

Correlates of the Sex Trade among African–American Youth Living in Urban Public Housing: Assessing the Role of Parental Incarceration and Parental Substance Use

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ABSTRACT *African–American youth are disproportionately affected by parental incarceration and the consequences of parental substance use. Many adapt to the loss of their parents to prison or drug addiction by engaging in sex-risk behavior, particularly the sex trade. These youth may engage in this risky behavior for a number of reasons. Although previous research has examined this issue, most of these studies have focused on runaway or street youth or youth in international settings. Empirical evidence on correlates of trading sex for money among urban African–American youth is practically missing. Using a sample of 192 African–American youth living in urban public housing, this paper attempts to rectify this gap in knowledge by assessing how individual and parental factors are related to the likelihood of a youth trading sex for money. The sample for this study reported a mean age of 19; 28 % reported having traded sex for money; 30 % had a father currently in prison; and 7 % reported having a mother currently in prison. Maternal incarceration and paternal substance use were associated with a higher likelihood of trading sex for money. Given the potential health risks associated with trading sex for money, understanding correlates of this behavior has important implications for the health of this vulnerable population of youth and urban health in general.*

KEYWORDS *Sex trade, Public housing, African–American youth, Parental incarceration, Substance use*

INTRODUCTION

Urban African–American youth are disproportionately affected by parental incarceration and the consequences of parental substance use.^{1–3} Many adapt to the loss of their parents to prison or drug addiction by engaging in health-risk behaviors; sometimes to meet their basic needs and also to cope with feelings of loss or both.^{4,5} These health-risk behaviors may include substance use and trading sex for commodities (e.g., food, money, or drugs).^{5,6} Although trading sex for money may not be common, this behavior places youth at risk for health and social problems (e.g., sexual victimization and exploitation, sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, substance use, and mental health problems).⁷ Given the risks associated with trading sex for money, understanding correlates of this behavior may have important implications for the welfare of urban African–American youth.

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Although, previous research has examined this issue,^{8,9} most of this research has focused on runaway or street youth or youth in international settings.^{10–12} This research has produced invaluable knowledge; however, research on trading sex for money among urban youth who have lost a parent to prison or drug addiction is scarce. This paper is timely and relevant given the mass incarceration within the urban African–American community. Using a sample of 192 African–American youth living in public housing, this paper attempts to rectify this gap in knowledge by assessing how individual and parental factors may be related to the likelihood of trading sex for money within this vulnerable population of youth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Demographic Characteristics and Trading Sex

Demographic characteristics have been indicated as predictors of trading sex.^{13–15} More specifically, age and gender are said to be connected to trading sex, with females reporting earlier initiation of the behavior. In addition, males have been found to be more likely to trade sex for money, whereas females are more likely to trade sex for drugs or alcohol.¹⁴ Furthermore, older youth have a higher likelihood of trading sex.¹⁵ There is some evidence suggesting higher prevalence of trading sex among African–American adolescents.^{16,17} This evidence, however, is not conclusive as other scholars have failed to indicate a racial association with respect to trading in sex.^{15,18} Moreover, evidence suggests a connection between having a history of early physical or sexual abuse and trading sex.^{14,15,19}

Substance (Alcohol and Marijuana) Use and Trading Sex

Scholars have linked trading sex to predisposition to drug use.^{20,21} Indeed, Greene et al.²² identify lifetime and recent drug use as correlates of exchanging sex in this group. Other scholars point to the reinforcing nature of the relationship between substance use and sex trading (see^{23,24}). Specifically, Tyler et al.²⁵ argue that pressure to pay for drugs may push one to trade sex for money or that drug use may heighten the tendency to engage in the behavior. Evidence also suggests that youth who have ever tried alcohol, marijuana, or other drugs have also traded sex for these substances.²⁶ Moreover, alcohol use is one of the most commonly cited correlates of risky sexual behavior among youth.^{15,26}

