 was largely a review of the domestic sex trafficking of *American* minors. Overall, there is a significant deficit in Canadian research on sex trafficking, leaving gaps in our understandings of sex trafficking within Canadian borders.

The goal of Study 2 (Chapter 4) is to increase understanding of the elevated risk status of CW involved youth who are victimized by sex traffickers, as well as explore routes into sex trafficking within the Canadian context. Circumventing methodological challenges of collecting data on victims of sex trafficking, we collaborated with a local child welfare and police agency to conduct a secondary data analysis of sex trafficking cases from 2008 to 2016. Study 2 offers a comparative understanding of the unique risks of CW involved youth for recruitment into sex trafficking including the ways in which traffickers meet and recruit CW youth compared to non-CW youth. Practice implications are explored, including the development of a risk protocol used by frontline CW staff for early identification.

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# Chapter 4: Sex Trafficking of Women and Girls in a Southern Ontario Region: Police File Review Exploring Victim Characteristics, Trafficking Experiences and the Intersection with Child Welfare[2]

Sex trafficking consists of the recruitment and exploitation of an individual through use of threats, force, coercion, deception, or abuse of power for the purpose of a commercial sex act (UNODC, 2014). It is one of the most common forms of human trafficking and involves the selling of persons for sex domestically, within country borders, and internationally, across country borders. The majority of available research is on the international industry, leaving gaps in understanding of exploitation of domestic individuals (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Hepburn & Simon, 2010). Although the exact numbers of sex trafficking victims[3] are unknown (Public Safety Canada 2012), the International Labour Office (ILO) reports approximately 4.5 million people worldwide are trafficked for sex (ILO, 2012). The province of Ontario has been identified as a major hub for sex trafficking, with 75% of Ontario's cases occurring within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) (RCMP, Human Trafficking National Co-ordination Centre, 2014). Growing public awareness and concern on issues of Canadian sex trafficking of youth (under age 18) has led to both Federal and Provincial anti-trafficking task forces and with these initiatives comes the call for relevant research to inform best practices.

By virtue of age, youth from all sectors of the population are at risk of involvement in sex

[2] This is the author's version of the published manuscript:
Baird, K., Connolly, J., & McDonald, K. (2020). Sex trafficking of women and girls in a southern Ontario region: Police file review exploring characteristics, trafficking experiences and the intersection with child welfare. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science.*

[3] In the literature on sex trafficking, terminology is a contentious issue. The words 'victim' and 'survivor' are two words that are used to describe individuals who have been trafficked. The term 'victim' is often used when referring to an individual who is in the process of being recruited or currently being trafficked/exploited, while 'survivor' is used when referring to an individual who is no longer being trafficked. The current study accessed participant data through a criminal lens on women and girls who were, at the time, being exploited. Thus, we view these individuals as victims of a crime and use the term 'victim' throughout the paper.

trafficking. In fact, the majority of victims are recruited as minors between ages 12 and 14 (Jordan, Patel & Rapp, 2013; Smith, Healy Vardaman & Snow., 2009). The developmental vulnerabilities of youth such as identity formation, the need for belonging, desire for autonomy, desire for romantic relationships and poor problem-solving skills expose this population as a target for psychological coercion and manipulation (Schwartz, 2015). In addition, youth are highly accessible online via social media platforms, making it easy for traffickers to connect with them and build relationships anonymously (Greenbaum & Crawford-Jakubiak, 2015). However, some populations of youth are at greater risk for recruitment than others. A particularly robust finding in the literature is that youth involved with child welfare (CW) are at an elevated risk for being victimized for sex trafficking (Landers, McGrath, Johnson, Armstrong, & Dollard, 2017). Likewise, CW agencies, are becoming increasingly concerned about how to improve the protection of their vulnerable youth in an empirically supported way (O'Brien, White, & Fraga Rizo, 2017). Unfortunately, there is limited Canadian empirical research available to inform anti-sex trafficking initiatives. Using Canadian definitions of sex trafficking, with the current study we sought to investigate a sample of sex trafficked youth within an Ontario district in order to compare those with and without CW involvement on age of recruitment, exposure to child maltreatment, substance use, criminal behaviour, and trafficking experiences.

**Sex Trafficking and Victim Involvement in Child Welfare**

Previous research has repeatedly highlighted that among sex trafficked youth, CW involvement is elevated (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Estes & Weiner, 2001; Fong & Berger- Cardoso, 2010; Gragg, Petta, Bernstein, Eisen, & Quinn, 2007; Williams & Frederick, 2009). One report indicated that 85% of trafficked youth have a history of involvement with CW and 75% have lived in foster care (Gragg et al., 2007). Researchers have speculated on why sex

trafficked youth are overrepresented in CW. Risk based research has highlighted the overwhelming rates of childhood maltreatment experiences among trafficked individuals, particularly exposure to childhood sexual abuse (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Farley et al., 2005; Fedina, Williamson & Perdue, 2016; Grace, Starck, Potenza, Kenney & Sheetz, 2012; Havlicek, Huston, Boughton, & Zhang, 2016; Kotrla, 2010; Moore et al., 2020; Raymond, Hughes & Gomez, 2001; Roe-Sepowitz, 2012). Many youth come into the care of CW due to experiences of childhood maltreatment, while others are referred for experiences of childhood adversity (Simmons-Horton, 2017). Additionally, not all youth who experience childhood maltreatment are involved with CW due to issues such as underreporting of maltreatment incidents, lack of follow-up on cases, differences in the definition and interpretation of what "maltreatment" is by service and care providers. Nonetheless, the ruptured familial relationships and experiences of childhood adversity are circumstances that place CW youth at heightened risk for exploitation because traffickers target these youths' unmet needs for positive caregiver relationships, love, and belonging. In addition, CW youth are more likely to exhibit runaway behaviours that place them at risk for recruitment on the streets (Landers et al., 2017). Despite a growing body of literature on risk for sex trafficking, there is limited empirical research examining the shared and unique characteristics and experiences of sex trafficked youth involved with CW compared to non-CW involved youth. Given the overlap between CW involvement and sex trafficking involvement, understanding the unique characteristics of this exploited group of youth might allow for early identification of risk for recruitment and special considerations for the placement of at-risk youth in care.

**Recruitment and Entrapment**

Recruitment refers to mode through which traffickers find their potential victims. Youth are recruited across all geographic regions including metropolitan, micropolitan, and rural communities (Cole & Sprang, 2015). Traffickers focus on locations where vulnerable youth spend unmonitored time. With the surge of social media usage among youth and the anonymity afforded with online connections, recruitment is increasingly taking place on sites like Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter (Greenbaum & Crawford-Jakubiak, 2015; Latonero, 2011), as well as on dating applications like Tinder. In fact, one study found that between 41.7% and 52.0% traffickers use the Internet to recruit youth (Cole & Sprang, 2015). Recruitment also takes place on the streets in malls, in and around schools (middle/high), bus stations, courthouses, bars, parks, restaurants and playgrounds (Boxill & Richardson, 2007; Moore et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2009). Typically, traffickers have greater success in recruiting vulnerable youth who are homeless, involved with gangs, in transitional or unstable housing, suffering from drug and alcohol addictions, and residing in abusive households (Saewyc et al., 2008). While researchers have cited that youth involved with CW are targets while in care (Choi, 2015; Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Fong & Berger- Cardoso, 2010; O'Brien et al., 2017; Williams & Frederick, 2009), there is no research examining whether there are specific trends in the targeting and recruitment of youth who reside in foster and group homes. Likewise, it is unclear how traffickers proceed to entrap these youth once they have recruited them.

Entrapment refers to the strategies traffickers use to engage youth once they have made contact with them. Trafficker strategies to entrap youth can be divided into two categories, grooming and aversive strategies. Grooming involves providing the target youth with basic needs (e.g., shelter, food) and desires, including showering her with presents, attention, money and even drugs (Raphael, Reichert & Power, 2010; Schwartz, 2015). The trafficker's grooming

process often includes meeting the youth's need for safety, security, love, and belonging by taking on the role of a caring, available, and attentive boyfriend (Schwartz, 2015). Comparatively, aversive strategies include threats, physical violence, or pressure from the trafficker or others involved (Kennedy, Klein, Bristowe, Cooper & Yuille, 2007; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Victims may be entrapped in more than one way (e.g., love and violence) and both grooming and/or aversive methods may be used prior to recruitment into sex trafficking or at the time of recruitment and thereafter (Kennedy et al., 2007). A trafficker's entrapment strategy intersects with the vulnerability of the youth who is victimized. For example, a youth with a drug addiction may be offered "free" drugs by the trafficker in the grooming process and a homeless youth seeking shelter may be offered a "free" room at a hotel. In many cases, "free" offerings become debt and the youth is then asked to work to pay it back (Estes & Weiner, 2001; Kennedy et al., 2007; Williamson & Prior, 2009).

**Research Approaches to Sex Trafficking**

Given the covert and transient nature of sex trafficking, exceptional challenges exist in research (Horn & Woods, 2013). One of the most challenging factors is accessing victimized individuals for research. Involvement in sex trafficking often includes involvement in illegal behaviours (e.g., theft, drug trafficking), stigmatization from the public, and risk to the victim, all of which impact individuals' willingness to participate in research and an increased likelihood of unreliable answers for privacy protection (Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005). There is an added challenge in researching youth victims of trafficking, as researchers have reporting obligations to child welfare (Zimmerman & Watts, 2003), which may deter youth engagement in this research. Challenges in accessing this hidden population for research has led to specific methodologies for studying sex trafficking, most of which present a host of limitations in the generalizability of the

data obtained. Sex trafficking research has largely relied upon participant self-identification, retrospective accounts, and convenience sampling (e.g., Lederer & Wetzel, 2014; Moore et al., 2020; O'Brien et al., 2017; Raphael et al., 2010; Reid & Piquero, 2014), all of which yield a range of sampling biases. Without corroborating information from other sources, the simplistic questions used for self-identification (e.g., "In the past 6 months, have you been paid for having sexual relations with someone?") (O'Brien et al., 2017) do not gather enough information to accurately determine whether individuals' exploitive experiences align with legal definitions of sex trafficking. Additionally, there are known challenges for victim participation in research including mistrust of others, fear of their trafficker, and denial of being a victim of a crime (Pearce, 2009). Therefore, we can assume that those who identify themselves as a victim of sex trafficking for participation in research are likely not representative of victims who do not. Another common method for accessing participants is within treatment or community programs (e.g., homeless outreach programs, sex trafficking community intervention programs) (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Landers et al., 2017; Roe-Sepowitz, 2012; Twill, Green & Traylor, 2010). While these studies provide valuable insights into issues of sex trafficking, there are inherent biases in their samples, as victimized individuals who have access to programs, likely also live in urban areas and have access to resources, support, and perhaps the financial means to make it easier to connect with treatment programs. Thus, the assumption can be made that individuals who self-identify, seek or obtain access to treatment are systematically different from those who do not.

The current study utilizes a unique approach for gathering data on sex trafficked individuals. Through collaboration with police services, researchers were able to examine chart data on all sex trafficked individuals police opened investigations for between 2008 and 2016.

Partnering with police services allowed for the data to bypass obligatory reporting issues, as all underage victims have already been brought to the attention of child welfare, therefore allowing the inclusion of younger victims in the sample. Using corroborating information from family members, the victim and other sources, these individuals were identified under Canadian law as being trafficked, whether or not the individual themselves self-identified as a victim. In addition, a local CW agency provided information about victim CW involvement allowing for the comparison of victims with and without CW involvement. The current study offers a novel and important exploration into the constellation of characteristics and trafficking experiences of sex trafficked victims within the Canadian context.

**Study Objectives**

The current study is a secondary data analysis of police and CW files that aims to enhance the understanding of the characteristics of trafficked females in an Ontario district by conducting a comparison of those with and without CW involvement. Based on the literature reviewed, it was hypothesized that CW victims will more likely be domestic (i.e., Canada as their country of origin), will have been recruited at a younger age, will be more likely to have experienced childhood maltreatment, more likely to have used alcohol and drugs, and the time between recruitment and police investigation initiation would have been shorter compared to non-CW victims. With regards to recruitment and entrapment, it was expected that compared to non-CW victims, CW victims will be more likely to have experienced multiple grooming and entrapment strategies, lived in a group home while being trafficked and met their trafficker online.

## Method

The current study was completed in collaboration with a local police agency and child welfare agency, who requested assistance in understanding sex trafficking of underage youth in their vicinity. These two agencies had a pre-existing relationship facilitated by a specific human trafficking protocol the two agencies had co-created, that involves CW workers reporting suspected sex trafficking cases to police and police notifying CW when a minor is identified as being at-risk for or is currently being exploited. The geographic area serviced by these agencies spans approximately 1,700 square kilometres in the Greater Toronto Area. It is one of Canada's fastest growing suburban municipalities with 1.2 million residents. The region contains high ethnocultural diversity with 78% identifying as a visible minority and 47% born outside of Canada. Crime in the region has risen 8% over the past five years, with human trafficking related offenses being one of the highest rates in Ontario (RCMP, Human Trafficking National Co-ordination Centre, 2014, Statistics Canada, 2016).

Police staff members on the Human Trafficking Team reviewed 275 sex trafficking case files which were investigated between May 2008 through December 2016. Sex trafficking in these investigations came to the attention of the police for various reasons including, but not limited to, victims seeking police assistance, cases with victim cooperation and charges against the accused trafficker, cases without victim cooperation, proactive cases where tips were provided, and police involvement for other reasons (e.g., responding to reported violence). Due to issues of confidentiality and privacy, researchers were not given direct access to case files and all data were de-identified. The research team consulted with police to determine variables of interest to extract from the case files. Data were collected from police reports, police notes, investigative summaries, audio or video interviews, statements from victims or their families, and information gathered from police staff involved in the investigation. Some of the data

provided to the researchers by the police were qualitative and later organized into coherent categories. The coded data was later reviewed by the Detective Sergeant to ensure accuracy. A senior supervisor at Children's Aid Society then reviewed the identified victims to determine which have current or past involvement with a Canadian child welfare agency in any capacity (e.g., crown ward, temporary care custody, society wards).

The researchers provided the police with a template containing variables of interest to be extracted from the case files. Data were obtained on age of recruitment and age when sex trafficking investigation was initiated. The latter variable is important to obtain the length of time victims are exploited prior to police investigation. In addition, country of origin was determined to establish whether victims were domestic (i.e., from Canada) or international (i.e., from another country). Data were also obtained on CW involvement, exposure to child maltreatment, substance use, criminal behaviour, and victim trafficking experiences. Victim trafficking experiences were broken down into where the victim was living at time of investigation initiation, as this is indicative of where they were living while being trafficked, as well as various modes of recruitment (e.g., Facebook, through a romantic relationship, strip club), and methods of entrapment by trafficker (e.g., use of grooming and aversive strategies).

