

RESEARCH REPORT

# Surviving the Streets of New York

## Experiences of LGBTQ Youth, YMSM, and YWSW Engaged in Survival Sex

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# Highlights

In 2011, researchers from the Urban Institute launched a three-year study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) youth; young men who have sex with men (YMSM); and young women who have sex with women (YWSW) engaged in survival sex in New York City. Working in partnership with the New York City-based organization Streetwise and Safe (SAS), researchers trained youth leaders to conduct in-depth interviews with a total of 283 youths who engaged in survival sex in New York City and identified themselves as LGBTQ, YMSM, or YWSW. During these interviews, youth were asked a wide range of questions about their backgrounds and experiences. The information they shared paints a vivid picture of how they survive in the face of adversity, often dealing with issues rooted in poverty, homophobia, transphobia, racism, child abuse, and criminalization. Using a multimethod analytic approach, we identified a number of key findings, highlighted below and described further throughout this report:

- Youth reported experiences of social and familial discrimination and rejection, familial dysfunction, familial poverty, physical abuse, sexual abuse and exploitation, and emotional and mental trauma.
- The experiences of youth engaged in survival sex are not static; they change over the course of youths' involvement in exchanging sex for money and/or material goods. For example, young people might be recruited by an exploiter but then eventually trade independently to meet their basic needs, or vice versa.
- LGBTQ youth tend to have large peer networks, which include youth who engage in survival sex. Many young people are introduced to the survival-sex economy through such networks.
- LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW lack access to voluntary and low-threshold services, including short- and long-term housing, affordable housing and shelter options, livable-wage employment opportunities, food security, and gender-affirming health care. Many of the youth who are able to access these services experience institutional barriers. Among the few service providers and public benefits programs that exist, LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW report high rates of service denial, as well as violence from breach of confidentiality and unsafe and discriminatory treatment by staff and other recipients of these services, on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and age.

- Many youth engaged in survival sex experience frequent arrest for various “quality-of-life” and misdemeanor crimes, creating further instability and perpetuating the need to engage in survival sex. In custody, many youth experience violence on the basis of their perceived sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Youth experience violence and abuse from multiple sources, including families, exploiters, clients, strangers, peers, and law enforcement. Youth also experience violence at the hands of staff and clients at social service organizations and other locations that are intended to be safe.
- Many youth report disappointing or frustrating experiences with social service systems and providers, which often fail to meet their need for safe housing, reliable income, and adequate mental and physical health care, as well as for freedom, independence, and self-expression.
- Youth are extremely resilient in the face of external challenges (such as violence and lack of housing and employment) and internal challenges (such as emotional and physical trauma and gender and sexual identity issues). They find ways to survive, often relying on their informal networks, street savvy, and quick learning abilities to share resources and skills and to adapt to difficult and often dangerous situations.

This study is among the first to focus on the experiences of LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW who have self-reported engagement in survival sex in New York City. Despite a recent increase in studies concerning the commercial sexual exploitation of children and survival sex, there has been a paucity of research focused on the experiences of YMSM, YWSW, and LGBTQ youth engaged in survival sex (Dennis 2008). Some of the existing literature assumes that young men and transgender youth who engage in survival sex do so voluntarily or as a by-product of a “deviant homosexual” subculture; others argue that unlike female youth, male youth take only pleasure from engagement in the sex trade or approach such engagement as a coming-of-age rite (Dennis 2008). However, few existing studies of youth engaged in survival sex use peer-to-peer interviews to explore LGBTQ youths’ perspectives on their own experiences, circumstances, service needs, and desires for individual and social change (McIntyre 2005, 2006, 2008a, 2008b; YWEP 2009, 2012). A main goal of this study is to describe and quantify these youths’ experiences and characteristics to gain a better understanding of their engagement in survival sex and how the support networks and systems in their lives have both helped them and let them down.

# Terminology and Definitional Considerations

Before we discuss the study's findings, it is important to address and define the terms we choose to use throughout this report. Some of the terms we use reflect the word choices of the young people we interviewed. These terms describe the youths' behaviors and experiences, as opposed to labeling them based on these behaviors and experiences.

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**Cisgender:** Individuals whose experiences of their gender match the sex they were assigned at birth.

**Gender expression:** The aspects of behavior and outward presentation that may (intentionally or unintentionally) communicate gender to others in a given culture or society. These aspects include clothing, body language, speech, hairstyles, socialization, interests, and presence in gendered spaces (e.g., restrooms, places of worship, etc.), among others. A person's gender expression may vary from the gender norms traditionally associated with the person's sex assigned at birth. Gender expression is separate from gender identity and sexual orientation (Perry and Green 2014).

