
**THE ROLE OF ADDICTIVE SUBSTANCES IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF SEX
TRAFFICKING**

IN URBAN AREAS IN THE U.S.: A STUDY OF CONTROL

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ABSTRACT

Sex traffickers manipulate their victims through force, fraud, and coercion into performing sexual acts in exchange for something of value. Often, traffickers use addictive substances to recruit and manipulate their victims into compliance. Less is known about how different types of traffickers – boyfriend/Romeo, gang-controlled or “guerilla/gorilla” pimps, and familial traffickers – use substances to control their victims. Additionally, law enforcement in urban areas regularly conduct drug interdiction, increasing the opportunities to uncover and assist victims of human trafficking with the proper training. The present study utilized 24 in-depth interviews with adult women formerly or currently involved in the commercial sex trade utilizing a community-based sample recruited by a leading survivor researcher in the United States. Results indicate that boyfriend

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pimps introduced addictive substances socially at first to groom victims and normalize drug use in the victim's new reality. Gang affiliated and more violent traffickers targeted and recruited new victims who already had an existing substance abuse disorder and provided highly addictive drugs to keep victims compliant and close by. Victims and survivors across both types of trafficking experiences reported using substances to numb the trauma and assist in dissociating to survive their exploitation. Practical implications point to the importance of raising awareness among law enforcement officers in urban areas to better identify victims during drug interdiction and investigation, ideally diverting them to services tailored specifically to sex trafficking victims and survivors.

Keywords: Sex trafficking, substance use disorder, qualitative research, drug investigations

Introduction

The purpose of the present paper is to explore how traffickers use illicit substances to recruit, groom, and control their victims, offering a typology for better understanding the ways in which sex and drug trafficking overlap. Much of the research on this overlap has examined substance use as a push factor into the commercial sex trade, or a reason individuals engage in selling sex, as well to escape from the trauma involved in prostitution (Bachman et al., 2019; Gunn et al., 2018; McCracken, 2013; Nichols, 2017; Ross et al., 2012; Sallmann, 2010). What is less well understood is the role third-party traffickers play in the sequential progression of substance use before and during a prostituted person's time in the sex trade. That is, when and how are substances introduced, and by whom? If a third party—in this case, a trafficker—is using substances to groom and control victims, elements of the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000) are met. This means that an opportunity exists for law enforcement doing drug interdiction and related investigations to dig deeper into such cases to identify whether substances are a signpost that sex trafficking is simultaneously occurring.

Law enforcement: Missing the mark

While awareness around sex trafficking victim identification has undoubtedly increased in recent years, law enforcement has not been fully trained on the overlap between drug abuse, survival sex, and drug and sex trafficking (Bouche, 2015; Roberson, 2017). While it is true that law enforcement has expanded drug interdiction and investigations to include rural areas, the majority of drug interdiction occurs in urban areas. It overlaps with investigations into gang activity and related crimes concentrated in metropolitan areas. Research shows a significant overlap between drug and sex trafficking (Meshelemiah et al., 2018; Roberson, 2017; Shaw et al., 2017; Sprang & Cole, 2018). Additionally, familial trafficking situations often include parents or

caregivers trafficking their children to access addictive substances (Roberson, 2017; Sprang & Cole, 2018). Police in urban settings plays a vital role in dismantling drug operations and identifying human trafficking incidents (Farrell & Kane, 2020). One study revealed that of law enforcement surveyed, only 20% had received proper training on how to identify human trafficking victims (Farrell et al., 2010). Farrell and Kane (2020) identified similar gaps a decade later, calling on a need for multi-agency collaboration between law enforcement, non-governmental organizations, and victim services. As first responders, police can identify and should also connect victims to appropriate services while “disrupting and dismantling human trafficking operations” (Farrell & Kane, 2020, p. 645). Yet, most local police departments have not prioritized trafficking investigations for various reasons. Unless departments have a dedicated human trafficking task force, trafficking investigations are usually initiated reactively instead of proactively, relying on tips from community members, non-governmental organizations, or victim services (Farrell et al., 2014). This approach assumes widespread public awareness, an assumption that leaves most victims unidentified and criminalized for related crimes uncovered in other, more proactive strategies that include drug interdiction and antiquated prostitution stings (Farrell & Kane, 2020; Henderson & Rhodes, 2022).

