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ARTICLE

## The health of children whose mothers are trafficked or in sex work in the U.S.: an exploratory study

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### ABSTRACT

The goal of this exploratory study was to identify health problems experienced by children whose mothers are trafficked or in sex work in the U.S. and the proportion of the children who experience these health problems. Participants were adult survivors of sex trafficking and adult women in sex work. They were asked about the health of children whose mothers were trafficked or in sex work but not about their own children. This approach allows participants to discuss sensitive issues but without having to share potentially negative information about their own children. Participants were asked to identify the common and serious health problems among the children based on their observations, to rank the problems in order of seriousness, to estimate the percentages of the children who experience certain health problems, and to identify the causes of death among the children. There were numerous reports of birth defects, fetal alcohol syndrome, blindness, neonatal abstinence syndrome, and physical and sexual abuse. Nearly a third of respondents (31%) knew of the death of a child whose mother was trafficked or in sex work, and 11% reported they knew of the death of a child due to physical abuse. The majority of respondents (89%) reported that some daughters are trafficked into prostitution. The median estimate of the percentage of daughters who are trafficked was 50%. Children born to trafficked adolescents and adult female sex workers in the U.S. are potentially at high risk for many serious and fatal health problems. The magnitude of these health problems is poorly understood but warrant urgent attention.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Sex work; sex trafficking; children

## Background

Globally and in the U.S., there are very few studies on children whose mothers were trafficked or sex workers (Beard et al., 2010). Only one of these studies, from Seattle, included children whose mothers were trafficked in the U.S. (Deisher, Litchfield, & Hope, 1991). The Seattle study reported the birth outcomes of 55 infants born to 61 adolescent girls (Deisher, Farrow, Hope, & Litchfield, 1989). While this study was very limited, it underscored health risks and problems among infants born to mothers who

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are trafficked and in sex work, ranging from exposure to drugs and alcohol in utero to a high mortality rate: 11% of the infants tested positive for drugs at birth and 7% of the infants died. Causes of death were not reported.

Since then, just two small qualitative studies have specifically examined the impact of sex work on mothers and the situation of their children in the U.S. In a study that included 16 sex workers in an urban area, the mothers were distressed after being separated from their children, which led to more risky behaviors, including substance abuse and more sex work in order to purchase more drugs (Sloss & Harper, 2004). The second study included 38 sex workers who lived in rural areas (Bletzer, 2005). Two of the mothers retained custody of their children, while the rest of the children were raised by other individuals. One daughter also entered sex work (age of entry not reported) and other children reported abuse from caregivers.

Larger studies on sex workers in the U.S. have not included data on those who are mothers or their children (Surratt & Inciardi, 2010; Surratt, Kurtz, Chen, & Mooss, 2012).

Most recently, neither the 2013 Institute of Medicine report on sex trafficking in the U.S. nor the Federal Strategic Action Plan on Services for Victims of Human Trafficking in the United States, issued in January 2014, addresses the health of pregnant trafficking victims or the children of survivors (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2013; 'Federal Strategic,' 2014). No federal agency has data on children of sex workers.

Similarly, studies from other countries provide little information on children of trafficked mothers. In a study on sex trafficking survivors in Europe, 38% of the women were mothers, but there was no information on whether the survivors had children before they were trafficked or gave birth while they were trafficked or any information about the children (Zimmerman et al., 2008). Many studies on sex workers from other countries provide some data on those who are mothers and their children even though they are not the focus of the studies (Wayal et al., 2011).

Data on children of sex workers from other countries include the following:

- 81.2% of sex workers in Kenya with children 0–5 years of age lived with their children and 79.9% of the mothers brought clients to their homes (Chege, Kabiru, Mbithi, & Bwayo, 2002);
- among 60 sex workers in Pune, India, there were 37 live births, of which six infants (6.1%) died (Getta & Bhattacharay, 2006); and
- 87 sex workers in Mumbai, India, gave birth to 49 infants, of which 23 (46.9%) were breast-fed for at least a year and 17 (34.7%) lived in the brothels, while the other children lived in their mother's village or in hostels (Yerpude & Jogdand, 2012).