Ethics approval was obtained from York University Human Participants Review Committee for the present study. All identifying information was removed from the secondary dataset prior to providing access to the researchers. Data were inputted in an excel spreadsheet created by the authors and provided in a secure, encrypted format.

**Data Set**

Data were retrieved from all sex trafficking case files ($N = 275$). Of these cases, 51 were incomplete with over 90% missing data. These cases were excluded from analysis. All

remaining cases ($N = 223$) were identified as female in the current sample. Fifty-two were identified as being involved with a CW agency at some point in their lives, 102 had no CW involvement at all and 69 cases were unknown. Ethnic diversity was observed in the current sample, with 43% identifying as an ethnicity other than White. Six categories of ethnicity were identified within the data: White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, South Asian, and Indigenous. The majority of the sample were identified as White (57%), South Asian (17.9%) or Black/African Canadian (16.1%). No significant differences in ethnicity were observed between CW and non-CW victims.

Findings are first reported for the total sample ($N = 223$) and then the file was re-organized so that comparisons could be made between CW-involved ($N = 52$) and non-CW involved females ($N = 102$). Given data were extracted from pre-existing files and documents, missing data varied across participants and variables.

## Results

Overall group demographic variables were explored, and comparisons were made between CW and non-CW involved victims (Table 3). Frequency and chi-squared analyses were executed to describe the characteristics of the total sample ($N = 223$). Similarities and differences between the subsamples of CW and non-CW cases were then analyzed using chi-squared statistics. Analyses begin first with age, followed by ethnicity, living situation prior to trafficking, childhood maltreatment experiences, substance use and criminality, and finally

*Table 3.* Socio-Demographic Characteristics

| | Full Sample (N=223) | | CW Sample (n=52) | | Non CW Sample (n=102) | | $\chi^2$ | *p* value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age When Recruited into Sex Trafficking | | | | | | | 32.87 | .00** |
| Under 18 | 111 | 69% | 52 | 100% | 47 | 55% | | |
| 18 and over | 51 | 32% | -- | -- | 39 | 45% | | |
| Age When Investigation Initiated | | | | | | | 45.57 | .00** |
| Under 18 | 75 | 34% | 43 | 83% | 26 | 26% | | |
| 18 and over | 148 | 66% | 9 | 17% | 76 | 75% | | |
| Country of Origin | | | | | | | | |
| Canada | 162 | 82% | 50 | 98% | 81 | 85% | 5.88 | .01* |
| Other | 36 | 18% | 1 | 2% | 14 | 15% | | |
| Europe | 5 | 2.5% | -- | -- | 2 | 2% | | |
| Asia | 22 | 11% | -- | -- | 5 | 5% | | |
| South America and Caribbean | 6 | 3% | 1 | 2% | 4 | 4% | | |
| Africa | 3 | 1.5% | -- | -- | 3 | 3% | | |
| Living Situation Prior to Trafficking | | | | | | | | |
| Two parent household | 52 | 33% | 4 | 8% | 37 | 46% | | |
| Single parent household | 60 | 39% | 12 | 25 | 33 | 41% | | |
| Multifamily household | 1 | 1% | -- | -- | 1 | 1% | | |
| Legal guardian/Adoptive | 6 | 4% | 1 | 2% | 3 | 4% | | |
| Foster parents | 9 | 6% | 9 | 19% | -- | -- | | |
| Group home | 19 | 12% | 19 | 40% | -- | -- | | |
| Extended Family | 9 | 6% | 3 | 6% | 6 | 8% | | |

*Note.* CW= child welfare.
*p < .05. **p < .01

trafficking experiences. Effect sizes were calculated to account for unequal sample sizes using Cramer's V. All statistical assumptions were met in the present analyses

**Age**

Overall, the majority of youth within the total sample were recruited into sex trafficking as minors (*M*= 16.77, *SD* = 3.72) (68.5%). In fact, all CW victims were recruited as minors (100%, *M*= 14.71, *SD* =1.40), whereas just over half of non-CW victims were recruited as

minors (54.7%, *M*= 17.81, *SD* = 4.22). Thus, compared to non-CW victims, CW victims were significantly more likely to be recruited as minors ($\chi^2$ (1) =32.87, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .49$).

When the sex trafficking investigation was initiated, victims were, on average, over the age of 18 (66.4%, *M*= 22.82, *SD* = 9.0). The average time between victim recruitment into sex trafficking and the initiation of the investigation was 2.5 years (*SD* = 3.1). In comparing CW and non-CW victims, approximately eighty percent (82.7%) of CW victims (*M*= 16.65, *SD* =2.17) and a quarter (25.5%) of non-CW victims were minors at time of the investigation initiation (*M*= 21.20, *SD* = 5.34). This difference was statistically significant ($\chi^2$ (1) = 45.57, $p < .001$, Cramer's *V*= 0.54). More specifically, the time (in years) between recruitment and the investigation initiation was shorter for CW victims ($M_{years}$= 1.75, *SD* = 2.17) than non-CW victims ($M_{years}$= 2.74, *SD* = 3.28), but this difference was not statistically significant.

**Country of Origin**

The majority of youth in the sample were domestic, with their country of origin being Canada (81.8%). 18% were from other countries including Europe (2.5%), Asia (11%), South America and the Caribbean (3%) and Africa (1.5%). CW victims were significantly more likely to report Canada being their country of origin (98%) than non-CW victims (85%) ($\chi^2$ (1) = 5.88, $p = .01$, Cramer's $V = .20$).

**Living Situation Prior to Trafficking**

Police staff extracted data on where victims were living prior to being trafficked. The majority of the sample identified coming from a single- parent household (38.5%) or a two-parent household (33.3%). The remaining twenty-eight percent lived with extended family (5.8%), in group homes (12.2%), foster parents (5.8%), or with legal or adoptive parents (3.8%). CW victims were more likely to identify coming from a group home (39.6%), single-parent

home (25%), or a foster home (18.8%). Of those in care of CW, 40% were designated as crown wards, meaning children who are the legal responsibility of the government.

**Childhood Maltreatment**

Victims disclosed high rates of childhood maltreatment predating their exploitation. Table 4 summarizes rates of childhood maltreatment for the entire sample, as well as for CW and non-CW groups. Seventy-five percent of the sample (74.6%) reported having experienced childhood maltreatment. Neglect was the most commonly reported type of childhood maltreatment (67%). Emotional abuse was reported by 65.8% of the sample, physical abuse by 38.2%, and sexual abuse by 15.5%. CW victims reported higher rates of childhood maltreatment (87.8%) compared to non-CW victims (67.6%) ($\chi^2$ (1) = 6.20, $p$ = .009, Cramer's $V$ = .20). Specifically, CW victims were more likely to experience emotional abuse ($\chi^2$ (1) =8.58, $p$ = .002, Cramer's $V$ = .25) and neglect ($\chi^2$ (1) = 4.93, $p$= .02, Cramer's $V$= .19), compared to non-CW victims.

*Table 4.* Childhood Maltreatment

| | Full Sample (*N*=223) | | CW Sample (*n*=52) | | Non-CW Sample (*n*=102) | | $\chi^2$ | *p* value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 141 | 75% | 43 | 88% | 69 | 68% | 6.20 | .01* |
| *No* | 48 | 25% | 6 | 12% | 31 | 31% | | |
| Physical | 63 | 38% | 19 | 46% | 33 | 36% | 1.31 | .17 |
| Emotional | 114 | 65% | 38 | 81% | 53 | 56% | 8.58 | .00** |
| Sexual | 22 | 16% | 6 | 17% | 12 | 15% | .05 | .51 |
| Neglect | 118 | 67% | 38 | 79% | 57 | 61% | 4.93 | .02* |

*Note.* CW= child welfare.
*p < .05. **p < .01

**Substance Use and Criminality**

All victims of sex trafficking reported high rates of substance use, including drugs and alcohol. Seventy-eight percent of the total sample reported using substances, with 68.4% abusing alcohol and 74.9% using drugs. As shown in Table 5, marijuana was the most commonly used drug in the total sample (54.8%). Cocaine was the second most commonly reported used drug (32.3%). Overall, CW victims were significantly more likely to report using alcohol ($\chi^2$ (1) = 6.32, $p$ = .01, Cramer's $V$ = .21). No significant differences were found for overall drug use between CW and non-CW groups; however, there were significant differences for particular drug types. CW victims were significantly more likely to report using cocaine than non-CW victims ($\chi^2$ (1) = 6.40, $p$ = .01, Cramer's $V$ = 0.22). CW victims were also significantly more likely to use crystal methamphetamine than non-CW victims (14.6% and 3.5% respectively) ($\chi^2$ (1) = 5.24, $p$ = .03, Cramer's $V$ = .20). No drugs were used more by the non-CW sample of victims.

*Table 5.* Substance Use

| | Full Sample ($N$=179) | | CW Sample ($n$=42) | | Non CW Sample ($n$=102) | | $\chi^2$ | $p$ value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alcohol Use | 119 | 68% | 39 | 81% | 58 | 60% | 6.32 | .01* |
| Drug Use | 134 | 75% | 38 | 81% | 66 | 68% | 2.60 | .08 |
| Marijuana | 85 | 55% | 28 | 68% | 43 | 51% | 3.32 | .05 |
| Cocaine | 50 | 32% | 18 | 44% | 19 | 22% | 6.40 | .01* |
| Ecstasy | 11 | 7% | 4 | 10% | 7 | 8% | .10 | .50 |
| Prescription | 8 | 5% | 3 | 6% | 4 | 5% | .38 | .40 |
| Heroin | 11 | 7% | 4 | 8% | 4 | 5% | 1.23 | .23 |
| Crystal Meth | 11 | 7% | 6 | 15% | 3 | 4% | 5.24 | .03* |
| Hash | 1 | 1% | -- | -- | 1 | 1% | .48 | .68 |

*Note.* CW= child welfare.
*p < .05. **p < .01

Just under half of the sample (47.6%) had a criminal record that predated their contact with the police for involvement in sex trafficking. Crimes reported were theft, drug possession,

drug trafficking, assault, and being an inmate of a common bawdy house (i.e., brothel). There were no significant differences in crime rates between CW (52%) and non-CW groups (39%).

**Trafficking Experiences**

**Living situation at time of the initiation of the police investigation**. At the time the victim was being trafficked, victims were most likely to live in a private residence (79.4%). Of the remaining 20.6% of victims, 8.7% were living in a group home, 7.6 % in a hotel, 3.8% in a foster home, and 0.5% in a shelter. Examining the CW group alone, 45.1% were reported to have been living in a group home or foster home when contacted by police (31.4 % and 13.7%, respectively). Of the remainder, 49% were living in a private residence, 3.9% in a hotel, and 2% were in a shelter.

**Recruitment.** Table 6 summarizes the recruitment mode and entrapment strategies (i.e., grooming and aversive strategies) used by traffickers during the recruitment process and contains comparative analyses between CW and non-CW samples. The data revealed five main modes of recruitment including online, through relationships, employment, nightlife, and as a stranger. Based on the current sample, the most common way victims met their trafficker was online. Thirty-six percent of the total sample reported being recruited on websites such as, Kijiji or Craigslist, or through social media accounts such as, Instagram or Facebook. As shown in Table 4, there were no significant differences between CW and non-CW groups for online recruitment. Twenty-eight percent (28.1%) of the total sample were recruited through a relationship. Examples provided by victims included: traffickers posing as a romantic partner, a friend recruiting them to work for their pimp, or a family member trafficking them. There were no significant differences between CW and non- CW groups for recruitment through a relationship. Twenty-three percent of the sample were recruited by their trafficker at their place of

employment, most commonly a massage parlor. Non-CW victims were significantly more likely to be recruited at work (22.6%) compared to CW victims (8.3%) ($\chi^2$ (1) = 4.33, $p$ = .03, Cramer's $V$ = .18). Eight percent (7.9%) of the total sample reported that their trafficker was a stranger to them when they were recruited. For example, victims reported being approached at bus stops, in the mall, or on the street. CW victims were significantly more likely to be recruited by a stranger than Non-CW victims ($\chi^2$ (1)=3.94, $p$=.04, Cramer's $V$= .17 ). Lastly, 5.1% of the sample reported being recruited at a nightlife event such as a club, bar, or party. There were no significant differences between CW and non- CW groups.

**Entrapment Strategies**. Overall, victims were significantly more likely to experience grooming strategies such as being given gifts, attention, drugs, money or offered housing, compared to aversive strategies such as violence and threats ($\chi^2$ (1) = 133.28, $p$ < .001, Cramer's $V$ = 0.61). Comparing CW and non-CW groups, CW victims were significantly more likely to experience grooming than non-CW victims ($\chi^2$ (1) = 3.77, $p$ = .04, Cramer's $V$ = .16); however, there were no significant differences for specific types of grooming strategies experienced. Notably, being offered or given money during the early stages of recruitment was the most common form of grooming reported by victims (59.9%). Attention and gifts by the trafficker was the second most common form of grooming experienced (48.4%). Thirty-two percent (31.9%) of victims reported being groomed with drugs; however, it is important to note that victims with prior drug use were significantly more likely to be groomed with drugs by their trafficker compared to non-drug users ($\chi^2$ (1) = 27.43, $p$ < .001, Cramer's $V$ = .40). Finally, 5.5% of the sample reported being offered housing as a form of grooming. Experiences of aversive strategies were less common (24.3%), with threats (17.6%) being more common than violence (11%). There were no significant differences between CW and non-CW groups for aversive strategies.