Prostitution stings cause significant harm to trafficking victims (Goldberg, 2021) and undoubtedly play right into the trafficker’s plan: the victim gets arrested, the pimp bails her out. The result is more debt bondage to her trafficker as she is forced into prostitution to earn back the money it costs to pay her legal fees and bail money. Further, this approach sometimes even involves arresting and using violence and threats against minors who are being commercially sexually exploited (Beijinariu, et al., 2021).

Police often view victims of sex trafficking as criminals, particularly so when there are drugs involved, given the evidence of drug possession is impossible to ignore. This means victims are being criminalized as part of their victimization circumstances (Henderson & Rhodes, 2022; Roberson, 2017). Traffickers understand their victims' drug use will help them avoid criminal charges, "because those under the influence of drugs, when apprehended by law enforcement, may lose their credibility and presumed innocence, distracting from their victimization" (Meshelemiah et al., 2018, p. 2). Taken together, this drug and sex trafficking ecosystem flourishes under the radar of law enforcement. What is still missing is a more comprehensive understanding of how different trafficker "types" use drugs for force, fraud, and coercion. This can help us better understand what police should be looking for when investigating other crimes or responding to calls where victims are not apparent without proper training.

Trafficker typologies

Early research on sex traffickers simply identified these individuals in a homogenous group as "pimps" or "traffickers" (Cusick & Hickman, 2005; Dalla, 2004; Evans et al., 2002) and also failed to identify the relationship between prostituted persons and their drug dealers and/or intimate partners (McMahon et al., 2006). Eventually, scholars began to recognize how prostituted persons suffered from addiction and how their addiction was used to force or coerce them into the sex trade. In 2007, Kennedy et al. identified how traffickers recruit and social networks, including pimp-related, gang-affiliated, or survival/addiction-driven trafficking. This further expanded the typology of sex traffickers to include drug dealers and intimate partners (Bennett & O'Brien, 2007; Young et al., 2010). It was not until 2016 that domestic sex trafficking was added to the typology of sex traffickers, and as a result, this area of research is still limited (Garrett et al., 2018; Ravi et al., 2017; Sprang & Cole, 2018).

Currently, the typology of third-party sex traffickers includes pimp, gang, and familial (Nichols, 2017). In a pimp-controlled sex trafficking operation, the trafficker primarily utilizes one of three tactics: (1) the intimate partner, (2) the successful business owner (“CEO pimp”), or (3) the often violent pimp, commonly referred to as a “gorilla” or “guerilla” pimp (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2009; Dalla, 2004; Evans et al., 2002; Frank & Terwilliger, 2015; Harris, 2012; Kennedy et al., 2007; Ravi et al., 2017). While gang-involved pimps have likely always utilized their established networks to exploit victims, only recently is a better understanding emerging of the differences and overlap between pimp traffickers and gang traffickers (Harris, 2012; Nichols, 2017). Pimps frequently are current or former gang members who still operate in connection with the gang network. Different gangs have varying modes of working regarding the sex trafficking of victims under their control (Busch-Armendariz et al., 2009; Frank & Terwilliger, 2015).

Familial sex trafficking typically involves juveniles living within one of two environments: (1) homes in which a parent or primary caregiver has a substance use disorder or (2) in a cult/high-demand group that requires the participation of the parents. While familial sex trafficking operations go undetected by systems, many domestic sex trafficking cases have been identified due to the family system’s involvement in drug trafficking or substance abuse (Garrett et al., 2018; Ravi et al., 2017; Sprang & Cole, 2018). Additional cases of domestic sex trafficking have previously been documented as incest and sexual abuse within cultic groups and communities and categorized under satanic ritual abuse (SRA). Often, these cases are not identified as having a commercial component, even though they usually do.