## Methodology

A questionnaire was developed and piloted at a program for trafficked adolescents in San Diego (Table 1). After revisions to the questionnaire, it was administered to women at five organizations in four cities: Portland, Oregon; New York City; Boston; and Washington, D.C.

**Table 1.** Health problems and health seeking behavior of mothers who are trafficked or in sex work in the U.S.

Health behavior or health seeking behavior	Teens ( <i>n</i> = 66)	Adults ( <i>n</i> = 70)
	Response/total (percent) (median) Other responses	Response/total (percent) (median) Other responses
1 Do you know of a teen or adult who was trafficked or in sex work and became pregnant or had children?	Yes: 66 (86%)	Yes: 70 (92%)
2 Do trafficked teens and adult sex workers become pregnant? If so, percent you estimate who become pregnant.	Yes: 66/66 (100%) Median = 50%	Yes: 68/70 (97%) Median = 60%
3 Do trafficked teen and adult sex workers get abortions? If so, percent you estimate who get abortions.	Yes: 52/66 (79%) Median = 50%	Yes: 52/70 (74%) Median = 50%
4 Where do they get abortions?	22/45 (49%) Planned Parenthood	
5 Do trafficked teen and adult sex workers have miscarriages? If so, percent that have a miscarriage.	Yes: 54/64 (84%) Median = 35%	Yes: 49/62 (79%) Median = 50%
5a Do trafficked teen and adult sex workers have children?	Yes: 64/66 (97%)	Yes: 69/71 (97%)
5b What is the average number of children trafficked teen and adult sex workers have?	Median = 2	Median = 3
5c Do some trafficked teen and adult sex workers have children before being trafficked or entering sex work? If yes, estimate the percent who have children before they are trafficked or enter sex work.	Yes: 58/66 (88%) Median = 10%	Yes: 53/67 (84%) Median = 50%
6 Do pregnant trafficked teen and adult sex workers get regular prenatal checkups? If so, percent who get regular checkups.	Yes: 57/64 (89%) Median = 20%	Yes: 58/69 (84%) Median = 45%
7 Where do they get prenatal checkups and where is the most common location where they get checkups?	11/28 (39%) Free clinics	14/33 (42%) Free clinics
8 Do they use alcohol daily while pregnant?	Yes: 62/64 (97%) Median = 100%	Yes: 67/68 (99%) Median = 90%
9 How often did they drink while pregnant?	Daily: 52/61 (85%)	Daily: 47/66 (71%)
10 Do they use marijuana while pregnant?	50/63 (79%)	29/67 (43%)
11 Where they deliver?	Hospital: 51/59 (86%)	Hospital: 52/61 (85%)
12 Did they have complications?	Yes – during pregnancy: 23/60 (38%) Yes – postpartum: 13/59 (22%)	Yes – during pregnancy: 31/65 (48%) Yes – postpartum: 17/66 (26%)
13 Do their infants have complications?	Yes: 52/61 (85%)	Yes: 56/65 (86%)
14 Who raises their children?	48/64 (73%) by mother's family 6/64 (9%) by the mother 3/64 (5%) by government agency	41/69 (59%) by mother's family 12/69 (17%) by the mother 3/69 (3%) by government agency
15 (a) Who cares for the children if the mother is trafficked or in sex work?	25/42 (38%) by mother's family	26/53 (49%) by mother's family
(a) Where do the children stay if someone else is caring for them?	25/42 (38%) by grandmother's house	23/37 (62%) by mother's family's house
16 Do mothers breast-feed?	Yes: 761 (12%)	Yes: 18/66 (27%)

The questionnaire included quantitative and qualitative questions about the children of women known to the respondents and whose mothers were trafficked or in sex work. Participants were asked to identify common and serious health problems among the children and estimate the percentage of the children who experience these problems (Table 2). They were also asked about the deaths of any children whose mothers were trafficked or sex workers.