*Table 6.* Recruitment Methods and Entrapment Strategies

| | Full Sample (*N*=223) | | CW Sample (*n*=52) | | Non CW Sample (*n*=102) | | $\chi^2$ | *p* value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Recruitment | | | | | | | | |
| Online | 64 | 36% | 18 | 38% | 33 | 39% | 0.04 | .84 |
| Relationship | 50 | 28% | 14 | 29% | 25 | 30% | 0.01 | .94 |
| Employment | 41 | 23% | 4 | 8% | 19 | 23% | 4.33 | .03* |
| Nightlife | 9 | 5% | 4 | 8% | 2 | 2% | 2.49 | .11 |
| Stranger | 14 | 8% | 8 | 17% | 5 | 6% | 3.94 | .04* |
| Entrapment | | | | | | | | |
| Grooming | 152 | 85% | 44 | 94% | 79 | 81% | 3.77 | .04* |
| Attention/Gifts | 88 | 48% | 29 | 59% | 46 | 47% | 1.96 | .11 |
| Drugs | 58 | 32% | 19 | 39% | 26 | 27% | 2.31 | .09 |
| Money | 109 | 60% | 28 | 57% | 60 | 61% | .23 | .38 |
| Housing | 10 | 6% | 3 | 6% | 7 | 7% | .05 | .56 |
| Aversive | 44 | 24% | 12 | 25% | 21 | 21% | .18 | .41 |
| Violence | 20 | 11% | 4 | 8% | 9 | 9% | .07 | .53 |
| Threats | 32 | 18% | 10 | 20% | 15 | 15% | .60 | .29 |

*Note.* CW= child welfare.
*p < .05. **p < .01

## Discussion

The current study explored the characteristics of individuals victimized by sex trafficking in a region of southern Ontario that is known to be part of a large Canadian hub for sex trafficking. Utilizing data from law enforcement and CW, the central goals of the study were to examine the constellation of characteristics of Canadian victims of sex trafficking and to differentiate between CW and non-CW involved victims to better understand the ways in which CW youth are recruited and trafficked. Results extend previous literature by confirming victims of sex trafficking are most commonly domestic and living in Canada at the time of their recruitment, rather than international. Consistent with region demographics, victims were ethnically diverse, with nearly half identifying as being “non-white”.

Previous research has highlighted that CW youth are overrepresented among sex trafficking victims and are targeted because of their lack of supervision, poor family connections, and histories of trauma and abuse (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Landers et al., 2017). CW's mandate is to work towards keeping families together. Thus, children and youth in foster care and group homes indubitably experienced a great amount of familial dysfunction prompting CW to remove them from their family's care. In the current sample, nearly 60% of CW victims reported growing up in foster-care or in group homes. This finding suggests a high level of familial dysfunction or stress that prompted these children to be removed from their family's care, placing them at risk for the kinds of grooming strategies employed by traffickers which target youth's need for familial love and belonging (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014).

The intersection between sex trafficking and child welfare are two-fold, youth who are extracted from trafficking are often placed in child welfare to enhance their protection and youth involved in child welfare are at risk for recruitment while in-care (Fong & Berger-Cardoso, 2010; Bounds, Julion, & Deaney, 2015). Based on the current study, it is evident that a significant majority of CW youth were living in a group or foster home while being trafficked. Nearly half of the CW sample were reported to be living in a group or foster home when the police opened the trafficking investigation; a time during which the youth was being exploited. Although it is unknown if CW involvement predated exploitation, knowing where youth were living during exploitation paints a picture of the level of monitoring they received. It is also informative of the place where prevention and intervention efforts should be directed. According to these findings, CW agencies should target their protection efforts within group and foster homes. Recent preliminary evidence has demonstrated the efficacy of specialized models of care for victims of sex trafficking involved in the child welfare system, such as therapeutic foster care

(Landers et al., 2017; Shuker, 2015) and residential treatment programs guided through motivational interviewing (Thomson, Hirshberg, Corbeet, Valila, & Howley, 2011). Future research is needed to examine mechanisms of change and long-term outcomes in these treatment models.

The current study is consistent with prior research in finding that victims of sex trafficking are young and most often minors (under age 18), when recruited. When comparing CW and non-CW victims, it was found that all CW victims were recruited as minors, and in fact, were recruited three years younger than non-CW victims. A novel finding of the current study was that CW victims were younger when sex trafficking investigations were initiated. This is likely reflective of the fact that CW victims were trafficked at a younger age, but may also be indicative of the human trafficking reporting protocol between the CW and policing agencies, whereby police are directed to cases of youth victims of sex trafficking by CW. As a result, these CW victims are drawn to the attention of police sooner than victims without CW agency involvement. Although the specifics of 'why' CW youth are recruited at a younger age than non-CW youth is unknown, we can deduce that being under the age of 16 and involved with CW are a significant risk factor for recruitment and these youths need special considerations with regards to protection and support when placed in group homes or foster homes.

Risk based research has identified several factors that contribute to youth victimization in sex trafficking. In particular, previous research has noted child maltreatment to be the leading risk factor for sex trafficking victimization among youth (e.g., Choi, 2015, Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Havlicek et al., 2016). Victims in the current study experienced high rates of all subtypes of child maltreatment (i.e., neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse). CW victims had elevated rates compared to non-CW victims, specifically emotional

abuse and neglect. However, it is important to note that experiences of childhood maltreatment are also one of the leading reasons youth are involved with CW and thus childhood maltreatment may be underreported among the non-CW victims in our study. As such, these findings should be interpreted cautiously. With regards to experiences of childhood maltreatment, our findings suggest CW victims of sex trafficking are a distinct group of youth in child welfare. Consistent with this possibility, a 2015 study by Fallon and colleagues obtained rates of substantiated child maltreatment among Ontario families investigated by child welfare in 2013. They reported 13% experienced physical abuse, 2% sexual abuse, 24% neglect and 13% emotional abuse. Comparatively, across CW involved victims of sex trafficking in the current study, 46% reported physical abuse, 17% sexual abuse, 79% neglect, and 81% emotional abuse. The high rates of child maltreatment among sex trafficking victims indicate CW agencies should be targeting prevention and intervention efforts toward children and youth who enter their care with maltreatment trauma experiences.

Findings from the current study highlight drug and alcohol use, and criminal history to be common across the total sample of victims. CW victims reported higher rates of using alcohol, cocaine, and crystal meth than non-CW victims. Although we were unable to determine whether substance use originated prior to, during, and/or after exploitation, those who reported using drugs were likely to be offered drugs by their trafficker during the recruitment process. Previous literature describes this form of grooming as a way of creating a dependency on the trafficker to obtain drugs (Kennedy et al., 2007). The current findings suggest CW youth are particularly vulnerable to this kind of grooming compared to non-CW youth and highlight the need for CW agencies to address substance use and addiction among their youth.

To our knowledge this is the first study to describe and compare the recruitment and entrapment strategies experienced by CW victims compared to non-CW victims. The data revealed five main modes of recruitment by traffickers; online meeting, through a relationship (e.g., friendship, romantic relationship), through place of employment, at a nightlife event, and being approached by a stranger. Consistent with prior research, traffickers are largely recruiting their target online on websites such as, Kijiji or Craigslist, or through social media accounts such as Instagram or Facebook. However, we are not able to make inferences about who initiated contact on these platforms, namely the victim or the trafficker. The second most common way for traffickers to recruit victims is through a relationship. For example, they may pose as a loving and attentive boyfriend, or befriend the young woman platonically. Non-CW victims were more likely to be recruited at their place of employment than CW victims. This is likely due to the older age bracket of the non-CW sample and the freedoms that they are afforded by not being in care of CW. On the other hand, CW victims were more likely to be recruited by a stranger and approached in malls, bus shelters, or on the street. Although we did not obtain data on runaway behaviours, we speculate that the high number of CW youth recruited by strangers is due to youth running away from their placement, visibility on the streets (e.g., outside late at night, loitering etc.), and poor monitoring by group and foster homes.

Entrapment strategies were divided into two categories, grooming and aversive. Previous research suggests that grooming strategies are more commonly used by traffickers than aversive strategies, simply because violence does not promote loyalty and attachment to the trafficker (Kennedy et al., 2007). Similarly, victims in the current study were significantly more likely to experience grooming strategies such as being given gifts, attention, drugs, money or offered housing, compared to aversive strategies such as violence and threats. Money, attention, and

gifts were the most common forms of grooming experienced by victims. CW victims were more likely to experience grooming than non-CW victims; however, there were no specific differences in the type of grooming experienced.

**Limitations**

Findings from the current study should be considered in the context of certain limitations. Firstly, all victims in the current sample had police involvement and are likely not representative of all sex trafficked individuals, particularly those without police involvement. It is possible that victims without police involvement are groomed and entrapped in different ways that isolate them from police access. In addition, the victims in the sample are from a region in Southern Ontario and perhaps represent a unique cohort of trafficked individuals. For example, previous research suggests Indigenous populations are at heightened risk for recruitment and are overrepresented among trafficked individuals (Sethi, 2007); however, only 5% of youth in the current sample were identified as Indigenous. Another important limitation of the study is that the CW agency was unable to corroborate information regarding CW involvement for all victims leading to a large amount of missing data on that variable. Consequently, it is possible the rate of CW involvement was under-reported in the current study. Lastly, variables of interest were extracted from each police file; however, not all variables were available in each file leading to high rates of missing data across variables.

**Implications**

Despite limitations, the current study offers novel information on the characteristics of Canadian CW youth and their routes into sex trafficking. The findings highlight the urgency for CW agencies to enhance their care of at-risk youth by targeting prevention initiatives to those most at risk and increasing support and protection in CW placements. This study also illustrates

the exemplary way CW and police agencies can collaborate in effectively addressing issues of sex trafficking in their shared community of service. Additionally, this study provides a Canadian specific lens to the issue of domestic sex trafficking. The results of this study will directly inform the development and use of a risk protocol used by frontline CW staff at a local agency, designed to aid staff in identifying youth in their care who are most at risk of being recruited. Moreover, this research can help to inform the early identification of youth at risk of or engaged in sex trafficking while in care of CW. In addition, findings can inform intervention initiatives of CW agencies who are interested in providing sex trafficking specific placements and services to victims in care of CW.

**Conclusion**

The current study highlights the complex psychosocial history of victims of sex trafficking. Some of the identified characteristics and vulnerabilities of victims in the current study are: CW involvement, being under age, using substances, engaging in criminal activity, and experiencing childhood maltreatment. Although research and discussions around sex trafficking victimization are overwhelmingly focused on risk and vulnerability, it is equally important to discuss resiliency. Risk and vulnerability cannot be erased from a young person's narrative; however, prevention and intervention initiatives for sex trafficking should also focus on fostering youths' resiliency by providing programs and services aimed at meeting their needs for love, belonging, and connection. Likewise, training for service providers across multiple sectors is important in efforts to combat sex trafficking. Victims present in many contexts such as schools, hospitals, and community mental health centres. Professionals working in these settings need to be knowledgeable about risk, vulnerability, recruitment by traffickers and warning signs of victimization (Baldwin et al., 2011; Greenbaum & Crawford-Jakubiak, 2015).

Moreover, service workers interacting with victims must be aware of evidence-based methods for serving these youth including trauma-based, victim-centered and gender-sensitive frameworks (Stoklosa, Grace & Littenberg, 2015). Along this vein, future research is needed to explore the knowledge of Canadian service providers on issues of sex trafficking among the youth they work with and to assess gaps in knowledge, as well as opportunities for programming.

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## Chapter 5: Focusing in on Policing Sex Trafficking

The goal of Study 2 (Chapter 4) was to increase our understanding of the elevated risk status of CW involved youth who are victimized by sex traffickers, as well as explore routes into sex trafficking. Using interagency collaboration to collect data from police case files from 2008 to 2016, we were able to comparatively examine the circumstances and characteristics of CW involved sex trafficking victims compared to non-CW involved victims. Findings revealed that CW involved victims were recruited at a younger age (i.e., under the age of 18), were more likely to use cocaine, methamphetamine and alcohol, live in a group home, and experience childhood maltreatment compared to non-CW involved victims. With regards to recruitment, CW involved victims were more likely to be approached by strangers. Overall, traffickers utilize online platforms and relationships for recruitment. Results from this study suggest early identification of high-risk status should be a priority for CW agencies, particularly for youth placed in CW group and foster homes.

Not all CW youth are at risk of recruitment into sex trafficking and it is important for research on CW populations to be sensitive to the possible perpetuation of negative stereotypes of CW youth. A more nuanced exploration and discussion of risk and vulnerability is needed to deter professionals and researchers from using blanket statements about this group of diverse youth. CW youth enter care for a variety of reasons and circumstances which guide agencies in determining placement and the level of involvement by CW. CW agencies' mandate is to keep families together by enhancing support for families in need (Ryan, Marshall, Herz & Hernandez, 2008). If kinship placements are not successful, more secure placements within foster homes or group homes are considered (Ryan et al., 2008). A finding of interest from Study 2 was that a significant portion of CW victimized youth were living in group homes (40%) and foster homes

(19%) before and during their exploitation (31.4% and 13.7% respectively). This raises a question about the level of monitoring youth receive in foster and group home placements and the importance of targeting early identification and intervention efforts within these environments. In study 2, we were unable to further delineate the context of recruitment or the factors that perpetuate exploitation for youth in care. In Study 3 (Chapter 6) we expand on the findings of Study 2 by utilizing police knowledge of recruitment and the exploitation of CW youth to enhance our knowledge of the exploitive experiences of these youth to inform CW prevention and intervention efforts.

Through the collaboration with a local police agency's specialized Human Trafficking and Vice section for Study 2, we were able to obtain unique insights on issues of the domestic sex trafficking of minors within Ontario. In speaking with officers through the process of data collection, it became clear this team was foundational to shifts in the policing of sex trafficking in Canada. Moreover, officers on the unit were highly knowledgeable through training and experience in the field. To our knowledge, there is no prior research on the policing approaches of specialized human trafficking law enforcement teams. Yet officers on these teams have a wealth of knowledge that can inform future directions for prevention and intervention in law enforcement and other community agencies working with trafficked youth. In Study 3, we used qualitative methodology to gather and thematically analyze officers' knowledge and experiences in working with CW youth victims of sex trafficking, particularly those placed within group homes. Officers spoke specifically to the risks of recruitment for youth placed in group homes, barriers to exiting, and their specific policing approaches in prevention and intervention. A discussion on the policy and practice implications of these research findings are found in Chapter 6.

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## Chapter 6: Police Responses to Sex Trafficking of Youth Involved with Child Welfare: A Specialized Human Trafficking Law Enforcement Team Approach

"Everybody's got to be ready to bend over backwards…be innovative and be an ear for these girls"

### Introduction

Sex trafficking is one of the most common forms of Human Trafficking involving the recruitment and exploitation of an individual through use of threats, force, coercion, deception, or abuse of power for the purpose of a commercial sex act (United Nation's Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2014). Sex trafficking is known to be rampant across Canada, with youth being particularly vulnerable to recruitment for sex trafficking (Jordan, Patel, & Rapp, 2013; Smith, Healy Vardaman, & Snow, 2009). Within youth populations, those involved with child welfare (CW) are vastly overrepresented among child sex trafficking victims (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Estes & Weiner, 2001; Fong & Berger- Cardoso, 2010; Gragg, Petta, Bernstein, Eisen, & Quinn, 2007; Landers, McGrath, Johnson, Armstrong, & Dollard, 2017; Williams & Frederick, 2009). Law enforcement are often the first to engage with victimized youth. Canadian government funding and interest has facilitated the training and development of specialized law enforcement teams and new policing approaches to sex trafficking, with a specific focus on protecting CW youth. However, there is limited information as to what these new specialized approaches are. In the present study we sought to understand the ways in which Canadian law enforcement is addressing the sex trafficking of CW youth, based on their insights about the ways these youth are recruited and barriers that hinder youths' successful extraction from sex trafficking. To this end, we interviewed the founder of a specialized human trafficking

law enforcement team in Ontario, whose work frequently intersects with CW agencies, and eleven officers on this team.