How drugs are used

It should be no surprise that traffickers and pimps exploit an addiction to profit through commercial sex acts. Regardless of the type of trafficking situation, several trends have been

identified in the literature surrounding how drugs are used. According to Meshelemiah (2018), traffickers use drugs to: (1) lure in persons with an established drug use problem, (2) lure in an inexperienced victim to get them “hooked,” (3) reward or punish the drug-dependent victim. Traffickers also use drugs to ensure victims become dependent on the trafficker for their next fix and hold the victim in debt bondage, making them easier to control. Meshelemiah (2018) refers to this as “weaponizing” drugs; like traditional weapons, they are used to gain an advantage over a vulnerable victim, disarming them and forcing them to comply. Henderson and Rhodes (2022) found similar use of drugs as a coercive tactic to force victims to comply.

Regardless of these established patterns among traffickers, it is essential to recognize that different traffickers do not operate within neat silos of behaviour and social networks but along a spectrum of tactics and relationships. For example, an intimate partner might coerce their partner into prostituting out of economic necessity and offer drugs as a “kindness” to bury the trauma and as a reward for “hard work.” Another example might include a current or former gang member already involved in the sale and distribution of drugs, who encounters addicted individuals they then begin to exploit either in exchange for drugs or those profits sexually. This individual may present as an intimate partner or a successful business owner to appeal to different victims’ vulnerabilities. Similarly, because gang involvement is commonly intergenerational, domestic sex trafficking operations may overlap with gang-controlled sex trafficking operations. A mother who is prostituting to maintain her drug addiction may not only directly introduce her child to sex buyers in exchange for drugs or money, but the exposure in early childhood to prostitution normalizes these transactions as a means for survival.

Additionally, a pimp or gang sex trafficker may utilize physical abuse, forced drug use, and abduction to maintain control over their victims, behaviours primarily used by a

gorilla/guerilla pimp. Finally, a gang that operates a network of illicit massage businesses (IMBs) may use one gang member to play the role of an intimate partner to recruit and groom the victim. In contrast, other members may oversee the daily activities of the business front and the transportation of the victim.

A critical component to preventing and responding to instances of sex trafficking is the proper identification of the typology of the trafficker. Because different traffickers utilize different techniques based on their typology, certain forms of trafficking may be more visible in specific scenarios than others (Riley-Horvath, 2019; Ross et al., 2015). For example, a victim under direct physical control by an intimate partner might be more visible in a healthcare setting where professionals have received a significant amount of training and education on intimate partner violence (IPV). Whereas a child experiencing domestic sex trafficking may be dismissed as a normal parent-child relationship, or an adult being sex trafficked by a dealer because their substance use disorder may present as a “frequent flyer” seeking prescription painkillers rather than a victim in need of safety planning (Stock et al., 2018; Bennett & O’Brien, 2007; Sprang & Cole, 2018). The existing gap in research around the typologies of sex traffickers’ centers around better understanding the intersection of the partner/abuser and substance use (Dalla, 2004; Kennedy et al., 2007; McMahon et al., 2006). The present study aimed to answer the following research question: What substance introduction, use and abuse themes exist between and across different typologies of third-party traffickers?

Methods

The researchers on this project partnered with a survivor-led organization in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States which offers direct services to both sex trafficking survivors and victims’ (those still being trafficked) across the United States. With Institutional Review Board

approval, in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of seventy-five women who either had experienced or were currently experiencing third-party controlled sex trafficking. The researchers asked respondents about their experiences in the sex trade, how and where traffickers recruit, how victims are groomed, how victims' daily lives are structured, including interactions with traffickers, other victims, and sex buyers, and what is needed to exit and recover from sex trafficking. All participants revealed that they had experienced force, fraud, or coercion defined by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA).

Recruitment & Data Collection

The partnering survivor-led organization advertised the study via social media blasts to a network of 1,600 women victims and survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. Seventy-three women-initiated contact with the research team and completed interviews, and another two provided email responses to the interview questions for a total sample of seventy-five women. Of the seventy-five women initially interviewed, a total of 24 participants disclosed past or current drug use and abuse, and these interviews were examined in greater depth for this study to understand better the tactics used by different third-party traffickers. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted either over the phone or in-person in a privileged setting. Only two of the interviews occurred in person at an undisclosed, private location. Interviews with the women ranged in duration from 40 minutes to 120 minutes. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym to protect their identities; in some cases, participants asked the researcher to select one for them. Qualitative in-depth interviews offer the opportunity to elevate participant voices, centering their lived experience in the data collection. Semi-structured interviews also provide depth that researchers cannot access using survey data, secondary data, or other quantitative approaches (Weiss, 1994). A panel of sex trafficking survivor leaders reviewed a semi-structured interview

guide before data collection to ensure the project was survivor informed. This approach is increasingly supported in studies interested in centering lived experience in sex trafficking research (Rajaram & Tidball, 2018).