**Table 2.** Health problems of children whose mothers are trafficked or in sex work in the U.S.

	Health problem	Total (N = 76) Response/total (percent) Median
41	Do you know if children are physically hurt?	Yes: 55/76 (72%)
42	Do you know if children are sexually abused?	Yes: 53/74 (72%)
43	Do you know of any deaths of children due to physical abuse?	Yes: 8/70 (11%)
44	Do you know of deaths of children from any cause?	Yes: 22/72 (31%)
45	Do you know of the death of any trafficked teen or sex worker who was a mother and who died?	Yes: 45/74 (61%)
53	Do children have mental health problems?	Yes: 61/75 (81%)
54a	Do you think trafficked teens are depressed while pregnant? If so, percent you think are depressed while pregnant	Yes: 65/71 (92%) Median = 95%
54b	Do you think trafficked teens are depressed after giving birth? If so, percent you think are depressed after giving birth.	Yes: 65/71 (92%) Median = 100%
54c	Do you think adult sex workers are depressed while pregnant? If so, percent you think are depressed while pregnant.	Yes: 72/73 (99%) Median = 100%
54d	Do you think adult sex workers are depressed after giving birth? If so, percent you think are depressed after giving birth	Yes: 72/73 (99%) Median = 100%
55	Are their children given drugs or alcohol?	Yes: 70/75 (93%)
56	Do children see their mothers physically abused? If so, percent who see their mothers abused.	Yes: 69/75 (92%) Median = 92%
57	Do children see their mothers or other women sexually abused? If so, percent who see their mothers or other women sexually abused.	Yes: 62/74 (84%) Median = 50%
59	Are daughters of trafficked teens and adult sex workers forced into prostitution? If so, what percent of daughters do you estimate are forced into prostitution?	Yes: 65/73 (89%) Median = 50%

Participants were recruited through local organizations that provide services to survivors of sex trafficking. Staff discussed the study with survivors who qualified for the study before meeting the interviewer. Organizations that provide services to sex workers informed clients through peer educators. In addition, some sex workers recruited other women for participation. All participants were at least 18 years old, had been trafficked or in sex work, and knew adolescents who had been trafficked or adult women sex workers. Interviews were conducted in offices of the organizations. Staff at four of the five organizations required participants to be compensated for participation. The compensation rate, which was set by the organization, ranged from \$10 to \$25 and was provided through gift cards. The fifth organization, which provides services to survivors of sex trafficking, has a policy that the survivors can participate in studies if they choose to contribute to the research and not based on compensation.

## Ethical review

The study protocol and questionnaire were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the School of Nursing at the University of Portland and Mount St. Mary's College, Los Angeles, California.

## Analysis

Data were entered into Excel and then were analyzed with SPSS Version 20 (Armonk, NY, USA). Because of the small sample size, only a frequency analysis is provided.

## Results

A total of 76 women were interviewed for the study, all of whom had been trafficked or in sex work. All of these women knew children of trafficked adolescents and adult sex workers.

Respondents estimated that 10–100% of the adolescents and adults they knew became pregnant while trafficked or in sex work. Of the adolescents and adults who become pregnant and do not terminate the pregnancy or have a miscarriage, the median estimated percentage who receive any prenatal care was 20% for adolescents and 45% for adults. The number of prenatal visits was not estimated. A larger percentage of adolescents (83%) than adults (78%) deliver in a hospital.

The majority of respondents (73; 97%) reported that the women they knew have children, with adolescents having a median of two children each and adult women having a median of three children each. A median of 10% of adolescents were estimated to have children before they were trafficked, and 50% of adult women estimated to be mothers before they entered sex work.