**Policing Approaches in Addressing Human Trafficking**

Police are often the first support persons in contact with victims of crime (Farrell et al., 2019). As such, they bear great responsibility in ensuring the safety and protection of victims. Victims of sex trafficking are often reluctant to seek help from police (Lavoie, Dickerson, Relich & Quas, 2019). Baird and Connolly (2021) identified an enmeshment process involving several dependency and control factors utilized by traffickers to prolong exploitation and prevent youth from seeking help. Reid (2016) described youths' feelings of loyalty towards their trafficker and an overwhelming responsibility for his/her potential arrest, leading to the refusal to testify against him/her. In other cases, victims are made complicit in a crime, as a calculated blackmail technique keeping them silent, controlled, and far away from police (Dalley, 2010; Reid, 2016). However, without witness testimony and cooperation it is nearly impossible to build a case for human trafficking, further compounding the challenge for police to prosecute perpetrators (Dank, Yahner, &Yu, 2017; Love, Hussemann, Yu, McCoy, & Owens, 2018). Coupled with the fact victims of sex trafficking are difficult to identify and the crime is overwhelmingly hidden (Duger, 2015; Franchino-Olsen et al., 2020), police are presented with significant barriers in successfully identifying and protecting victims and prosecuting offenders.

Some research has suggested that the power of arrest is often used as a primary intervention by police in cases with crime victims and has unintended consequences (Barner & Carney, 2011). For example, with the goal of protecting underage victims of sex trafficking, police may detain youth on minor charges to ensure their protection (Barnert et al., 2016; Musto, 2013). However, being arrested and obtaining a criminal record can have significant disruptive

impacts on victims, limiting their access to education and employment as well as solidifying their distrust in police and thwarting future opportunities of seeking police support when needed (Dank et al., 2017). Negative interactions with the police have been identified as a factor that contributes to prolonged exploitation of victims (Love et al., 2018). As a result, traditional measures of policing success centred on prosecution and arrests of offenders has been suggested to not only be ineffective, but damaging when working with and for victims of human trafficking. Connection, building trust, and meeting victim needs are considered centrefold to police practices in the specialized domain of 'human trafficking' (Farrell et al., 2019).

Currently there is no standard approach for organizational law enforcement responses to human trafficking. While there is a growing literature on the diverse challenges experienced by law enforcement in prevention and intervention to human trafficking, there is not enough written or known about how police can best address these challenges (Dandurand, 2017). American research on policing approaches has suggested that police are generally more reactive than proactive to problems of human trafficking in their communities (Farrell, 2014). Farrell (2014) suggests this may be due to police agencies being unknowledgeable, lacking training, and being generally unprepared to respond to issues of human trafficking. Given victims are unlikely to self- report as "victims of human trafficking", policing efforts need to shift from being reactive to proactive which requires mass education for all front-line policing staff to enhance victim identification, a coordinated specialized team approach to manage HT cases, and interagency collaboration to support victims.

**Canadian Law Enforcement Approaches to Human Trafficking**

Over the last two decades there has been significant interest both publicly and politically in the eradication of sex trafficking in Canada. Federal and provincial governments have allotted

large sums of money with the goal of identifying, protecting, and supporting victims as well as prosecuting offenders. The federal government initiated a four-year National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking (Public Safety Canada, 2012) dedicating $6 million annually to support the cause of eradicating human trafficking in Canada. More recently, the federal government implemented a $75 million National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking 2019-2024 (Public Safety Canada 2019). Other government anti-trafficking initiatives include a national advisor on human trafficking, national government reports on trafficking in persons, and the establishment of specialized human trafficking law enforcement units.

Part of the Canadian governmental initiative to end human trafficking was the allocation of funds for the training and development of specialized law enforcement teams across Canada. Various training opportunities have been made available by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RMP), Human Trafficking Coordination Centre, and the Canadian Police College (CPC) to law enforcement staff, including an online introduction to human trafficking course for Canadian law enforcement officials and an eight-day human trafficking investigator's course for Canadian law enforcement (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2020). HT trained staff and officers come from a range of units responsible for human trafficking cases including Vice, Guns and Gangs, Special Victims and Counter-exploitation units (Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking, 2021). A recent 2021 study by The Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking identified that, despite federal funds for training and team development, Canadian law enforcement units struggle to investigate cases of human trafficking because of insufficient full-time staff and inadequate resources (Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking, 2021).

Police operate within communities and in conjunction with agencies, and thus are the bridge between victims and the services they need (Williams, 2015). While The Canadian Centre

to End Human Trafficking (2021) identified that officers who specialize in human trafficking utilize a different approach with victims of human trafficking. It is unclear, however, what this approach is and what challenges they face in their pursuit to protect and extract victims from the sex trade, particularly victims involved in child welfare. The current study addresses this gap in the literature by examining the knowledge, experience, and policing approaches of detectives on a specialized Human Trafficking law enforcement team in Ontario who have had success in the arresting notorious human traffickers for sexual exploitation.

**Sex Trafficking and Child Welfare**

Child welfare agencies' mandate is to keep families together, and as such they rarely remove children and youth from their family of origin (Ryan, Marshall, Herz & Hernandez, 2008). When they remove children from their family of origin, there exists a continuum of care options ranging from familial to non-familial placements, such as kinship placements, foster care, or group homes. If kinship or non-kin foster care placements are not successful, CW agencies will place youth in a higher-level care setting, that is a group home. Group homes are a non-familial residential setting that provides 24-hour care by paid staff to groups of youth (Baker & Calderon, 2004). Previous research has identified that youth placed in group homes are a unique subset of CW involved youth, insofar as they have more socio-emotional and behavioural problems and involvement with the juvenile justice system compared to youth in foster care (Bronsard et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2008). When placed in a congregate group home environment, negative peer influences can compound youth risk for delinquent and risky behaviour (Dishion, McCord & Poulin, 1999; Dishion & Tipsord, 2011).

Service providers such as child welfare agencies and police services are acutely aware of the heightened risk status of CW youth, and in some regions have established working

relationships to address the issue of sex trafficking within CW (Baird et al., 2020). Police are often the first service providers in contact with exploited persons and obtain information from victims, involved service providers (e.g., CW workers), witnesses, and families that virtually no other service provider acquires. Therefore, the police have unique insights into the nuances of child recruitment into sex trafficking, and the intersection with child welfare. With the current study we were interested in the knowledge and perspectives of detectives on a specialized human trafficking unit on: why CW youth are at higher risk, their approaches to extracting youth from trafficking, and the perceived barriers to police intervention. Given group differences between youth placed in foster homes and group homes, a secondary interest for this study was whether police officers differentiate levels of risk for CW youth, in relation to their housing placement.

**Objectives**

Police play a large role in both the prosecution of traffickers and protection of victims of sexual exploitation. With the issue of sex trafficking growing across the country, it is becoming increasingly important for front line officers to be knowledgeable and sensitive when identifying and working with victims of sex trafficking. Without a standard protocol for specialized Human Trafficking (HT) policing units, it is important to understand the ways in which pre-established teams are operating. The present study examines the knowledge, experiences, and enforcement approaches of officers on a specialized Human Trafficking section in Ontario, Canada. Interview questions explored three broad areas of interest: a) why CW-placed youth are at risk of recruitment into sex trafficking, b) perceived barriers to successfully helping CW victims of sex trafficking leave their exploiter, and c) the team's policing approach to the prevention and protection of CW youth from sex trafficking.

## Method

## Participants

Researchers conducted a one-time, semi-structured interview with 11 officers on the Vice and Human Trafficking (HT) section of a regional police service. Collectively they had 35.75 years of experience on this team, with a range of 3 months to 7 years. All police interviewees had experience working on cases of human trafficking and working with victims directly. Their roles on the team were identified as either detective constables or supervisors. To protect their anonymity, all participants are henceforth referred to as 'officers'. An additional interview was conducted with the senior detective involved with the initial development of the Vice and HT team to understand the background in the development of this team. This interview was not included in the thematic analysis, it was summarized by the first author. All officers interviewed for this study consented to participation. Ethical approval was provided by the authors' institutional research ethics board.

## Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word documents prior to uploading data into the qualitative data management software, ATLAS.ti, version 8.4.4. The authors used a cross-case thematic analysis to identify and describe patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview data were examined through a post-positivist lens (Ponterotto, 2002, 2005), whereby the authors' pre-existing theoretical knowledge of victim experiences of exploitation by sex trafficking and associated barriers to exiting, as well as an understanding of the policing team, informed the development of open-ended questions asked to participants and subsequently steered the thematic coding process. Interview questions reflected the authors' research objectives across three broad areas of interest: why CW youth are at risk of

recruitment, barriers to extracting victims from sex trafficking, and policing approaches to the prevention and protection of CW youth.

Data were analyzed using the Braun and Clark (2006) six- phased approach to thematic analysis. The first and second author read each transcript several times for a deep familiarization with the data. An initial set of codes was co-developed using an inductive approach. As a result of pre-existing theories and knowledge guiding the questions asked of participants, the resulting set of codes were both theory- informed and data driven. Codes were organized into higher-level themes. The authors then named and defined themes and subthemes, meeting frequently to refine themes. The same process was used for all themes and subthemes. Thematic saturation was attained when no further themes were identified in the analysis of the data.

With regards to inter-rater reliability, the first and second author reviewed and coded two transcripts independently prior to co-developing an initial set of codes, after which point, they coded two transcripts together and five independently. They met several times to review and compare their independent coding, resolving any disagreements as well as further refining the codes. All remaining interviews were double coded separately and the authors met to review discrepancies for each coded interview. Disagreements were discussed until a consensus was reached, and a third trained coder was involved in any unresolved disagreements. Inter-coder reliability (percent agreement) was calculated by dividing the number of times coding was in agreement by the total number of code comparisons. On average percent-based, inter-coder agreement was 85% across the 11 interviews, ranging from 79% to 90%.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 The Development of a Specialized Human Trafficking Policing Team

The co-developer of the Vice and Human Trafficking section (HT section) was interviewed to obtain a history of the development of this team. The HT section was the first of its kind in Canada, it was developed in 2008, after a recognition that the current approach to policing was not yielding arrests nor the extraction of victims of sex trafficking. P01, the co-developer of the team, noted that prior to 2008, "prostitution wasn't looked at with a victim lens. It was looked at as a 'victimless' crime, consensual between adults… there were some views that even teens were consenting". As a result, those who were victimized in the sex trade by human traffickers were missed by law enforcement who had little to no training on human trafficking. "The thing about human trafficking, you won't find it unless you look for it" stated P01. He described how victims of HT were often misidentified when they presented to police, "we would encounter an HT victim and a pimp and we wouldn't see a human trafficking victim, we would see a domestic relationship. We would look at that as oh, a domestic assault or just prostitution". There was an evident need to shift the way law enforcement both viewed prostitution and treated victims.

At the time of the development of this team, there was no available training by the police college and no other specialized teams to train with, "there was no framework, nothing, we built it from the ground up" stated P01. Detectives and constables were hand selected from other units and received training on human trafficking developed within the police agency itself. P01 noted the selection of officers for the HT team was careful and different from other policing units, "The recruitment of the investigators was important. And human trafficking, to me, is a team where you really have to care, it's not just a job. You really have to care and you have to live and breathe it".

With the development of team came a shift to a victim-centered lens, acknowledging the experiences of those engaged in the sex trade are often exploitive and involving disproportionate power between a pimp and sex worker. The HT team established unique policing methods with a cohesive and focused team approach to act proactively and preventatively in addressing issues of sex trafficking in the community. P01 highlighted the novelty of the proactive approach to policing human trafficking at the time of the team's inception, "we knew as we changed our mindset, hey these girls are being victimized and they aren't going to come ask for help. We have to go find them. And that's the different approach we took. And that's what we started advocating other police agencies to do". With reported successes in prosecuting large human trafficking rings, the HT team served as a model for other specialized units establishing across Canada and the USA. P01 described training police agencies across Canada and the USA, he noted "We have had many police services come and we train them on the ground. They come out with us".

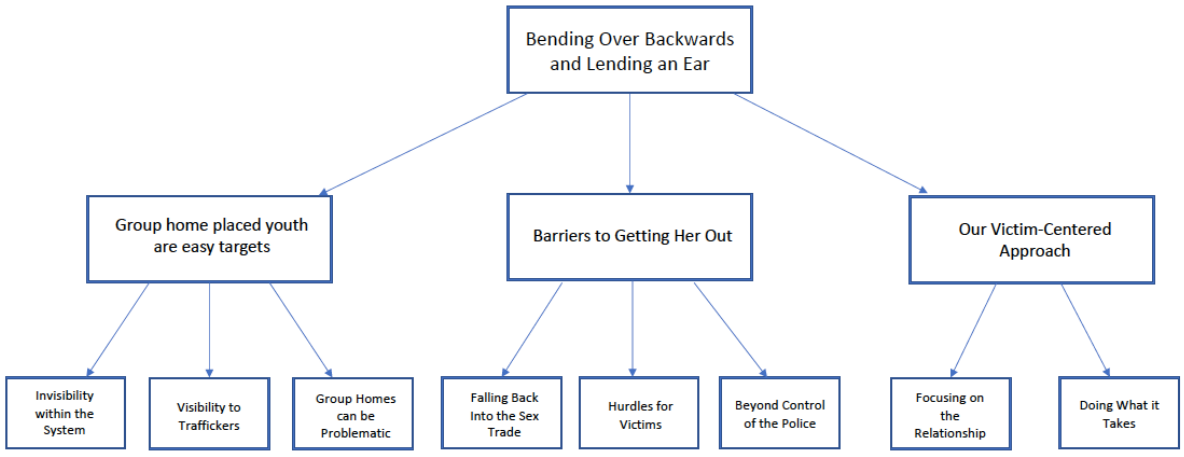
Over the next several years, collaborations were established with local NGOs such as homeless shelters and governmental agencies such as Child Welfare and victim services. The shift in policing became sensitive, victim-centered and proactive not just within this team but across the country. P01 believes, "for the most part, policing across Ontario, there is a better understanding of human trafficking for officers" with the policing approach being "better and in a more sensitive manner now". P01 expressed pride over the successes of the team, noting "all the officers are dedicated. It's the training and the on-the-job experience and the mentoring that makes it special to me." Over the past 13 years the team has grown and has had success in the extraction of youth from sex trafficking and the arrest of both human traffickers and buyers of

juvenile sex trade workers. It continues to serve as a model for other specialized units establishing across Canada and the USA.