Parental Factors (Parental Alcohol, Drug Problem, and Incarceration) and Trading Sex

Healthy People 2020²⁷ suggests the need for scholarship to help understand the development of society's most vulnerable youth—those who have experienced parental incarceration and substance abuse. Previous research links healthy and deviant behaviors to factors prevailing within a youth's social environment including familial stability/instability (see^{14,28,29}). In fact, the majority of youth involved in deviant behavior, including exchanging sex for commodities, also report familial instability.^{30,31}

Parental substance use/abuse has been linked to trading sex among youth.^{7,14,15,22} It could be that parental substance use/abuse has potential to destabilize a youth home environment by compromising the capacity of parents to supervise and provide guidance. This behavior could also be said to divert monetary resources that should go into the home environment, forcing the youth to seek atypical avenues to meet her needs.

Moreover, a growing body of literature suggests that youth with incarcerated parents may have a disproportionately high likelihood of involvement in health-risk behaviors including alcohol, tobacco and illicit drug use.^{3,32-35} Parental incarceration has also been connected to other multiple negative outcomes including trading sex.¹ Similar to observations made earlier, parental incarceration may disrupt a youth's home environment, leading to an increase in health risk behavior. These observations are in fact supported by previous research providing evidence on consequences of parental incarceration for the next generation.^{3,36,37} The literature reviewed is suggestive and points to the need to investigate these relationships. Indeed, the USA incarcerates more individuals than any other country in the world.³⁸ Accordingly, the number of parents involved in the criminal justice system has dramatically increased.^{2,39}

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

We built upon Smith's⁴⁰ Family Stress Theory to help understand and explicate how family stressors (i.e., parental incarceration and parental substance use) may be associated with the likelihood of young people exchanging sex for money. Smith⁴⁰ defines family stress as an imbalance in demands (i.e., stressful life events, related hardships, and prior strains) and capabilities or resources (e.g., monetary and parental support) to cope with the demand placed on family members. The author⁴⁰ posits that perception of stressors and capabilities by family members influence the impact of the stressor/s on the family. The current study focuses only on youth in the family unit and examines the effect of family stressors (i.e., parental incarceration and parental substance use) on the likelihood that a youth will trade in sex. Drawing from Family Stress Theory, we developed an integrated model that hypothesize that when youth are unable to meet the demands placed on them by the loss of their parents (e.g., parental monetary support and supervision from incarceration or addiction), these youth may engage in adaptive behavior to compensate for lost resources. We see parental incarceration and parental substance use as the crisis which could lead to familial disruptions. The lack of monetary resources into the family is linked to increases in the likelihood of a young person exchanging sex for money.

Research Questions

The study advances the following questions:

1. How do demographic factors affect the likelihood of trading sex for money among youth?
2. How is substance use—alcohol and marijuana—associated with the likelihood of trading sex for money?
3. How are parental factors—parental incarceration and parent substance use—related to the likelihood to trading sex for money?

METHODS

Design and Study Procedures

This study is based on data collected in a cross-sectional study of African-American adolescents living in public housing located in a large Mid-Atlantic city. The target area had a median family income of \$14,487, with 68.5 % of families having an

annual income of less than \$25,000. Furthermore, most (99.4 %) of the students in the target areas were enrolled in public schools that are predominantly African American.⁴¹

The study used a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach. In compliance with the core principles of the CBPR, the research team developed relationships within the community. Adolescents, adults, and social service providers acted as our community advisory board (CAB). These stakeholders were involved in every phase of the study. Issues salient among CAB members, especially youth members, were parental substance use, parental incarceration, youth substance use, and youth exchanging sex for money. Thus, these topics became central to the exploration.

Study Sample

Adolescents were recruited at recreation centers and social services agencies in or around the public housing. Recruitment consisted of flyers posted in the community centers and agencies as well as announcements made at local community centers. In addition, recruitment cards were distributed to youth living in the target community. The flyers and recruitment cards included a brief overview of the study, the date and location for data collection, and contact information for the PI and RA.