Sample

Most women in this study (94%) were trafficked in urban settings. A portion of the sample self-identified as wholly exited from the commercial sex trade (CST) while others in the sample identified as still prostituting. The sample of women ranged in age at the interview from 21 years to 58 years old and included women who had initial entry as juveniles and during adulthood. Additionally, the sample included women who had experienced familial, gang and pimp-controlled trafficking and individuals who identified as entering the CST independently. Just under 2% of individuals in the sub-sample of twenty-four entered the commercial sex trade over the age of eighteen *without* facilitation from a third-party trafficker. This means that 98% of this sample identified their entry into the sex trade to align with the U.S. TVPA's (2000) definition of being sex trafficking victims.

Some trends emerged when looking at the type of third-party trafficker, the age of entry, and mention of substance use. All familial-controlled victims in this study were introduced to the CST under 18. Half of this group disclosed substance use or addiction during their interview, though it should be noted that not all familial experiences were the same. Some participants were trafficked as infants, and others were trafficked as juveniles by parents with a substance use disorder to maintain the addiction. Eighty percent of gang-controlled victims in this study were introduced to CST under the age of 18. This entire group disclosed substance use or addiction during their interview. Thirty-six percent of pimp-controlled victims in this study were introduced to CST under the age of 18. Eighty-nine percent of them disclosed substance use or addiction

during their interview. All individuals who identified as entering the CST independently were over the age of 18 at the time of entry. Sixty percent of this group disclosed substance use or addiction during their interview.

Table 1 presents the demographic information for the sample in the study, including what type of trafficking participants experienced.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Results

Boyfriend Pimps: "He wanted me to"

One theme that emerged from the data revealed how boyfriend pimps introduced addictive substances socially to groom victims and normalize drug use in the victim's new reality. Many victims shared that the emotional bond between them and their pimp was a deciding factor in using. As an example, Amanda, a White woman trafficked into the CST in her 20s by a man she initially believed was a boyfriend, explained how substance use was a part of the trauma bond he fostered in her: "I was never much into drugs, but I did it because he wanted me to." Andrea described the relationship with that boyfriend pimp as one where he introduced her to crack cocaine because they lived in poverty. He coerced her into selling sex and used crack to force her to continue. She became addicted quickly and continued to sell sex, turning all the money over to him to replenish the supply of drugs for both. The relationship soon became violent, fueled by drugs and trauma. They lived in what she referred to as a "drug house" in a major metropolitan area that was allegedly on the radar of local police. Additionally, Amanda described reporting him to police for a highly violent rape:

I told the police that he had raped me, and they came and arrested him. Of course, he was yelling and crying and screaming, ‘Why are you doing this to me? Why did you do this to me? Do you know what is going to happen to me? Rape? Why would you say something like that?’ Of course, they collected evidence. They collected towels and blankets, and there was blood on the blankets and the clothes I was wearing. They had me get out of them and put something else on, and they collected all sorts of evidence. They took him away, and unfortunately, for about five or six days after they took him, he kept calling me from the jail, and I accepted his calls, and he convinced me to drop the charges.

Amanda went on to say, “I ended up calling the detectives and everybody and telling them that I made it up, I lied. They knew that I hadn’t.” Yet, the police could not pursue the case without charges. In this case, the trauma bond forged between Amanda and her trafficker was too strong to break.