### 3.2 Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis of the 11 interviews with officers on the Vice and HT team yielded one meta-theme, three main themes, and eight associated subthemes (see Figure 3). The meta-theme "Bending Over Backwards and Lending an Ear" is characterized the team's deep understanding of the unique vulnerabilities of CW youth with the theme "Youth Placed in Group Homes are Easy Targets", the associated barriers in extracting youth from sex trafficking with the theme "Barriers to Getting Her Out", as well as the police commitment to the protection of CW youth with the theme "Our Victim-Centered Approach".

*Figure 3.* Thematic Analysis of Officer Interviews




### *3.3 Meta-theme: Bending over Backwards and Lending an Ear.*

Summarizing across themes, the meta-theme highlights the Vice and HT team's unique approach to the extraction of CW youth from sex trafficking. It reflects the team's perspectives and knowledge on the heightened risk and unique vulnerabilities of CW youth for recruitment and exploitation by virtue of their unmet needs, and risky behaviours. A noteworthy observation

is that officers nearly always referred to the youth placed in group homes in their responses, rather than youth in other placement settings such as kinship or foster care. As such, officers specifically discussed the challenges associated with living in a group home setting. Officers also recognized the barriers in extracting and protecting victimized CW youth. However, a common thread across all interviews was the team's commitment to the protection of these youth, using victim-centered approaches for prevention within group homes and intervention in the community.

### *3. 3. 1. Youth Placed in Group Homes are Easy Targets*

Central among discussions about the recruitment and exploitation of CW youth, was the notion these youth are particularly easy to traffic due to the invisibility created by group homes and the CW system, their visibility to traffickers, and the systemic issues within group homes heightening CW youth risk for recruitment. Three subthemes were identified within this theme: "Invisibility within the system", "visibility to traffickers", and "group homes can be problematic".

***3.3.1.1. Invisibility within the System.*** Eight officers described CW youth being at risk for recruitment due to their invisibility within group homes and the CW system at large. This can be in part because of the missed warning signs. For example, one officer noted "when you're already living in a world that's crazy, for you to continue crazy, isn't really an alarm bell." Additional factors including lack of supervision, more freedoms than non-CW youth, and absence of significant consequences to rule breaking, all of which put these youth at risk of running under the radar, unnoticed. One officer explained, "They're [youth placed in group homes] given a lot more freedom, like they can go out and just come back at this time. You don't know where they are and what they're doing, who they're hanging out with. And I guess these

people running the Child Protective Services, they have so many kids they're looking out for, right? So. It's hard for them to see what all these kids are doing as well or who they're hanging out with." A compounding factor to the systematic challenges of being in a group home, is the unfortunate reality that child welfare staff do not have the same emotional attachment, time, or resources to search for missing youth in the same way as parents or invested caregivers may. As one officer described "if they're from this group home, maybe there's less people looking, right? Because if a girl's gone for a month, half the girls in the group home could have turned over by now, half the workers are different, so nobody's really combing the internet looking for her like the way a mother or father may."

***3.3.1.2. Visibility to Traffickers.*** While the behaviours of youth placed in group homes can render them invisible to the CW staff, all 11 officers noted, these youth are highly *visible* to traffickers who have a sharp radar to the vulnerabilities of youth. Traffickers were described as constantly searching for their next target and looking for indicators of vulnerability. For example, being out late at night, running away, and engaging in risky behaviours are indicators of poor supervision and guidance. One officer described how CW youths' risky behaviours make them visible and vulnerable to traffickers, "You're a teen and you're drinking at a party on a Wednesday, or you sneak into a club. Where are your parents? …So, without even me talking to you, you're saying a lot by what you're doing and it's making it very obvious to me that you're vulnerable. You might as well be walking around with a t-shirt that says, come recruit me." Officers noted that CW youth feel jailed by the restrictions of group homes and often run away, placing them at risk of recruitment. One officer described, "…the goal is getting out. The goal in their mind: I gotta go get a job, I have to make money, I have to be independent, I have to get the hell out of here as fast as possible." In addition, youth in care may have unmet needs for love,

care, and belonging that lead to searching for love in the wrong places. An officer noted "A lot of the girls in the group homes and in the Child Protective Services come from broken families or poverty. These pimps know that and they exploit that right away and all they can start to build a relationship with these girls, pretend that they care, pretend that they're there for them…And if they got this guy coming here and filling them with all this love, then just the attraction, it's just so strong and they'll do anything for the guy."

***3.3.1.3. Group Homes can be Problematic.*** While CW agencies' mandate is to protect youth, there are systemic factors that put youth at risk for exploitation. Ten officers drew attention to the problem of placing a group of at- risk youth together under one roof and the inevitable spread of sex trafficking within any given group home. One officer described "…if you got a group of five girls, if a pimp has one girl in a group home, she'll be trying to recruit the other four girls to work for her guy... So, that's a huge environmental factor because she's living and breathing in an environment where she's constantly, can be constantly, trying to be recruited from others in the home." Sex trafficking also spreads *between* group homes and is facilitated by the multiple transitions youth undergo between homes after engaging in forbidden behaviour. One officer explained, "The cycle seems to be repeating itself from group home to group home". The additional challenge of the group home structure is the lack of consistent caregiving and positive adult mentors. Group home staff are on a rotating schedule, precluding youth from experiencing a stable family environment with guidance from emotionally invested adults. One officer noted the challenge of group home staff not being permanent adult figures in a child's life, "no matter what, that child knows that that adult is being paid to be there and they work a shift. Parents don't work shifts. They're there constantly. So, that consistent foundation can sometimes not be there. Not for lack of effort, but it's hard to do. Even if this worker had the

ability, they're only there for 8 hours a day…You can't make up for 12 years of not being there in a short amount of time."

### *3.3.2. Barriers to Getting Her Out*

Participants were directly asked about what gets in the way of extracting and keeping CW youth out of the sex trade. Several barriers were identified across interviews and clustered within three subthemes: falling back into the game, hurdles for victims, and barriers beyond control of the police.

***3.3.2.1. Falling Back into The Sex Trade.*** Ten officers spoke to the cyclical nature of sex trafficking, whereby victims fall in and out of the sex trade for a variety of reasons, making it challenging for youth to exit the trade indefinitely. The most cited reason for victims to stay in or go back to their pimp is romantic attachment. As one officer stated, "there's no stronger lever to use as control than love". Officers spoke to the challenge youth face in having their emotional needs met by their pimp, and the manipulative ways in which pimps exploit these needs to create loyalty through love and affection. The second most commonly cited reason was the financial pull victims experience drawing them back into the sex trade after exiting. "So, they go from making thousands of dollars in a short period of time to maybe folding clothes at the Gap, pouring coffee at Tim Hortons" said one officer. Lastly, victims were described to develop a growing tolerance to abuse and exploitation once they are in the sex trade that facilitates re-entry. One officer described how prior experiences of violence impacts reentry into the sex trade with another pimp, "Sometimes I think what they're willing to take, the violence or abuse, increases. So, if you're not as bad as the last pimp, you're going to seem like a really good guy, even though you're a terrible human being". Another officer spoke to the role of prior exploitation in the sex trade normalizing this experience for future exploitation, "there's something about them

that changes and they're just more willing to go into that work…You're more accepting to that idea once you've done it before."

***3.3.2.2 Hurdles for Victims.*** All 10 officers spoke about barriers for victims, which are hurdles that the officers acknowledge get in the way of youth working with their team to build a court case as well as their willingness to exit the sex trade. The most commonly cited hurdle was the victim's stage of change, defined here as the victim's readiness to engage with police. Several officers noted youths' willingness to work with police changes frequently, making it challenging to obtain a useable statement to use as evidence in court. One officer described how it takes time for victims to be forthcoming and open about their experiences, "eventually they [victims] will come to us at some point whether it's by a phone call at like 3 in the morning. It's usually when they hit rock bottom. So until they hit rock bottom, they're not going to open up and tell you, okay, my boyfriend isn't really my boyfriend. He tricked me and he used me and he exploited me." Officers also recognized youths' distrust in police being the undercurrent to their reluctance in working with them. Distrust was described as originating from negative experiences youth have had with police and/or being coached to dislike the police by their pimp. As one officer described, "I pulled up at one group home…and every time I go there, they tell me a negative experience they had with police officers because they never have a positive one. Every time they interact with police, it's because police were there apprehending somebody or arresting somebody or are stopping a fight and they perceive that as a negative encounter."

Officers also acknowledged the emotional barriers for victims in working with police and exiting the sex trade, particularly feelings of fear and embarrassment. Traffickers may use threats to keep youth loyal and as one officer noted, "the fear of getting killed or hurt really badly might stop you from contacting police". One officer explained the cognitive dissonance experienced by

some victims noting that feelings of embarrassment may even shift the way youth view their relationship with their pimp, "…it's embarrassing for me to tell you that he's pimping me out and I think he's my boyfriend so I'm just going to go with, he's my boyfriend. I love him I'll do anything for him because that's what you should do for someone you care about."

Officers spoke to the role of drugs in keeping youth hooked to their trafficker. Traffickers may introduce drugs to create addiction, or appeal to a prior addiction the youth presents with. Regardless of when the addiction started, "now she's addicted and that's where she's getting her drugs from. That's another form of control he has over her. She'd love to leave, but where am I going- I don't pay for my drugs. I get them free off this guy. I can't leave".

***3.3.2.3 Beyond Control of The Police.*** Eight officers reported systemic barriers, beyond their control, that get in the way of their effectiveness in finding and extracting youth from the sex trade. "To try and track them down or whatever, it's harder because it's shrouded in more secrecy" described one officer when explaining the hidden nature of the sex trafficking of minors. Traffickers understand the criminal costs of exploiting a minor and as a result keep them hidden out of plain sight, in their hotel rooms. They are not trackable by any system, as they often do not have cell phones, are unable to rent hotel rooms, and if pulled over on the road, are not even the driver of the car, "they are just more in the shadows than an adult is going to be", one officer explained. In an effort to keep youth hidden, traffickers move girls from city to city, making it challenging for police to find them. Several officers noted the added systemic barrier in the transiency of the trafficked youth is the lack of effective communication between police agencies. For example, when a new police agency makes a report on a youth, they don't have the history from other policing agencies investigating this youth as a victim of sex trafficking, missing an opportunity to offer her support. As one officer highlighted, "Each time they move,

it's new police [agency] that are involved or a new investigating agency maybe. When that girl has a breakdown and reaches out to the police in wherever, are they able to look at it as a human trafficking incident or are they looking at it as a domestic between a girl who they won't identify and a guy?"

When minors are extracted from the sex trade, police are in contact with the local Child Welfare Agency for housing placement. Officers noted the challenge of having their hands tied, "So I think, unless there is any other alternative, which I don't think there is, you have to put them back into child [protective] services. And are they going to return to the game." Unfortunately, foster home placement is not often available to youth who have been trafficked, one officer stated, "how do you reintegrate them back? and that's a tough task for asking a foster family to take on". As a result, officers noted housing placements for extracted youth are often group homes, the exact circumstance from which the youth might have been recruited from in the first place, and so the cycle repeats.

### *3.3.3. Our Victim-Centered Approach*

Despite the barriers and associated challenges in the extraction of youth from the sex trade, consistent across interviews was the commitment to youth protection from a victim-centered lens. As noted by officers on this specialized Vice and HT team, the current standard for the policing of sex trafficking is to focus on the protection and support of victims by both building a trusting relationship with the victim and doing whatever it takes in the effort to protect victims. Two subthemes were identified: "Focusing on the relationship" and "doing what it takes".

***3.3.3.1. Focusing on The Relationship.*** Central among interviews was the notion that this team focuses on creating a trusting, relationship with victims over time rather than using

their inherent power and authority to achieve their goals. All 11 officers made reference to the establishment of a relationship with victims as part of their job. "It's a monumental task to get them to trust us, even speak to us" stated one officer. Given the barrier of distrust in the police, officers on this team work to break down the barriers of hierarchy and power to establish a human connection. Officers alluded to several strategies they use to establish rapport, earn trust and credibility. For example, several officers described their experiences on a proactive assignment going into group homes in plain clothes. One officer described, "They already had that wall of distrust…So part of that was going into those group homes where they were comfortable, their living environment and just rapport building…You go in and bring pizza and drinks and just hang out and they had a Nintendo there and stuff and just kind of tell them a little bit about ourselves and just talk like normal people, like you're just hanging out with friends or stuff like that. Not that, speak like a robot, "I'm a police officer and you shall answer my questions". The goal of these group home visits was to establish a trusting connection that hopefully led to youth either reaching out to talk or being willing to talk over time. Officers also use the 'knock and talk' method of connecting with identified trafficked persons and focus on building a relationship for intervention. In a 'knock and talk' an officer will reach out to book an appointment with the sex worker as a potential 'john' (i.e., buyer of sex services), show up in plain clothes, and spend their time talking. One officer described their goal in this interaction, "It's just sitting down talking to them giving them our info who we are what we do, there's always options and then just trying to plant that seed of, there is people here that think of you as a victim and want to help you as opposed to everyone's telling you the police are here just to arrest you and lock you up". In essence, a primary function of the rapport building is for the police to build trust with a group who has historically been arrested rather than supported.

Giving gifts without strings or commitments attached is another strategy officers on this team reported using to establish rapport. One officer described how providing victims with basic necessities can help develop a positive relationship, "they're used to doing something that they don't like doing or don't want to do and getting money or getting gifts". Another officer referred to their connections to people in the community who could provide victims with brand name clothes, makeup, and cosmetics, "they can go there and pick out their own stuff… So, get some makeup, get some clothes here. It feels good to get some stuff. So now, they're getting stuff, not because they made a lot of money, but just because it's the right thing to do." These are all items they are used to being given by their pimp, but this time without a string attached to the gift.

Beyond the initial contact, officers described the importance of 'victim management' or maintaining frequent contact with victims. Sending periodic texts was a commonly referred to method of choice to keeping contact. One officer described this process as being similar to building a friendship, "what's your likes, your interests, like oh, I'm watching this series on Netflix. Have you ever seen this? Just little things like that". The effort officers put into building trusting relationships with these young women were described as necessary to getting the call they are all waiting for, a call asking for help. Typically, the call comes when the victim has had enough and in a moment of crisis, as one officer described, "That usually happens after an instance of violence or a prolonged situation but most of the time it's violence, like I've had enough. I can call this officer because I know him and I trust him." Another officer identified the cost of not putting effort into maintaining the relationship, "they weren't coming to court, they were going to move away, they moved to a new pimp, and in their mind you don't give a shit about them because you didn't call… it sounds stupid but send a text, say hey, how are you doing today, just so that somebody's asking them".