Participants under the age of 18 years were required to provide signed parental consent and signed youth assent forms before participating in the study. Participants 18 years and older were asked to sign an adult consent form on the day of the data collection. The study utilized a self-administered survey technique in groups of five participants. Two members of the research team provided assistance to participants when needed. The survey took between 30 and 45 min to complete. Participants received a \$20 Visa gift card and a snack after completing the survey. Morgan State University's Institutional Review Board approved the research protocol.

Measures

Demographic variables included age and gender. The study also asked the youth whether or not their parents lived with them—does your mother currently live in your household (yes or no) and does your father currently live in your household (yes or no).

Individual Factors

Trading sex for money was assessed by asking youth the following questions: "Have you ever exchanged sex for money, food, or clothing?" Responses were "yes" or "no." Two dichotomous variables from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Survey were used to assess if participants *have ever used* marijuana and alcohol. Respondents were asked, "Have you ever used marijuana?" and "Have you ever used alcohol?" Responses were "yes" or "no."

Parental Factors

To assess whether or not a youth's parental was incarcerated, youth were ask, "Is your father presently in jail" and "Is you mother presently in jail." To assess whether participants ever experienced parental substance abuse they were asked, "Has your father ever had problems with consuming too much alcohol," "Has your mother ever had problems with consuming too much alcohol," "Has your father ever had problems with using illegal substance," and "Has your mother ever had

problems with using illegal substance.” Responses were dichotomized as “yes” and “no.”

Analytical Procedures

We use Logistic Regression as our primary analytic procedure. In addition to Logistic Regression, other analyses included univariate descriptive, *t* test, and Chi-square statistics.

RESULTS

Univariate Descriptors

Respondents' age ranged from 12 to 24, with a mean age of 18.9 and a standard deviation of 3.9 years. Females represent 52.1 % of the sample. Over half (61.3 %) of the sample reported that their mothers currently live in the household while a third (34.4 %) reported that their father currently lives in the household. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents reported having had sex for money. Sixty-eight percent of the sample reported having used alcohol, while 48 % reported having used marijuana. With regard to parental substance abuse, 32 and 25 % reported having fathers with a drug or alcohol problem, while 23 and 22 % reported having mothers with a drug or alcohol problem, respectively. The sample reported a maternal incarceration rate of 7.3 % and a paternal incarceration rate 30 % (Table 1).

Bivariate Comparisons

Females ($m=19.7$; $SD=3.4$) were significantly older than males ($m=18$; $SD=4.2$; $t=2.98$). Males reported significantly more mothers with drug (31.5 %; $\chi^2=7.40$) and alcohol problems (33.7 %; $\chi^2=14.44$) compared with females. Males also reported a

TABLE 1 Sample characteristics and key study variables ($n=192$)

	%/mean (SD)
Demographic	
Age	18.9 (3.9)
Gender ^a	52.1
Race (percent African American)	100
Mother currently live in home ^b	61.3
Father currently live in home ^b	34.4
Individual factors	
Had sex for money ^b	28.6
Have tried alcohol ^b	63.0
Have tried marijuana ^b	47.9
Family factors	
Father has drug problem ^b	32.2
Father has alcohol problem ^b	25.0
Father currently incarcerated ^b	29.7
Mother has drug problem ^b	22.9
Mother has alcohol problem ^b	21.9
Mother currently incarcerated ^b	7.3

^aPercent female

^bPercent yes

higher (15.2 %) maternal incarceration rates compared with females (1.4 %; $\chi^2=16.41$) (Table 2).

Multivariate Results

The Logistic Regression model significantly distinguished young people who reported trading sex for money vs. those who have not exchanged sex for money [-2 Log likelihood=162.05; χ^2 ($df=12$)=58.37; $p<.000$]. The model correctly classified 83 % of the sample. Regression coefficients indicated that age and respondent's gender were unrelated to trading sex for money. Participants who had ever tried alcohol were five times more likely to have traded sex for money (OR=5.1; $p<.01$). Conversely, having ever tried marijuana was unrelated to having traded sex for money.