Respondents reported that many children have significant behavioral problems, especially anger. The majority of respondents (61; 80%) thought that the children have mental health problems, including depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Most respondents (70; 92%) reported that children are given alcohol and over-the-counter drugs, such as Nyquil, often in their bottles, to make them sleep. The most commonly reported substance given to the children was cough medicines. Children are also reported exposed to other drugs, such as when marijuana is blown in their faces. One person reported that children are given methadone, while another reported that some children are given sleeping pills.

Nearly three quarters of respondents reported children are physically abused (54; 72%) or sexually abused (54; 72%). A total of 22 (29%) respondents reported they knew of death of a child of mother who was trafficked or in sex work from any cause, and eight respondents (11%) said they knew of children who had died from physical abuse. Other reported causes of death included neglect, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), HIV/AIDS, poisoning, low birth weight and prematurity, suicide, shaking baby syndrome, and murder. Respondents said they knew of five children who had died in house fires when left alone. Neither the year the children died or their ages at death were provided.

A large percentage of respondents (69; 90%) reported that children witness physical abuse of their mothers, and 62 (81%) respondents reported that the children see their mothers or other women sexually abused. Respondents estimated that a median of 90% of the children witness physical abuse and 50% witness sexual abuse against their mothers and other women.

The majority of respondents (65; 85%) reported that some daughters are trafficked into prostitution. The median estimate of the percentage of daughters who are trafficked was 50%.

## Discussion

Collecting information on sex trafficking and sex work is challenging. It is even more so when the survivors and sex workers are mothers and are asked about their children and their health behavior, such as substance abuse while pregnant, that may compromise the health of their children. Therefore, this study utilized an approach in which survivors of sex trafficking and sex workers were asked about the health of children of other women who were trafficked or sex workers based on the social network among the women. This is similar to the motherhood and neighborhood methodologies in which mothers and community members can accurately report the death of other mothers and their children.

In addition, this methodology is used to avoid embarrassing the mothers by asking them to self-report behavior that may have compromised their children's health and to prevent traumatizing the mothers by asking them to recount harm that has occurred to their children.

This methodology has a disadvantage in that it is not a direct report from the mothers about their health and health behaviors and the health of their children. However, it has a significant advantage in that it collects the input from women who are, or have been, trafficked or in sex work and have seen many other adolescents and women in these situations, and their children, often over many years.

The women who were interviewed for this study provided us with a perspective on children whose mothers are trafficked or sex workers in the U.S. that has not previously been explored. These women estimated that a high percentage of both trafficked adolescents and sex workers become pregnant (mean = 65%). Trafficked adolescents and adult sex workers are estimated to be mothers with two to three children each. Although our methods were limited and we cannot use these data to extrapolate the number of children whose mothers are trafficked or sex workers in the U.S., our study suggests that there are many children whose mothers are trafficked or in sex work and who are at high risk for serious physical and mental health problems.

A small percentage of adolescents were estimated to be mothers before being trafficked (mean = 10%); however, many adult women (mean = 50%) were estimated to be mothers before entering sex work. The adult mothers may be very poor and struggling to feed and care for their children when they are offered support by men who want to traffic or exploit them. Later, in exchange for the support, they must sell sex. It is unclear how often this is the result of duress where the child is held until the mother returns with a prescribed amount of money, but it was noted as an issue by numerous women. In these situations, the mothers would be victims of sex trafficking. No



published study or report identifies poor, single, adult mothers as being at risk of sex trafficking. This may reflect a national focus on trafficked adolescents, who are less often single mothers, and the lack of research on sex workers who are mothers in the U.S.

As a pregnant woman's access to prenatal care and health behavior during pregnancy can greatly impact the birth outcomes of her children, we assessed utilization of prenatal care and drug and alcohol use during pregnancy. Trafficked adolescents were estimated to access regularly scheduled prenatal care much less than by adult women (mean = 20% vs. 50%). The reason for the difference between adults who access prenatal care compared to adolescents is not clear but may reflect the adult's awareness of the need for prenatal care as well as potentially limited access to medical care for adolescents due to the presence of pimps.