**Gender nonconforming:** People who have or are perceived to have gender characteristics or behaviors that do not conform to traditional or societal expectations. Gender nonconforming people may or may not identify as transgender. While gender nonconforming people are often assumed to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual, sexual orientation cannot be determined by a person's appearance or degree of gender conformity (Perry and Green 2014).

**Sexual orientation:** Whom a person is physically and emotionally attracted to. Sexual orientation is distinct from gender identity; transgender people may identify as heterosexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, or any other sexual orientation.

**Transgender:** People whose gender identity (internal sense of being female, male, or another gender) is incongruent with their sex assigned at birth (physical body). Transgender is also used as an umbrella term to refer to communities of people that include all whose gender identity or gender expression do not match society's expectations of how they should behave in relation to their gender (e.g., transsexual, transgender, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, and other people whose gender expressions vary from traditional gender norms) (Perry and Green 2014).

**Young men who have sex with men (YMSM):** Young men who may identify as heterosexual but have sex with members of the same sex, often in exchange for money and/or material goods.

**Young women who have sex with women (YWSW):** Young women who may identify as heterosexual but have sex with members of the same sex, often in exchange for money and/or material goods.



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**Exploiter:** An individual who uses tactics involving force, fraud, and coercion to control a young person's involvement in the commercial sex market.

**Peer facilitator:** A peer, who may or may not be engaged in survival sex, who provides nonexploitative support to someone engaging in survival sex, such that the person engaging in survival sex does not have limited mobility; decides what they do and what they trade sex for; and is not subject to force, fraud, or coercion.

**Youth engaged in survival sex:** The terms “youth engaged in survival sex” and “youth who exchange sex for money and/or material goods (e.g., shelter, food, and drugs)” are used here to reflect young people's experiences of involvement in the commercial sex market in their own terms. These terms describe a behavior as opposed to labeling the youth themselves.

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# Youths' Engagement in the Commercial Sex Trade for Survival

Population estimates of youth who trade sex for survival vary considerably. Curtis and colleagues (2008),<sup>1</sup> using respondent-driven sampling methods, estimated that as many as 4,000 individuals under age 21 were engaged in New York City's commercial sex market. A much lower estimate by Gragg and colleagues (2007), generated with interview and service data from law enforcement and youth service providers in New York City, indicated a population of approximately 2,250 youth who exchanged sex for money and material goods.

Regardless of the exact number, the limited literature on LGBTQ youth engagement in survival sex reveals that such youth are likely to share several common experiences before exchanging sex for money and/or material goods. These experiences may include racism; family poverty; homelessness and its associated stigma; lack of adequate or safe housing options; lack of access to gender-affirming medical care; and rejection and discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity by families, communities, and employers (Bigelsen and Vuotto 2013; Gwadz et al. 2009; Lankenau et al. 2005; NYCAHSIYO 2012; Rees 2010; Wilson et al. 2009). Additionally, LGBTQ youth experience homophobic and transphobic harassment, discrimination, and physical violence within the child welfare and foster care systems and emergency and short- and long-term shelters, and from health care providers, social services, law enforcement, and other government institutions (NYCAHSIYO 2012; Ray 2006; YWEP 2012).

Homelessness is one of the most common drivers of youth engagement in survival sex (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council 2013; Weber et al. 2004). Nationally, estimates of the proportion of runaway and homeless youth involved in survival sex range from 10 percent to as high as 50 percent (Greene, Ennett, and Ringwalt 1999; Halcón and Lifson 2004; Haley et al. 2004; Tyler 2009; Weber et al. 2004). Studies focused on New York City consistently report that homeless youth often trade sex for a place to stay each night because of the absence of available shelter beds (Freeman and Hamilton 2008), and that approximately a quarter of homeless youth in New York City have traded sex at some point (Bigelsen and Vuotto 2013; Clatts et al. 1998; Rotheram-Borus et al. 1992).

These figures are even more striking for LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW in New York City. According to a survey of nearly 1,000 homeless youth in New York City, young men were three times more likely than young women to have traded sex for a place to stay, and LGBTQ youth were seven

times more likely than heterosexual youth to have done so (Freeman and Hamilton 2008). Transgender youth in New York City have been found eight times more likely than nontransgender youth to trade sex for a safe place to stay (Freeman and Hamilton 2008). Nationally, 48 percent of transgender people reporting involvement in sex work also report homelessness (Grant et al. 2011).