Mother's presence in the home was associated with a .38 times less likely of trading sex for money (OR=.381; $p<.05$). Father's presence was unrelated to the likelihood of trading sex for money. Mother's incarceration was associated with a ten times higher likelihood of trading sex for money (OR=10.31; $p<.05$). Father's incarceration was unrelated to the likelihood of trading sex for money. Mother's alcohol problems were associated with a ten times higher likely of having traded sex for money (OR=10.28; $p<.001$). This relationship did not exist for maternal alcohol problems. Mother's (OR=.292; $p<.05$) and father's drug problems (OR=.103; $p<.000$) were associated with a lower likelihood of having traded sex for money (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

The study provides partial support for hypothesized relationship. Unlike previous research, individual level factors, age and gender, were not related to the dependent variable.¹³⁻¹⁵ The fact that individual (i.e., age and gender) differences were not detected is an important finding, however. This unique none significant findings could be explained by males experiencing significantly more maternal alcohol and drug problems and also more maternal incarceration. Given the central role of maternal hardships in exchanging sex for money, this noted disparity in maternal hardship could

TABLE 2 Bivariate test by gender for key study variables ($n=192$)

	Female ($n=100$)	Male ($n=92$)	χ^2/t test
Age	19.68 (3.4)	18.02 (4.2)	2.98**
Mother currently live in home	58.8	65.2	ns
Father currently live in home	29.0	40.4	ns
Had sex for money	28.0	29.3	ns
Have tried alcohol	67.0	58.7	ns
Have tried marijuana	42.0	54.3	ns
Father has drug problem	36.0	28.3	ns
Father has alcohol problem	20.0	30.4	ns
Father currently incarcerated	29.0	30.4	ns
Mother has drug problem	15.0	31.5	7.40**
Mother has alcohol problem	11.0	33.7	14.44***
Mother currently incarcerated	1.4	15.2	16.41***

Note: percent yes within gender

** $p<.01$

*** $p<.001$

TABLE 3 Binary logistic regression—criterion: sex for money ($n=186$)

	<i>B</i>	Wald	OR	<i>p</i> value
Demographic				
Age	-.083	1.36	.920	.242
Gender ^a	-.617	1.49	.539	.221
Mother currently live in home	-.966	4.10	.381	.043
Father currently live in home	-.800	2.83	.449	.092
Individual factors				
Have tried alcohol	1.63	6.66	5.14	.010
Have tried marijuana	.403	.532	1.49	.466
Family factors				
Father has drug problem	-2.27	12.49	.103	.000
Father has alcohol problem	2.33	10.28	10.28	.001
Father currently incarcerated	.155	.091	1.16	.764
Mother has drug problem	-1.22	3.88	.292	.049
Mother has alcohol problem	-.508	.520	.603	.471
Mother currently incarcerated	2.32	4.68	10.21	.031
Chi-square (<i>df</i>)	58.37 (12)			
-2 Log likelihood	162.058			
Nagelkerke pseudo R^2	.388			
Overall percentage correctly classified	83.3			

^aFemale reference group

have nullified gender differences that have been reported in other explorations. Conversely, in line with observations made in previous research (see²⁶), a youth's behavior, e.g., ever tried alcohol was related to the likelihood of trading sex for money.^{15,26} Having ever tried marijuana, in this sample, was not associated with the likelihood of having traded sex for money. Furthermore, mother's presence in the home was inversely related to the likelihood of having had sex for money while father's presence in the home had no significant effect on the behavior. It could be that for youth in compromised environments, a mother presence serves as a stabilizing factor, curbing involvement in health risk behavior. This observation is, in fact, in line with the premises of Family Stress Theory.⁴⁰ The same rationale could help explain the effect of mother's current incarceration on the likelihood of trading in sex.