Other trafficking victims were introduced to selling sex due to their involvement in the drug trade. Camille was “boyfriended” into the sex trade by her drug dealer turned romantic partner. Camille described her childhood as tumultuous, and in her late teens, she felt what she thought was love and acceptance from drug dealers and gang bangers:

... they accept the most vulnerable people. And so, that’s initially kind of where I started, was I started selling drugs and being a drug runner for a bunch of big-time drug dealers, in Minnesota, back and forth between the cities, in Chicago, to Detroit, things like that. And then one of the drug dealers that I ended up meeting, getting hooked up with, had this concept that he could sell people instead of drugs and make more money, and it would not be as dangerous. So, he sold me this fantasy of like, you can make more money, he was

telling me I could make more money than what I was making selling drugs, and it is a lot safer.

Camille quickly learned that the money she made prostituting was not hers to keep. She said the idea of getting paid to do something she was “already doing for free” was intriguing. Interestingly, her second trafficker got her *off* drugs because her second trafficker did not want the additional expense, nor did he want his victims “getting sloppy.” The key similarity between Camille and Amanda’s stories is how much power the trafficker held regarding whether drugs were used as part of the control. For many victims, they had a minimal choice in the matter; it came down to whether “he wanted me to.”

Weaponizing drug use

Other individuals experienced what Meshelemiah (2018) referred to as “weaponizing drugs” to get victims to comply. Cashmere’s boyfriend-turned-pimp forced her to comply by using threats of physical abuse. She stated, “He wouldn’t [physically] force me to do drugs, but I was kind of like, forced to do the drugs. It’s either you’re gonna do the drugs or you’re gonna get beat up.” She described how he used drugs to manipulate his other victims, a tactic she witnessed when she became the trafficker’s bottom girl or second-in-command in the trafficking operation (Henderson & Rhodes, 2022). Cashmere said:

A lot of women were drugged immediately and then once they became addicted, I mean, they had sex for drugs because they needed their next hit from their pimp, and they never saw any of the money from any of the transactions at all.

Cashmere, a multi-racial woman, was trafficked as an adult in a metropolitan area known for street-level prostitution. She indicated having several interactions with law enforcement but never received offers for help or was given any indication she was viewed as a victim:

Some were nice, and some were real nasty and mean, calling us sluts and that is what we get, and we should be ashamed of ourselves. So, I am just like, okay. And other ones, you know, they say, ‘We get it.’ Like I have had plenty of them stop when I was on the blade, and stop and be like, ‘dude, you know, stay off the street beyond the sidewalk.’ They were like, just be careful. And then other ones are just like I said, nasty and mean.

Cashmere was arrested once for loitering, and most of her interactions with law enforcement took place while she was engaged in outdoor, street-level prostitution.

Other evidence from the data suggests that drugs were weaponized to force victims into compliance when traffickers would withhold their next fix, resulting in painful and often debilitating withdrawal symptoms. Andi’s trafficker withheld all her basic needs until she made her daily quota. She explained:

He would take, like—withholding drugs and food it was pretty much everything would be shut down. No doing anything. No eating, no getting high, or making yourself [feel better]. He was just such an angry person that he would lose it and start punching holes in the wall and just destroying and breaking everything. He would rape me or beat me...he was a very violent person...overall.

Gwen, a White woman who met her “boyfriend” pimp while still in high school, had similar experiences to Cashmere. She was trafficked in a metropolitan area in the northwest region of the U.S. and described how her trafficker used drugs to confuse her, which inevitably resulted in harsher punishment:

I remember this one time... It had been three days that I was sitting in this room smoking crack cocaine being tortured by him...he would ask me “what color was the car that picked you up the other night where you earned forty bucks? What color was the car?” Well, it

was dark green. So, then he would go downstairs, ask one of the other girls, “what color car did Gwen get into the other day?” They’ll say, “I think it was like a dark blue.” He’d come back in and say, “you’re lying. One of you guys are lying. One of you guys are going to get your ass beat.” There is a part of me that’s like, okay, I don’t want her to get her ass beat so okay, maybe she’s right. It is dark. It was dark blue, and she’s like, perhaps it was dark green. I don’t know. He would literally like make us crazy and this would go on for hours and hours and hours accusing us of lying to him...three days of this and I remember I was like in the corner on the floor just hovered down there, just wondering oh my god, this is my freaking life and remember I’m high as hell, I’ve been up for three days.