The vast majority of respondents reported that adolescents and adults reportedly give birth at hospitals, but 15% of births reportedly took place in jails, hotels, and crack houses. By comparison, according to the most recent national data, home births constituted just 0.72% of all births in the U.S. with the highest percentage in Montana (2.5%) (MacDorman, Mathews, & Declerq, 2012).

Physical and sexual abuse, including death, of children whose mothers are trafficked or in sex work was frequently reported with nearly three quarters of all respondents being aware of physical abuse (72%) and sexual abuse (72%) of the children with 11% reporting the death of a child due to abuse. In one case, an infant died after being fed cat and dog food and another infant died after been shaken by a pimp.

Another significant risk to the children was exposure to drugs and alcohol, even at a young age. The majority of respondents (93%) reported that children are given some form of over-the-counter drug, an illegal substance, beer, or alcohol, often in their bottles. The short- and long-term exposure to drugs, including over-the-counter drugs, and alcohol among these children is unknown but does reflect a need to provide the mothers with safe childcare options that can also provide them with some level of assurance that the childcare will not lead to child-protective services or law enforcement. Such childcare is available to children of sex workers in some counties, but no such facility is known to operate in the U.S.

Almost one third of the respondents (31%) reported knowledge of the death of a child from any cause. Although the age of child who died was not reported, many were clearly infants based on the reported causes, which included three premature births, one from low birth weight, and eight deaths due to SIDS. In addition to fire-related deaths, as mentioned above, other reported causes included as follows: two children who choked to death; one child who died of exposure while living in a car; one infant smothered by the mother; two suicides; three murders (two gang related); and one overdose. The deaths due to suicides, murders, and overdose may reflect an elevated risk of death to these children as they become adolescents.

The majority of respondents (81%) said children whose mothers are trafficked or in sex work have mental health problems. These observations are not a substitute for a clinical diagnosis, but the level of specificity provided by the respondents may reflect a sharing of information by the mothers about their children. Some of these conditions may clearly be organic, e.g. bipolar disorders, while others may be a result of the physical and sexual abuse the children experience.



The children's mental health may also be impacted by what they see: the vast majority of respondents (92%) report that the children witness their mothers being physically abused and see their mothers and other women sexually abused (83%).

Finally, 89% of the respondents stated they are aware that daughters of mothers who are trafficked or in sex work are themselves trafficked. The estimates of the percentage of daughters who are trafficked range from 10% to 100% with a median of 50%. No specific information on the age that children are trafficked was collected although numerous respondents indicated it is not uncommon for girls entering adolescence to be targeted by pimps. This may reflect a continuum of the sexual abuse experienced by these children and their observation of their mothers and other women who are sexually abused.

## Limitations

As with the two identified studies on mothers who are trafficked or sex workers and their children in the U.S., this study has a small sample size. Methodologically, the study has two potential issues that may compromise its validity: recall bias of the participants and a lack of a defined time frame for the questions. In addition, the study utilized a new methodology based on estimates from a population that is often difficult to reach and that may be reluctant to discuss about their own children. The validity of this methodology has not been tested.

## Conclusion

This study indicates that children born to mothers who are trafficked or prostituted are at very high risk of health problems at birth and may continue into adolescents. Some of these problems may result in permanent and lifelong challenges and impairments as well as being fatal. This is the first study to report causes of death among children whose mothers are trafficked or in prostitution in the U.S. Some of these deaths reflect potentially fatal risks in the community. Many of the problems experienced by these children are preventable if we choose to help their mothers with nonjudgmental care during pregnancy and ongoing support for the mothers and their children. We should adopt a family-based model of support that recognizes the women as mothers not treating them solely as survivors of sex trafficking or sex workers.

## Disclosure statement

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