With respect to maternal alcohol problems, this behavior was not related to trading sex in sex. Conversely, father's alcohol problem was related to having had sex for money. It could be that for youth in challenging environment, such as public housing, a mother's alcohol problems may be seen as part of the daily routine, and hence may have little/no effect on functioning. A father's alcohol problems, on the other hand, may be connected to other predicaments including marital discord and domestic violence, disrupting the home environment. Both maternal and paternal drug use were associated with a lower likelihood of having had sex for money. This observation is counterintuitive. Indeed, existing evidence suggests that substance use has potential to compromise a parent's ability/capacity to supervise and support offspring, or to maintain a good home environment.⁴² The expectation, therefore, is that parental drug use would lead to a higher likelihood of trading in sex. Conversely, a youth adjusting to life in a challenging environment may assume roles parents are incapable of playing—adulthood. Adulthood may serve as a protective factor.⁴³

Limitations

Study findings should be interpreted within the context of existing limitations. First, a nonprobability sampling technique was employed. The cross-sectional approach limits our ability to establish temporal ordering. In addition, other predictors not included in this study, such as access to mental health services, may be important correlates of trading sex for money. Furthermore, the accuracy of the data is limited by the accuracy to which youth recalled and self-reported their parents' and their own behaviors. Conclusions from this study are based on a sample of youth from public housing one large cities in the Northeast, generalizing these findings to youth from other public housing types in other regions (i.e., rural housing developments, Section 8, and HOPE IV communities) should be done with caution.

STUDY IMPLICATIONS

A number of implications can be suggested based on results of this study. We focus only on a few. Our results suggest that alcohol may play a role in youth exchanging sex for money. This relationship, however, may be complex and difficult to explain.⁴⁴ It is likely that youth engaged in the sex trade used significantly higher levels of alcohol compared to other youth as a way to cope the stigma and emotional distress associated with exchanging sex for money. Conversely, youth who exchange sex for money may use more alcohol than youth not in the sex trade to lower their inhibitions, which may make exchanging sex for money endurable. It is important to note that our speculations are beyond the scope of the data used in our analysis; however, these findings have been reported by others.⁴⁴ For these reason, intervention strategies targeting youth involved in, and at risk for, the sex trade should include comprehensive drug and alcohol treatment. Practitioners working with these youth should be mindful of the role that alcohol may play in a youth's participation in the sex trade.

Results of this study provide some support for Family Stress Theory, suggesting that vulnerable youth may engage in sex to help fill the resource-gap resulting from parental substance use and/or incarceration. It may be important for practitioners to focus attention on identifying and addressing the needs that push vulnerable young people to turn to survival sex. Long-term interventions such as job training, job creation, and job placement may also be effective. Alongside this, there may be effort directed at helping youth in impoverished environments learn about healthy alternative and referrals to resources to meet their basic needs. Another useful avenue may be provision of information about risks associated with the behavior. This has potential to help prevent youth's involvement or reduce some of the risks associated with the behavior. At an even more fundamental level, the family, familial stressor identified in this study (mother's incarceration and father's alcohol use) may need to be addressed. Community-based intervention focusing on family support, especially in households with dependent children may prove useful. Such interventions may incorporate counseling, prevention, and treatment of drug problems. The association between mother's incarceration and the likelihood of trading in sex highlights an unintended negative consequence of removing mothers from their homes. Further research may be needed to help develop a deep understanding of effects of maternal incarceration on the welfare of their adolescent offspring. In addition to this research, there is the need more family friendly policies—designed to minimize negative effects of mother's incarceration on children. Indeed, the current "tough on crime" policies may need to be reviewed with the goal of including

policies with greater discretion in incarceration of mothers, especially for non-violence offences. One last implication of this paper is to expand intervention strategies and policies developed to help youth escape the sex trade to include a male component.

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