This trafficker’s tactics are clearly examples of not only weaponizing drugs, but also gaslighting. Both Gwen and her trafficker had several interactions with police, and their time together ended with a raid on the apartment they were living in. Gwen was arrested, convicted, and served just under two years for crimes she was compelled to commit as part of her victimization.

Other participants shared how their trafficker used their existing addiction as a point of leverage. Calista, a White woman whose trafficking started at age 18, had a pimp who used her active addiction to motivate her to prostitute:

I got addicted to opiates and heroine ... and it resulted in me coming to this fact that I had to sell my body to get money because I was [dope] sick ... I was brainwashed by the drugs.

They made me [think] that, okay, I can feel it, this way I don’t have to feel my feelings.

This tactic was expected, as Eliza, who was first trafficked as a juvenile by her drug dealer, described this was a steadfast part of her trafficker’s recruitment strategy for new drug abusers and trafficking victims. He directed her to provide free drugs to other missing and runaway teens in the area. She explained:

Marc started having me carry crack cocaine to get runaways high and addicted. To save myself from that part [also getting high and addicted], I just did what he told me to do, and it just increased to him beating me.

Eliza's trafficker did not use drugs to force or coerce her but used physical abuse instead.

One final victim, Ami, described her intense desire to avoid drugs despite the perceived escape from her reality: "They just shoved them down my throat ... until I finally learned how to put them up in my cheek. I finally figured out how to do that, and I would just pretend to be asleep or loaded."

Drugs as a coping mechanism for complex trauma

Many participants explained how drug use was a critical coping mechanism to endure prostituting daily. Maggie, a White woman who was trafficked in early adulthood, used drugs at first to numb the pain of the daily trauma. Still, as with any addictive substance, it spiralled out of control, and she found herself engaging in dangerous street-level prostitution to feed the addiction:

I did it because I didn't want to feel the way I felt, because I don't like to feel, and I don't like the way my feelings feel, so I numb them with drugs, and then I like I would be so scared that I would be out on the street and be sick and be homeless and be this and be that, that I would take like...I would do anything.

Talia entered the CST in her early twenties through her drug dealer, who eventually came to traffic her. She explained how being on drugs allowed her total escape from the present reality:

You can shut your perceptions to love and appreciate and like and absorb any situation that you're in if you choose to. You never had to live in your natural mindset because you were finding your drugs. To you, that was heaven on earth.

Cashmere also explained how using substances was her sole coping skill when she had to prostitute: “When I was on drugs, I would be like, ‘Oh, it’s not that bad...But when I’m off it’s like, ‘Damn. That was bad.’” Cashmere went on to say she and other victims she knew used drugs to dissociate “to cover for that alter ego” (the identity that engaged in commercial sex).

Discussion

This study aimed to identify how different traffickers utilize substances as a mechanism of control among sex trafficking victims. According to our results, substance abuse and addiction are utilized in various ways; pimps intentionally use psychological, social, and situational manipulation to encourage substance use. The result is that drug abuse is integrated into the victims’ daily activities as expected and normalized behaviour. Pimp control differs from the other forms of trafficking in that a pimp must create vulnerability and leverage over the victim where it might not naturally occur. For example, many victims reported their pimp weaponized drugs, which confirms Meshelemiah (2018), and others’ research suggests that introducing drugs to coerce and force victims into selling sex is, in fact, sex trafficking. The pimp trafficker creates a vulnerability with induced drug addiction. Most pimp-controlled victims in this study were introduced to substances through their intimate male partner or drug dealer, who quickly became their pimp. Sometimes, this was an intentional transition on the part of the pimp. In some instances, the drug dealer or intimate partner promptly realized that the female victim could become an additional revenue source to support their addiction or fuel the cyclical nature of prostitution and substance abuse.

One distinct subgroup of traffickers is the drug dealers who become pimps. While many drug dealers were previously or currently gang-involved, dealers who became pimps operated with the exact tactics we commonly observe being used by pimps.

Pimps rely on public perceptions of what determines free will and real choice regarding substance use and prostitution. A victim who uses substances socially with their partner or in party and nightclub scenes is perceived by the unlearned person to choose to engage in this behavior and environment, and therefore the relationship with their traffickers. First responders often have no choice but to believe victims who say they love their partner (who is their pimp) and that they are “choosing to prostitute.”