***3.3.3.2. Doing What it Takes.*** Seven officers spoke to the necessity of going beyond their job description to achieve success on this team. As one officer stated, "My job description doesn't mean anything. If we're trying to do the right thing, just do it". Officers on the team are expected to be available beyond working hours, relentlessly finding victims, working beyond their mandate, and managing the most challenging victims. Unlike other policing units some of these officers disclosed having worked on, being on HT and Vice requires 24/7 availability. Officers provide victims with their cell phone number and inform them they will be available at any hour of the day or night. As one officer described, "You are that one person who's supposed to help them, so you are their everything, now you're their counselor, you're their parent, their confidant. Whatever they need…They are expecting that you are available now 24 hours a day". Several officers spoke to the multiplicity of their role beyond an officer of the law, helping them meet their needs no matter how unrelated to their job as an officer. One officer recalled, "I helped one particular girl get back into school, like actually going to the school and registering her. "Are you her guardian?", "No I'm not, but I'm the only person in her life who's an adult"….another girl, I was taking her to get her wisdom teeth pulled out because her teeth was bad".

## Discussion

Police officers play an important and understudied role in the prevention and intervention of youth from exploitation by sex traffickers. They are often the first service provider in contact with victims and therefore their care, sensitivity and approach are imperative in ensuring youth get access to adequate support. Likewise, police offer unique insights into the risk and pathways of youth into sex trafficking and the intersection with child welfare. Collaborations with CW agencies are particularly important, as CW youth placed in group homes are in a high-risk

environment for recruitment and exploitation (Baird et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2020). While there is no standard policing protocol to addressing sex trafficking within communities, preliminary research has suggested specialized HT teams utilize a different approach, although it is unclear what this approach might be. This present study offers a unique perspective to issues of sex trafficking among CW youth by thematically summarizing the insights of police officers on a specialized Vice and Human Trafficking team in Ontario. Police officer responses on the risks experienced by CW youth highlighted the specific challenges of group home placements. As a result, findings expand previous research by highlighting the group home circumstances that enhance CW youth vulnerability to traffickers and youth invisibility within the CW system that perpetuate exploitation. In addition, findings underscore the personal and systemic barriers youth face in exiting sex trafficking and the associated challenges that police face in their efforts to extract youth from sex trafficking. In particular, victimization is described as cyclical, with youth victims being hidden and transient which negatively impacts police efforts of protection. Lastly, policing approaches to the prevention and intervention of sex trafficking are revealed to be relationship-focused, proactive, and victim-centered, contrasting the approach of traditional policing units. Findings from the current study shed light on important directions for prevention and intervention for the sex trafficking of CW youth.

The placement of youth within group homes is a careful and thoughtful decision made by CW agencies. Youth are rarely removed from their family of origin and directly placed in a group home (Ryan et al., 2008). More commonly, youth have had unsuccessful placements in less secure environments such as kinship or foster care. Youth in group homes are a unique subset of CW youth, with more socio-emotional and behavioural problems and histories of delinquency (Bronsard et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2008). Previous research has labelled CW youth

as a high-risk group for recruitment into sex trafficking (e.g., Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014; Estes & Weiner, 2001). However, researchers have largely neglected to explore the unique risk of CW youth in group home placements. Using a broad-brush approach in describing characteristics of "CW youth" can be oppressive and stigmatizing. There is variability among CW youth in regard to their placement in CW (i.e., kinship, foster home, group home), the reason for family involvement with CW, and length of time in care that contribute to differential risk for exploitation. Variability also exists among youth in group homes; however, these youth experience a great deal of family dysfunction prompting CW to remove them from their family's care, placing them at risk for grooming strategies targeting their need for familial love (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolan, 2014). In fact, some research has illustrated that youth placed in group homes are particularly at risk for exploitation (Baird et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2020). Officers interviewed for the present study, while not asked specifically about youth placed in group homes, focused their answers on the experiences and unique vulnerabilities of this subset of CW youth and how their specific preventative policing approaches are targeted within the group home setting rather than within foster homes or other placement settings

Findings of the present study deepen our understanding of the role that CW involvement plays in the risk of youth for recruitment and re-entry into sex trafficking. In particular, officers highlighted the invisibility of CW youth to the Child Welfare system, identifying specific issues within group homes such as inadequate supervision, lack of consequences for misbehavior, and missed warning signs leading to victimized youth going under the radar of staff. Another key factor identified as heightening these youths' vulnerability is when CW youth go missing they don't have the benefit of a parent searching the streets for their safe return. A team of rotating staff at group homes is unable to provide equivalent care as a parent or family member and are

not able to search for these youth in the same way. As a result, CW youth are at risk of prolonged exploitation as they remain invisible within the system. Consistent with prior research on sex trafficking (e.g., Baird et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2009; Tidball et al., 2016; Williamson & Prior, 2009), officers identified group homes as particularly problematic, with recruitment into sex trafficking spreading within and between group homes. More specifically, exploited youth recruit other youth within the group home with the lure of money and freedom. When youth are moved between group homes recruitment spreads. Taken together, these findings speak to the importance of developing specialized models of care for youth victims of sex trafficking. There is preliminary evidence for the efficacy of therapeutic foster care that consist of foster parents specifically trained for the supervision and care of victimized or at-risk youth (Landers et al., 2017; Shuker, 2015). These specialized placements address concerns of at-risk youth going under the radar of rotating staff at group homes and victimized youth recruiting other youth within group homes. Future research should further evaluate the efficacy of these placements and long- term outcomes.

The very reasons youth in group homes can be *invisible* within the CW system, can make them highly *visible* to traffickers. Runaway behaviour is common among CW youth, with some reports identifying 20-30% of runaway homeless youth having left foster care placements or group homes (Biehal & Wade, 2000; Landers et al., 2017). Officers remarked on CW youth feeling 'jailed' by restrictions imposed by group homes and run away to escape. Indeed, prior research has illustrated that runaway youth experience heightened risk of recruitment into sex trafficking (Perkins & Ruiz, 2017; Reed et al., 2019; Williamson & Prior, 2009). According to officers, runaway youth are highly visible to traffickers in part because of the risky locations they hang out at, such as bus stops late at night or even at parties with adults on weekends.

Furthermore, traffickers were described to be highly attuned to the vulnerabilities of youth and pick up on insecure body language, unmet needs for love, and even clothing that is indicative of low socio-economic status and financial need. These results expand on previous research identifying CW youth as more likely to be recruited by strangers than non-CW youth (Baird et al., 2020) by suggesting CW youth visibility on the streets, coupled with lack of supervision by group home staff, put them at risk of meeting strangers in precarious locations.

While the protection and support of victimized youth is of upmost importance to officers in their plight to end sex trafficking, so is their mandate to prosecute traffickers to prevent further exploitation. As a result, officers are presented with the challenging task of both extracting youth from their trafficker and gaining their trust to obtain useable statements for court. Witness testimony and cooperation are necessary in the prosecution of traffickers (Dank, Yahner, &Yu, 2017; Love et al., 2018). Officers in the current study identified a victim's readiness for engagement with police as centerfold to obtaining reliable information. Readiness can take time, and sometimes only occurs after a significant negative event (e.g., violent) for victims to reach out for support. However, officers noted youths' distrust in the police underly their reluctance for engagement and building trust is a significant barrier they must overcome.

In addition to their distrust in police, specific barriers were identified that keep youth enmeshed with their trafficker. In particular, officers spoke to cycle of exploitation, whereby youth repeatedly fall back into selling sex despite efforts to extract them. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Reid, 2016; Smith et al., 2009), officers described factors such as romantic attachment to their pimp and needing money as significant factors that pull youth back into selling sex. Findings also extend our understanding of barriers to exiting by describing how youths' tolerance to exploitation and abuse rises after experiencing violence from their pimp.

Officers described how exploitation in the sex trade normalizes the selling of sex for future exploitation. Furthermore, physical and emotional abuse from their first trafficker serves to skew youths' tolerance for abuse, insofar an a less abusive trafficker, albeit abusive nonetheless, is seen as tolerable.

Officers shed light on the frustrating systemic barriers beyond their control. Due to the penal consequences of trafficking minors, traffickers are vigilant about hiding the children they exploit. Officers spoke to the challenge of finding minors, as their exploitation is veiled and transient. Coupled with the transiency of child exploitation, systemic barriers such as the lack of communication between police agencies make it challenging for police to locate victims they are searching for. Findings highlight the importance of policing agencies developing a system of communication whereby victims 'on watch' are known to other districts. A second systemic barrier is the lack of housing options for youth victims. Even when victims reach out to officers for help, group homes are often the only option for minors, the place from which they were originally recruited from, and so the cycle of exploitation continues. Indeed, specialized foster care placements would offset some of the risk of re-entry to sex trafficking by limiting contact with other at-risk youth and enhancing supervision by trained, consistent caregivers who are able to be more invested in the care of these youth than rotating staff.

In light of the diverse barriers and challenges faced by police, officers were unified in their commitment to using non-traditional, victim-centered, and proactive policing approaches to reach victimized youth and prevent recruitment within CW youth populations. According to one of the team developers, prior to the development of this Human Trafficking and Vice Team sex trafficking was viewed as a 'victimless' crime, whereby victims were treated as criminals rather than supported as victims. However, traditional policing approaches centered on prosecution and

arrests have been cited to be damaging when working with victims of human trafficking (Farrell, 2019). Since the development of this specialized HT policing unit, their approaches to policing are centered on building trusting relationships with youth and doing whatever it takes to reach victims. Officers were acutely aware of the distrust youth have in police. As such, they described specific prevention approaches to building trusted relationships with youth, including going into group homes in plain clothes to break down barriers of hierarchy and power and gain credibility, with the hope youth will reach out for support if needed. One intervention approach described by officers was 'knock and talks', whereby an officer poses as a buyer or 'john' when booking an appointment but uses the time to establish rapport and inform them of the ways they can help the youth. Officers were observed to use their knowledge of barriers to exit to guide their approaches in building trust. For example, understanding that exploited youth are accustomed to receiving expensive items in exchange for sex, officers made connections with local shops to offer them new clothes and high-end make up at no cost, no strings attached. Likewise, maintaining frequent contact was highlighted as an essential part of relationship building and victim management. Officers highlighted the need to be a constant figure of support for victims in order for them to consider reaching out in crisis. Central to all prevention and intervention policing approaches described, was their application of knowledge of youth risk and pathways into sex trafficking and their commitment to meeting youth where they are at.

In addition to the untraditional policing approaches adopted by this specialized HT team, is the 24/7 on call nature of the job and the multiplicity of their role. Officer spoke to the burnout they experience alongside their commitment to being available at all hours for victims. As previously mentioned, victims' engagement with police is based on their readiness, therefore officers described needing to be available to support them at their time of crisis whenever this

may be. Likewise, a position on this team was described as vastly different from other units (e.g., child porn, homicide), insofar as officers work beyond their mandate to support victims. Examples such as enrolling youth in high school, taking them to the dentist, taking them Christmas shopping or for groceries are all examples officers provided of working beyond their role as law enforcement and bordering on roles as a social worker or parent. The theoretical underpinning of these deviations from the traditional role as police officer ties back to building relationships, gaining trust, and being victim- centered.

**Conclusion**

Taken together, this specialized HT policing team is a hand selected, highly trained group of officers who have redefined the policing of HT in their efforts to address the sex trafficking in their community. They go beyond the mandate of traditional law enforcement to be victim-centered, trauma informed, and holistic in their efforts to gain trust and build a lasting relationship with youth. Building strong, communicative relationships with CW agencies appears to be beneficial to the prevention of sex trafficking among CW youth. CW group homes, while problematic, are likely going to remain in operation for the foreseeable future, as such policing efforts should be targeting their prevention efforts in these homes as part of their collaboration with CW agencies. Indeed, the team featured in the present study highlight innovative approaches to prevention within group homes that should be considered by other policing units across the country. Findings of the present study highlight the critical need for specialized therapeutic foster homes for victimized youth to support their own needs as they transition out of the sex trade and reduce risk for re-entry. Given there is no standard protocol for policing in the domain of human trafficking, future research should systematically evaluate and compare the

effectiveness of different policing units in an effort to inform best practices for policing sex trafficking in Canada.

**Limitations**

Findings of the present study should be understood within the context of certain limitations. In terms of sampling, this study focused on the voices of police officers on one specialized HT team and did not include child welfare staff perspectives on issues of sex trafficking among youth in their care. Indeed, these officers have experience and knowledge of the challenges youth face while in care; however the perspective of child welfare workers could broaden our understanding of CW youth risk and recruitment. Likewise, this study did not include the voices of CW youth victimized by sex trafficking. Future research should consider the inclusion of CW survivors to obtain first-hand stories of exploitation and their perspectives as to the role of police officers in their stories of leaving the sex trade.

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## Chapter 7: Discussion

This dissertation consists of three studies that significantly contribute to the literature on domestic child sex trafficking. These studies offer a nuanced and deeper understanding on youth pathways into sex trafficking, the role of CW involvement on youth risk and recruitment, and new policing approaches to the prevention and intervention of child sex trafficking. Study 1 was a systematic review of the literature on the recruitment pathways into sex trafficking among domestic youth in Canada and the US. The review converged on a novel concept of an exploitation continuum involving various entrapment and enmeshment tactics used by traffickers in their recruitment of youth into sex trafficking. Although it was not a specific research objective, the review also highlighted the American centric nature of available sex trafficking research and the need for research within the Canadian context, reflecting Canadian laws, policies, and socio-cultural context. Study 2 built upon Study 1 by using secondary data from police sex trafficking case files and CW data to explore the characteristics and experiences of CW involved victims compared to non-CW involved victims. Findings support the notion that CW involved youth are at heightened risk of recruitment. This study drew attention to foster and group home placements being problematic placements for youth at risk of recruitment and require more research attention to understand the reasons why CW youth are recruited and how they are accessed by traffickers. Study 3 qualitatively explored the knowledge, experiences, and policing approaches of officers on a specialized human trafficking law enforcement team. Officers offered insights on the reasons why CW youth are targeted and highlighted the unique vulnerability of youth placed in CW group homes. Officers discussed the team's relationship and victim-centered policing approaches to prevention and intervention and the barriers that get in the way of youth successfully exiting the sex trade. In the following sections, the findings from

each of the three studies are summarized followed by an integrative synthesis, policy and practice implications, limitations, and future directions for research.

