

Push-Pull Factors Influencing Sex Trade Involvement among Young Black/Latinx Sexual Minority Men and Transgender Youth

Kris Rosentel, MSW; Clair Fuller, BA; Shannon M.E. Bowers, MPH; Alicia VandeVusse, PhD; Darnell N. Motley, PhD, John Schneider, MD; Rob Garofalo, MD, MPH; Lisa Kuhns, PhD, MPH; Michele Kipke, PhD; Sari Reisner, ScD; Brandon J. Hill, PhD

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study was to explore the push-pull factors that influenced Black and Latinx sexual minority men and transgender youth's involvement in the sex trade.

METHODS

As part of the Work2Prevent study, 21 interviews and 7 focus groups were conducted with a total of 67 Black and Latinx men who have sex with men (MSM), transgender women (TW), and gender non-conforming individuals (GNC) who were assigned male at birth (ages 16-32). Participants were recruited using flyers in LGBTQ organizations and businesses, referral from community organizations, and a community-based recruiter. Interviews and focus groups focused on participants' experiences navigating employment and managing money. Members of the research team developed and revised a codebook after engaging in open coding of a small subset of the dataset. Each interview and focus group was transcribed verbatim and coded in Atlas.ti by two independent coders, allowing researchers to identify emergent themes.

RESULTS

Involvement in transactional sex work was common with around a third of the sample including both transgender/GNC participants and MSM reporting escorting for money or other needs. Analyses revealed interrelated push and pull factors that influenced participants' decisions to engage in the sex trade. Participants often highlighted that experiences in the sex trade exposed them to violence and increased risk for HIV/STIs.

Sample Characteristics (n=67)	
Mean age [SD]	22.5 [3.6]
Race/Ethnicity	
Black/African American	91.0%
Hispanic/Latinx	6.0%
Gender	
Transgender Female	50.7%
Cisgender Male	43.3%
GNC/Genderqueer	6.0%
Sexual Orientation	
Gay/Homosexual	45.5%
Bisexual	27.2%
Straight/Heterosexual	30.3%
Other	6.1%
Employment	
Unemployed	57.6%
Employed Part Time	19.7%
Employed Full Time	22.7%
Educational Attainment	
Less than High School	20.0%
High School/GED	47.7%
Some College	32.3%
Homeless (past 6 months)	16.7%
HIV-positive (self-report)	16.4%
Transactional Sex Work (ever)	32.8%

PUSH FACTORS

Financial Insecurity:

"If you got to miss a meal, miss a meal. If you got to walk, you got to walk ... That's how I had to learn [to be] very disciplined ... The escort stuff was my last resort."
–Male Participant

Family Rejection:

"My parents stopped talking to me. I was living with my auntie. When I told her I was trans like, 'I'm a transgender.' She wasn't having it. Our relationship went downhill ... On my 18th birthday, I left ... My 18th birthday was in November, I started working [sales] in the February after. Worked for like a month and a half, then I started escorting."
–Trans Female Participant

School Dropout:

"I've been doing [sex work] since I was 14. But I started off on the streets. But school, I've never been a school kind of girl. So I graduated eighth grade, but I didn't go to high school after that. When I did finally go to high school, like a certain year, I was already hoeing ... It's like, 'Why even bother? Shit I can go do [sex work] and get what I need to be comfortable.'" –Trans Female Participant

Unstable Housing:

"Yeah, housing plays a big part because like I said you get people who aren't accepted, and they get thrown right out. That plays a big part because that will keep them from getting a regular job."
–Trans Female Participant

Criminal-legal System Involvement:

"I wanted fast money, fast life... [I ended up] in the juvenile system also, so it was like a whole different life ... Then I really got into the escort thing."
–Trans Female Participant

Job Discrimination/Harassment:

"It's hard to get a job as a transgender female. It's a lot of discrimination ... I haven't really looked for jobs outside of escorting for a while."
–Trans Female Participant

Poor Pay/Work Conditions:

"By the time I got full-time with [a grocery store], that's when all the BS started ... [they] wasn't, you know what I'm saying, paying me enough. We got paid every week, but they kept claiming hours. At that time, that's when I started escorting a little bit."
–Trans Female Participant

PULL FACTORS

Autonomy:

"The hustle is different ... Let's just be real. If we said that we ain't going to flip no burger that's because of the fact we seen the environment that they work in ... Some of us are actually being smart...If you know you have a pop-off attitude, don't go work with people."
–Male Participant

Flexibility:

"Honestly, with escorting it's like all you do. I can go to sleep right now and sleep this whole day away. Go get me something to eat, get me something to drink, lay down, watch TV, lay up, do the fuck, whatever I want to do. Then I can get up at about 10 o'clock at night and put in."
–Trans Female Participant

Gender/Sexual Identity Affirmation:

"I was escorting, but not like they do it nowadays. I had men, all type of men came to [the city] and wanted to take me out for dinner."
–Male Participant

LGBTQ Community Belonging:

"I was introduced to the gay world. I guess I always thought everybody was just quiet about it. It was a whole another world ... From there, that's when I started [sex work]."
–Male Participant

Ability to Earn Money Quickly:

"With a job you have to wait two weeks to get on the payroll, you have to wait until you get your check... [With escorting] you get it right there. As long as you do it, you can finish whatever you doing and get your money."
–Male Participant

CONCLUSION Structural-level interventions aimed at improving social support, economic opportunities, workplace inclusivity, and working conditions for Black and Latinx sexual minority men and transgender youth may impact sex trade involvement and mitigate associated risks for these populations. Interventions should address factors that limit these youth's opportunities in the formal job market and influence their decisions to engage in sex work including unstable housing, school dropout, and discrimination. Interventions may also be needed to create economic opportunities for these youth that provide similar benefits to involvement in the sex trade including autonomy, flexibility, and affirmation.