Gang-controlled/gorilla/guerilla trafficking, due to its brutal nature, focuses on the short-term proceeds, utilizing existing social networks. For this reason, it could be argued that while all types of traffickers are focused on the monetary profits involved in sex trafficking, gang-controlled operations are the most aligned with western capitalism due to their short-term, high-risk, high-profit model. Because gangs are already moving and distributing drugs, they have not only the transportation and communication network developed, but they also have a pool of both sex buyers and victims from which to generate additional revenue. An individual in active addiction is at incredibly elevated risk for future commercial sexual exploitation through gang control, and a male customer is easily suggestible when it comes to enhancing his substance use experience with paid-for sex. Combined, the prostituted person is forced to use substances to comply with being prostituted, and the sex buyer desires additional substances to prolong a sexual encounter while under the influence. Thus, maximizing a single drug transaction into two consumers of substances, one of which also consumes paid sex with a person who is the property of the gang.

Substance use was prevalent across all forms of CST involvement, with it being least common in familial settings. This could be because of high-demand religious groups' role in domestic sex trafficking operations and the group's rules regarding using substances. Women who

entered the commercial sex trade independently either had already engaged in drug use before entering or developed an addiction during their time in prostitution/trafficking.

This study confirms the bi-directional nature of prostitution and substance abuse; it also provided some foundational insight into significant variables influencing directionality. This study also reaffirms that abusers are known to intentionally manipulate situations around substance use to criminalize and socially isolate the victim, increasing the likelihood of victim-blaming by the community. Lastly, this study confirms that social environments and intimate partners undoubtedly play a direct role in the prostituted person's substance use patterns.

Limitations of this study include the demographics of the available sample. The sample did not proportionately represent persons of colour who are over-represented in the commercial sex trade at-large. This sample was limited to cis-gendered women, and therefore does not expand the body of work on male or non-binary prostituted and sex trafficked persons. Additionally, the sample held a high representation of pimp-controlled victims, building a case for future research to continue exploring the intersection of gang and familial traffickers and substance use.

A sole underlying theme across all sexual exploitation and trafficking was the high rate of prior sexual victimization. Over 90% of interview participants had experienced sexual assault or abuse before they entered prostitution (Henderson & Rhodes, 2022). Future studies should continue to explore the bi-directionality of sexual abuse/assault and substance use and how this influences how and when diverse types of traffickers target specific victims and how this chronological sequence impacts recovery attempts and outcomes. Future research should focus on clinical explorations of the various forms of traffickers and how the strategies utilized by the different typologies influence treatment outcomes. Finally, future studies should examine the

intersection of trauma bonds to traffickers, substance use and abuse, and treatment and sobriety outcomes.

Implications

As mentioned earlier, given that most victims in this study were trafficked in urban settings, and many of those had interactions with law enforcement conducting proactive investigative work, this research has much to learn. In medical settings, healthcare professionals can often retrospectively identify medical cases that included substance use as potentially red flags for sex trafficking immediately following an in-depth training on the topic (Roberson 2017). The same could be accomplished within law enforcement agencies already conducting drug interdiction, especially in urban areas where outdoor prostitution is visible and typically well-known. This should provide an efficient way to increase detection of trafficking cases alongside drug (and other) investigations that are already ongoing. Farrell & Kane (2020) argue for a similar approach, claiming that sex trafficking investigations require a proactive investigative approach instead of a reactive approach. Suppose agencies do not have adequate funding to create and sustain a human trafficking-specific investigative unit. In that case, a stop-gap approach could train law enforcement to identify the real issue more accurately behind the presence of illicit substances. Then, victims should ideally be directed to services, and law enforcement can pursue investigations into the individual responsible for their victimization—the traffickers.

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Table 1*Sample Demographics*

Race/ethnicity	
White	60%
Black	11%
Multi-racial	10%
Native American	10%
Other/NR	9%
Age (mean)	36 years old
Age at entry	
Under 18	50%
Over 18	46%
Type of Trafficking Control	
Pimp	60%
Familial	10%