## Synthesizing the Literature on Recruitment and Entrapment Pathways for Domestic Youth: Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to synthesize the research on the processes and tactics employed by traffickers in the sex trafficking of domestic minors in Canada and the U.S. 23 eligible studies were included in the review. A key finding of the review is the concept of an exploitation continuum consisting of three distinct, but not mutually exclusive, components: the recruitment context, entrapment strategies used by traffickers, and enmeshment tactics. The recruitment context includes characteristics of traffickers (e.g., male, female, gang member), youth relationship with the trafficker (e.g., romantic, friendship, family, acquaintance and stranger), youth characteristics (i.e., child welfare involvement, intellectual disability) and recruitment location (e.g., online, bus stop). Trafficker entrapment strategies were found to intersect with the recruitment context, insofar as the strategies traffickers utilize are tailored towards the youths' specific circumstances. More specifically, traffickers were described as using strategies that target youths' unmet needs. For example, traffickers were cited to cultivate control over a youth through a relational 'romancing scheme' whereby they target youths' desire for love and belonging by establishing a seemingly loving romantic relationship only to shift to exploitation thereafter (Cavazos, 2015; Rosenblatt, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Traffickers may also use aversive strategies such as blackmail or violence, although these tactics were cited to be less common than grooming and luring tactics such as providing gifts, money, and attention (e.g., Baird et al., 2020; Bruhns et al., 2018; Cavazos, 2015; Dalley, 2010; Gibbs et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2020). Enmeshment processes were identified in the literature as tactics or factors that

prolong exploitation and act as barriers to exiting. Traffickers were cited to use dependency (e.g., impregnating the youth, supplying them with drugs, 'debt bondage') or control factors (e.g., trafficker withholding documents, systematic isolation, or creating a 'trauma bond') to facilitate long term loyalty to the trafficker. Various youth specific factors act as barriers to youth being able to access support and leave their trafficker such as relational attachment to the trafficker, youth agency in selling sex, and feeling love during the exchange of sex for money. Overall, the proposed exploitation continuum considers the full process and sequence of exploitation. This study offers a novel framework for understanding the ways in which youth vulnerabilities and circumstances shape trafficker's use of specific entrapment tactics and the factors that keep youth enmeshed with their trafficker and prolong their exploitation.

Various gaps in the literature emerged from the systematic review of the literature for Study 1 that informed the research goals of Study 2. First, 20 of the 23 reviewed studies were American indicating a significant paucity of Canadian based research on the topic of domestic minor sex trafficking. Second, while the review highlighted the heightened risk of CW youth for recruitment into sex trafficking, it remained unclear how CW youth are specifically targeted and recruited compared to non-CW youth. Moreover, previous research often aggregated CW youth into one category, neglecting the fact that these youth enter care for varying reasons and are placed in different levels of care (i.e., foster care, group homes, etc.) based on varying degrees of need. Understanding where CW victims of sex trafficking were living during their exploitation sheds an important light on where prevention and intervention efforts should be targeted. This review points to the need for research to explore the characteristics of CW youth that can differentiate levels of risk, including placement in care. Lastly, research on child sex trafficking is riddled with methodological challenges such as participant self- identification, retrospective

accounts, and convenience sampling, yielding sampling biases that impact generalizability of the data (e.g., Moore et al., 2020; O'Brien et al., 2017; Raphael et al., 2010; Reid & Piquero, 2014). Study 2 addressed these three limitations by utilizing a unique approach for gathering data on sex trafficked youth. Through collaboration with a local police agency and child welfare agency, I gained access to chart data from police files on all sex trafficking cases from 2008 to 2016 with supplemental data from child welfare, on victim involvement and placement with their agency. As a result, Study 2 comprised a novel exploration into the characteristics and trafficking experiences of sex trafficked victims within the Canadian context.

**A Canadian Police File Review on Victim Characteristics, Trafficking Experiences, and Intersection with Child Welfare: Study 2**

Study 2 utilized police file data to explore the constellation of characteristics and trafficking experiences of Canadian victims of sex trafficking and differentiate between CW and non-CW victims. Findings offer a novel understanding on CW youth routes into sex trafficking and point to opportunities for targeted prevention and intervention practices specifically within foster and group homes where a large proportion of CW victims were residing. CW victims were also identified in this study as distinctive in several ways from non-CW victims, insofar as CW victims were younger, experienced more childhood maltreatment, and were more likely to use alcohol, cocaine and crystal meth compared to non-CW victims. This is the first study to describe and compare the trafficking experiences of CW victims compared to non-CW victims. Across both samples, findings reveal traffickers use one of five modes of recruitment; online meeting (e.g., social media, Kijiji, etc.), through a relationship (e.g., friendship, romantic relationship), through place of employment, at a nightlife event, and being approached by a stranger. CW victims were more likely to be recruited by a stranger and approached in malls, bus

shelters, or on the street, which speaks to CW youths' lack of supervision, runaway behaviour, and consequential visibility on the streets. With regards to entrapment strategies, two categories emerged, grooming and aversive. Overall, victims were more likely to experience grooming strategies from traffickers such as being given gifts, attention, drugs, money or offered housing than aversive strategies such as violence and threats. In comparing groups, CW victims were more likely than non-CW victims to experience grooming; however, there were no specific differences in the type of grooming experienced.

This study offers new information on the trafficking experiences and routes into sex trafficking for CW youth within the Canadian context. It specifically highlights the importance of increasing support and protection within group and foster homes. This study is a product of an exemplary collaboration between a local CW and policing agency that work together to protect CW youth. Despite innovative findings from Study 2, the police file data did not allow for further delineation of the context of recruitment, role of CW involvement, and factors that may perpetuate exploitation for youth in care. Study 3 expanded on the findings of Study 2 by examining police knowledge of recruitment and exploitation of CW youth, perceived barriers to exiting, and the unique policing approaches utilized by officers on a specialized human trafficking law enforcement team.

**Police Responses to Sex Trafficking of Youth Involved with Child Welfare: Study 3**

Police offers play an important role in prevention and intervention with youth at risk of exploitation in sex trafficking. They are often the first respondents in contact with exploited youth and are the bridge to support and safety. Study 3 utilized qualitative methodology in exploring the knowledge, experience, and policing approaches of officers on a specialized HT team in Ontario. The specialized HT policing team was a hand selected, highly trained group of

officers. Eleven officers from the team were interviewed for the study and an additional officer, a co-founder of the team, was interviewed for the purpose of obtaining a history of the team's development. The central goals of this study were to understand how a specialized Human Trafficking law enforcement team approaches the policing of sex trafficking and to explore officers' knowledge on why CW youth are specifically targeted, how they are recruited, and the barriers to successfully extracting them from traffickers.

The thematic analysis revealed that the common thread across all interviews was the team's commitment to the protection of these youth, using victim-centered approaches for prevention within group homes and intervention in the community. When speaking to CW risk of recruitment, officers spontaneously spoke, almost exclusively, to the problematic nature of group homes for facilitating recruitment and exploitation. More specifically, the congregate environment of at-risk youth sets the stage for recruitment within and between group homes. The subtheme of CW youths' invisibility within group homes and the CW system at large highlighted factors such as inadequate supervision, lack of consequences, and missed warning signs that set the stage for recruitment and prolonged exploitation. Likewise, the visibility of group homes within communities and youths' runaway and risky behaviours make youth visible to traffickers who are constantly searching for their next target. Officers were asked about the barriers they perceive as getting in the way of youth exiting the sex trade successfully. Officer responses pointed to the cyclical nature of falling back into sex trafficking due to factors such as financial need, romantic attachment to their trafficker, and the increase of tolerance to exploitation and abuse after a stint in the sex trade. Other significant factors include drug dependency, fear, embarrassment, and a distrust in the police keeping them from accessing officers for support. Officers spoke to the frustration they experience with systemic barriers beyond their control such

as the hidden nature of child sex trafficking and lack of effective communication between police agencies. Given that foster homes are often unprepared or unavailable for trafficked youth, officers noted that housing placements for extracted youth are often group homes, the exact circumstance from which the youth might have been recruited from in the first place.

Study 3 is the first study, to our knowledge, to summarize the specific policing approaches to sex trafficking by a specialized HT team, an understudied area of sex trafficking research. While traditional approaches of policing success have centred on prosecution and arrests of offenders, it has been suggested to not only be ineffective, but damaging when working with and for victims of human trafficking (Farrell et al., 2019). The HT team interviewed for this study highlighted the importance of using a victim-centered approach to policing sex trafficking. Given the barrier of distrust in the police, officers on this team discussed the importance of building a trusting relationship with youth that involves breaking down barriers of hierarchy and power to establish a human connection. Officers spoke about several strategies they use to establish rapport and earn trust and credibility such as proactively going to group homes in plain clothes, with pizza, to talk and play Nintendo with the youth. Giving gifts without strings attached and maintaining frequent contact through texts with victimized youth were also referenced as important facets of their approach to intervention. Unlike other units, officers described the expectation to be available beyond working hours, relentlessly finding victims, working beyond their mandate, and managing the most challenging victims.

**Integrative Synthesis**

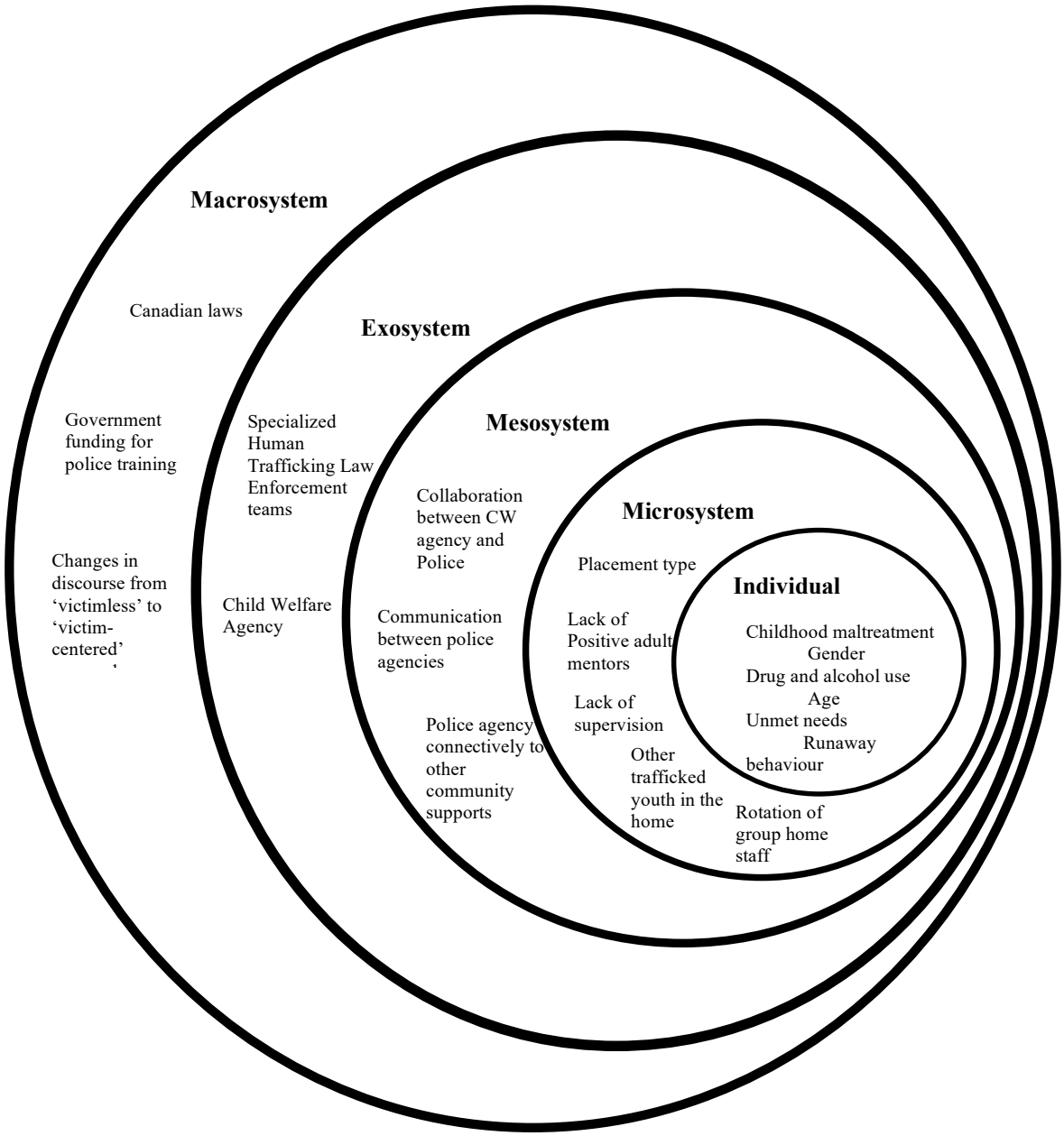
This dissertation offers new understandings on issues of sex trafficking from multiple perspectives: the trafficker, the victim and the police. Through the systematic review (Study 1), insight on traffickers' manipulative and exploitive strategies were identified, highlighting the

ways in which they target youth based on identifiable vulnerabilities such as unmet love or financial needs. The notion of exploitation occurring on a continuum alludes to the process of recruitment and enmeshment with the trafficker creating barriers to exiting such as, romantic attachment, fear, and dependency factors. Using police case files, explorations into the unique characteristics and pathways into sex trafficking for CW youth were described, furthering understanding of the exploitative experiences of this subpopulation of youth. Lastly, interviews with trained and experienced officers on a human trafficking law enforcement team offered insights into the knowledge and approaches of officers who are dedicated to supporting victims of sex trafficking. Overall, this series of studies comprehensively highlights the interplay of environmental and developmental factors that place some youth at greater risk of recruitment than others, which in turn act as barriers to exiting the sex trade and the importance of holistic, victim-centered interventions involving interagency collaboration.

Revisiting Bronfenbrenner's the bioecological theory of development is useful in conceptualizing the findings of this dissertation (see Figure 4). The bioecological theory describes human development as occurring over time and being shaped by progressively more complex transactional interactions, referred to as *proximal processes*, between the individual and their various environmental contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). The environmental contexts include microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems. These systems are both bidirectionally influencing the individual as well as interacting with each other, shaping development over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). The bioecological theory of development is particularly useful in understanding why certain youth are at heightened risk of recruitment into sex trafficking based on the transactional relationship between their individual

biopsychological characteristics and their embeddedness within various systems (Barner, Okech & Camp, 2018).

*Figure 4.* Applying Bronfenbrenner's the Bioecological Theory of Development



This framework of development offers an understanding of pathways into sex trafficking that moves beyond individualistic explanations of risk and accounts for the transactional process by which youths' development is impacted by his/her engagement in different spheres of their environment. This dissertation highlights several individual biopsychological factors that place youth at risk of recruitment including experiences of childhood maltreatment, substance use, being female, being a minor and runaway behaviour. It is, however, too simplistic to understand youth trajectories into sex trafficking by listing their individual vulnerabilities. Rather, it is the bidirectional influence of youths' biopsychological factors and the environmental systems they are embedded in that can heighten risk or be protective. For example, this dissertation highlights Child Welfare (CW) involvement as a microsystem that bidirectionally intersects with youth biopsychological factors and impacts youth risk for involvement in sex trafficking. Various youth specific factors influence their placement within CW (e.g., experiences of childhood maltreatment, criminal behaviour, etc.). Group homes, were described as problematic in Study 3, highlighting how a youth's risk for recruitment is influenced by the other youth residing in the home, youths' own biopsychological risks, and the group home context (e.g., poor supervision, lack of positive adult mentors, visibility to traffickers in the community etc.). Thus, CW youths' risk is best understood with a view of the interplay of environmental systems and their own individual characteristics over time.

Broadening the scope further, this research also highlights how exosystem influences such as law enforcement approaches to policing and collaborations with CW agencies, are systems that impact youths' trajectories in and out of sex trafficking. More specifically, policing approaches that are proactive, victim-centered and relationship focused can reduce risk and promote successful extraction of victimized youth from sex trafficking. Shifts in policing,

however, were possible due to macrosystemic changes in discourse around child sex trafficking from a criminal (e.g., 'teen prostitutes') to victim-centered lenses. Government attention, laws, and the allocation of funding for the development of specialized law enforcement human trafficking teams has fundamentally shifted how victims of sex trafficking are treated and has facilitated opportunities for partnerships between CW and law enforcement agencies. Taken together, child sex trafficking is best understood in the context of systems and the dynamic interplay between the child and the systems he or she is embedded within. By broadening the scope beyond that of the individual or their microsystem, we are able to see opportunities for intervention at various levels of influence.

Youth pathways into sex trafficking can also be understood as a chain of events or cascade leading them into the arms of traffickers. Dodge and colleagues (2009) present a dynamic cascade model of development which describes the chain of events that evolve over time when children/youth exhibit early biopsychological and ecological risks. Dodge and colleagues (2009) liken this model to the image of a stream building speed and bringing along with it rocks and pebbles that join along the way. There is a momentum that builds when children possess risk factors that dynamically and transactionally impact the environment around them, leading to problematic outcomes. For youth with early adverse life experiences, development undoubtedly is altered. In the context of child sex trafficking, the findings from this dissertation support the notion of child risk factors impacting the level of support, supervision and care they receive which in turn leads to problematic behaviours (e.g., running away) that send youth under the radar of caregivers and directly in the spotlight of traffickers. For example, youth with significant familial dysfunction who also exhibit emotional and behavioural problems may be placed in a group home by CW, where they receive inconsistent care from different staff.

As a result, youth take liberties to be out past curfew, engage in deviant behaviour with other group home youth, and put themselves in a position of vulnerability for recruitment. Indeed, Study 2 found that CW youth are more likely to be recruited by strangers and in locations such as bus shelters, malls, parties than non-CW youth.

In summary, when discussing risk for involvement in sex trafficking, a numerous list of risk factors negate the developmental process and transaction that occurs between the child and their environment. To effectively prevent and intervene to protect youth from sex traffickers, front line workers need to be aware of the dynamic cascade between child factors and the environment that reciprocally exacerbates the youths' risk of recruitment over time. However, this 'cascade' is not synonymous with an inevitable outcome, rather Dodge and colleagues posit that there are opportunities to intervene, shift or disrupt the cascade, to a more adaptive and resilient path (Dodge et al., 2009). In the next section on practice and policy implications, I explore specific opportunities for prevention and intervention to promote positive outcomes for youth.

**Practice and Policy Implications**

Based on the findings from the three studies in this dissertation several practice and policy implications are suggested. Study 1 offered insights into the ways minors across Canada and the USA are entrapped and enmeshed in sex trafficking. Studies 2 and 3 honed in on the Canadian context to expand understanding of CW youths' risks and pathways into sex trafficking. Practice implications are integrative across the findings of the three studies and are specific to opportunities for Canadian Child Welfare Agencies and Police Services. The policy implications offered are specific to the current state of Canadian policy attention, funding, and laws on sex trafficking.

The specialized HT law enforcement team at the centre of this dissertation was a positive disruptor in the policing of sex trafficking in Canada. The team has been a template for other policing agencies across Canada who are specializing their services to include an HT team. With the emergence of specialized teams across Canada and the absence of standardized policing practices, the findings from Study 3 offer important practice implications for policing units to consider in the specialization of their services. Based on the findings of Study 3, the key components to a successful HT team are: a) all officers receiving training and mentoring by the HT team officers, b) using a victim-centered lens for HT policing, c) focusing on relationship and trust building with victims, d) working beyond the mandate of policing to support victims, e) establishing partnerships with local Child Welfare Agencies, and f) acting proactively and targeting prevention within group homes.

Emergent from this dissertation is the problematic environment of group homes for some youth who are at risk of being recruited into sex trafficking. As such, findings speak to the importance of targeted prevention initiatives within group homes to identify youth risk for recruitment. To this end, two suggestions are offered. First, the development of a risk evaluation tool would be centrefold to early identification and prevention to determine which youth are at risk of being recruited or may be at risk of current involvement. The tool should be developed and evaluated with a CW sample of youth. CW staff would be able to use this tool to establish risk for youth on their roster and to inform placement and intervention. Second, one of the identified challenges with group homes is the need for consistent adult mentors, as CW staff are on rotating schedules. Child Welfare Agencies should be thoughtful about the way they can incorporate a consistent mentor within group homes to offset the challenge of rotating staff. Understanding the central role of positive relationships for these youth, CW agencies should

consider the addition of an adult mentor in group homes who is not responsible for the day-to-day enforcement of rules and routines but is solely present several times a week as a mentor to speak to or get in touch with by phone. This mentor should be trained on understanding the risks and warning signs for exploitation and be attentive to signs of recruitment spreading within the group home.

Highlighted by this research are the large hurdles faced by youth who attempt to or are ready to exit the sex trade. Survivors have multifaceted needs from the most basic, such as shelter, money, food and clothing, to more complex psychological, medical, and emotional needs. In fact, the unmet needs of survivors were described by officers to be barriers to successfully exiting the sex trade and can be a reason for re-entry. As such, post-exit programs and Child Welfare Agencies should focus on providing holistic, victim-centered, and trauma-informed care to meet the needs of survivors. This includes access to trauma-informed therapy for survivors, access to education, and housing that is sensitive to the needs of survivors. For Child Welfare agencies in particular, housing options for youth exiting the sex trade that are not a group home environment are imperative to reducing the re-exploitation of youth. Findings from this dissertation highlight the importance of developing specialized models of care for youth victims of sex trafficking. There is preliminary evidence for the efficacy of therapeutic foster care placements that consist of foster parents who are self-selected to be trained for the supervision and care of victimized or at-risk youth (Landers et al., 2017; Shuker, 2015). Specialized foster care placements would offset the concern of placing at-risk or victimized youth in a congregate setting where their behaviours and needs go under the radar of the rotating staff at group homes. Likewise, it reduces the likelihood of recruitment within the group homes.

Youth victims of sex trafficking are transient and reside in and across multiple jurisdictions (Williams & Frederick, 2009). Based on police responses in Study 3, victimized youth encounter police in different jurisdictions for a variety of reasons unrelated to trafficking. Poor communication between policing agencies contributes to the prolonged exploitation of youth who go under the radar of law enforcement. As such, findings from this dissertation highlight the importance of coordinated responses and cross-jurisdictional communication among police agencies for issues of sex trafficking. Likewise, a trafficked youths' first encounter with police may not be with an officer from a specialized HT team in any given jurisdiction. Thus, it is critical for training to be given to law enforcement across *all* units to aid with the assessment and identification of youth who may be trafficked. With enhanced training, identification of trafficked youth and a communication between law enforcement jurisdictions, the sex trafficking of minors may be less hidden and more easily traceable.

This dissertation was possible because of the collaboration between a local police agency and child welfare agency who had a pre-existing relationship. These two agencies co-created a specific human trafficking protocol that involves CW workers reporting suspected sex trafficking cases among their youth to police and police notifying CW when a minor is identified as being at-risk for or is currently being exploited. Given the heightened risk of CW youth for recruitment into sex trafficking, collaboration between law enforcement and CW is central to the early identification and intervention of sex trafficking in communities. Other jurisdictions should consider developing their own human trafficking protocol to aid in information sharing and communication between law enforcement and child welfare.

With regards to police implications, attention and funding is required for the expansion of specialized HT law enforcement teams across all regions of the country and the training of

officers across all divisions. Likewise, funding is required for the development of specialized foster care placements, to aid in financial stability and mental health support for survivors. At present, mental health services are over- burdened in Canada with long waitlists at government supported agencies for children and adolescents (Canadian Mental Health Ontario, 2020). Increased funding for mental health services can help survivors obtain therapy from the private sector where waitlists are shorter and there are options to find specially trained clinicians.

**Limitations**

The findings from these three studies should be considered within the context of several limitations. Although Study 1 was conducted rigorously and extensively, with a high-sensitivity, multi-strategy search, it is possible not all available studies were found and included in the review. In addition, although the review was focused on American and Canadian studies, most of the reviewed studies were from American researchers using American data, which may limit the generalizability of findings to Canada. Study 2 used unique methodology to obtain data on trafficked individuals, bypassing reporting obligations and self-reporting biases. However, the sample of police involved victims in the dataset is likely not representative of all trafficked individuals. It is possible that trafficked individuals who do not encounter police have different trafficking experience that preclude them from being found by law enforcement.

Another limitation of this research is the lack of representation among various genders and under-representation of Indigenous populations. While research has shown females to be the most common victim of sex trafficking (ILO, 2012), boys and transgendered youth are also known to be exploited, even at earlier ages, between 11 and 13 on average (Clawson et al., 2009; Hardy, Compton & McPhatter, 2013). However, the three studies of this dissertation were largely female centric. The systematic review (Study 1) only found 4 studies that included male

or transgendered participants, the police file data (Study 2) did not include any males or transgendered survivors, and in the qualitative study (Study 3) participants only referred to female victims in their responses. Additionally, previous research has suggested Indigenous populations to be over-represented among trafficked Canadians (Sethi, 2007), yet only 5% of the police sample youth were identified as Indigenous. Thus, this results of these three studies are likely not generalizable to males, transgendered, or Indigenous populations.

Another important limitation is the large amount of missing data. Police do not have standardized questions for gathering information for their files, thus some variables of interest had high rates of missing data. In addition, the CW agency was unable to corroborate information for CW involvement for all victims, leading a large amount of missing data on that variable as well. Study 3 was focused on the trafficking of CW youth, yet the study focused exclusively on police perspectives on one specialized HT team and did not include child welfare staff perspectives on issues of sex trafficking among youth in their care. Likewise, the study did not incorporate the voices and perspectives of CW survivors of sex trafficking who deserve representation in research on their own trafficking experiences.

**Future Directions**

This dissertation highlights several future directions for research in the area of sex trafficking among domestic minors. First, findings from the systematic review highlighted the lack of Canadian based research. Future research should continue to explore issues of sex trafficking within the Canadian context including trafficking experiences and routes of entry for youth across Canada. One of the key findings from Study 1 is that traffickers target their recruitment strategies to the vulnerabilities of the youth they exploit. As such, it is important that research accurately incorporates the trafficking experiences of diverse samples of youth known

to be represented among trafficking victims. Given that the sample from Study 2 yielded few Indigenous victims, future research should delineate the trafficking experiences of Indigenous populations. Identifying the unique ways traffickers access these youth can inform opportunities for targeted prevention and intervention in their communities. Likewise, research on risk and vulnerability has also highlighted the enhanced risk for LGBTQIA+ youth for recruitment into sex trafficking (e.g., Choi, 2015; Fedina et al., 2019). It remains unclear whether traffickers utilize similar or different tactics in recruitment, entrapment, and enmeshment of these youth. Future research should focus on LGBTQIA+ youth pathways into sex trafficking. Much of the extant research is on the trafficking of adults and international victims. To understand the unique experiences of domestic youth, it is important for future research to examine the differences in youth and adult pathways into sex trafficking as well as domestic and international victims. Findings from Study 3 highlight the importance of targeted early identification and intervention within Child Welfare, including placement options for trafficked youth such as specialized foster care placements. Future research should focus on evaluating the process and outcomes of specialized foster care placements for at-risk and exploited youth. Documentation of the implementation of this program should be recorded as a both a process and outcome evaluation to inform other districts looking to incorporate similar programs. Lastly, future research should consider the inclusion of CW survivors to obtain first-hand narratives of exploitation and their perspectives as to the role of law enforcement and perceived opportunities for effective post-exit programs to support CW survivors.

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# APPENDIX

## Project Gabriel: Inter-Agency Prevention Initiatives for the Domestic Sex Trafficking of Minors: Stakeholder Knowledge and Perspectives

### Interview Protocol for Officers

Kyla Baird
Dr. Jennifer Connolly

*Experience with Victims of Sex Trafficking*

1. Tell me about your role on the Vice and Human Trafficking Unit. How long have you been working on the team?
2. What is your experience interacting with victims of sex trafficking?
3. What has been the most challenging part of working with these victims?

*Knowledge on Recruitment and CPS Victims of Sex Trafficking*

***Remind interviewee that questions are referring to underage (<18 years) victims***

4. Our data suggests that a minor's involvement with Child Protective Services makes them vulnerable to recruitment, why do you think this is?
5. How do you think traffickers are able to reach CPS youth? How do they target them?
   Cue for:
   a. Role of group homes and foster homes
6. Based on your experience, what kind of recruitment strategies have you observed with underage victims? Are some more common than others?
7. Based on your experience, what kind of relationship do CPS victims describe having with their traffickers? (e.g., familial, caregiver, friend, peer, romantic relationship)
   a. Does this relationship change over the course of trafficking?
   b. Do relationships impact extraction from sex trafficking and re-entry into sex trafficking?
8. Does the recruitment of minors with CPS involvement look similar or different to minors without CPS involvement? Please explain.

Cue for:

a. Mode of recruitment (e.g., through social media, jobs, strip clubs, massage parlors)
b. Grooming (e.g., use of presents, drugs, attention) and Violence (e.g., threats, physical abuse)
c. Length of time trafficked
d. Relationship to trafficker
e. Age when recruited
f. Reentry into sex trafficking after extracted by police

*Prevention Opportunities and Challenges*

9. What are some barriers in extracting youth from the sex trade?
10. What keeps youth from exiting the sex trade?