The number of homeless youth who report trading sex for shelter corresponds to the number of youth involved in the sex trade who report having experienced homelessness. The vast majority of young men and transgender youth interviewed by Curtis and colleagues (2008) reported being homeless, including a significant proportion of young men who reported engaging in survival sex while living on the streets. An earlier ethnographic study of YMSM who traded sex for money or material goods in New York City found that 9 out of 10 interviewed youth were homeless at the time they began trading sex (Lankenau et al. 2005). Further, another study found that over half of transgender youth interviewed in Chicago and Los Angeles who had traded sex had spent one or more nights in a shelter, had a precarious housing situation, or were living on the street (Wilson et al. 2009).

Homelessness is thus a driver for involvement in survival sex and an ongoing issue for a significant proportion of youth who trade sex for money and/or material goods, especially LGBTQ youth who experience exclusion, discrimination, and abuse within their families, schools, shelters, and social services (Bigelsen and Vuotto 2013; Curtis et al. 2008; Gaetz 2004; Gwadz et al. 2009; Maitra 2002; McIntyre 2005, 2006, 2008a, 2008b; NYCAHSIYO 2012; Thukral and Ditmore 2003; Thukral, Ditmore, and Murphy 2005; Tyler 2009; YWEP 2009, 2012).

According to the Center for American Progress and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, a disproportionate number of homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (Quintana, Rosenthal, and Krehely 2010; Ray 2006). Further, youth service providers report that LGBTQ youth prefer to engage in survival sex or “couch surfing”<sup>2</sup> that involves sexual exchange, rather than risk experiencing the abuse and potential violence they sometimes face in youth shelters or foster care (NYCAHSIYO 2012). Transgender youth in particular report a lack of access to transition-related treatment centers and to safe shelter in sex-segregated facilities (Rees 2010). Transgender youth in New York City have been found eight times more likely than nontransgender youth to trade sex for a safe place to stay (Freeman and Hamilton 2008). Nationally, 48 percent of transgender people reporting involvement in the commercial sex market also report homelessness (Grant et al. 2011).

While each individual’s life circumstances differ and many factors contribute to engagement in survival sex, the explanations given by LGBTQ youth often highlight survival and economic need. LGBTQ youth who exchange sex for money and/or material goods in New York City report endemic

race- and gender-based job discrimination and limited to nonexistent economic choices resulting from discrimination from families, police, and social services (Gwadz et al. 2009; Maitra 2002; Rees 2010). A national survey of transgender people found that 61 percent of those engaged in sex work had experienced employment discrimination (Grant et al. 2011).

While transgender youth report active efforts to find alternative sources of income, few manage to get even an initial interview, and many report direct discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression (Rees 2010). Similarly, more than two-thirds of transgender youth who had engaged in survival sex in Chicago and Los Angeles reported experiencing problems getting a job because of their gender identity or presentation, and consequently earning less than \$12,000 a year (Wilson et al. 2009). Transgender youth whose gender expression was perceived as gender nonconforming reported absolutely no employment options (Rees 2010). Many transgender youth saw trading sex as a more ethical option than others available to them; as one youth said, “It’s better to try and make money on the street than to have to steal off people; at least I’m doing this for myself” (Rees 2010).

Prior engagement with child welfare and juvenile justice systems is also a predominant theme in the literature (Freeman and Hamilton 2008; Lankenau et al. 2005; Wilson et al. 2009). Gragg and colleagues (2007) found that the overwhelming majority of youth engaged in survival sex had prior child welfare involvement, typically in the form of child abuse and neglect allegations or investigations (69 percent) or foster care placements (75 percent). Further, over half had a prior juvenile justice placement, and 45 percent had a prior persons-in-need-of-supervision placement.

Childhood sexual abuse experiences have also been hypothesized to be among the factors contributing to youth involvement in the sex trade (Estes and Weiner 2001). One study of New York City homeless youth found that “78% of those who engaged in commercial sexual activity reported histories of childhood rape or molestation” (Bigelsen and Vuotto 2013, 5). However, other researchers have found that controlling for other variables has eliminated any statistically significant correlation between sexual abuse and engagement in survival sex (Tyler 2009).

The relationship between childhood sexual abuse and involvement in the sex trade has been found to be indirect. A 2001 study found that childhood sexual abuse was more closely correlated with running away from home at a young age to escape the abuse, which was, in turn, positively correlated with trading sex to meet survival needs (Tyler et al. 2001). Weber and colleagues (2004, 592) came to similar conclusions in research they describe as “the only prospective analysis of antecedents to prostitution among female street youths.” Other factors the research has linked to youth who exchange sex for money and/or material goods include alcohol use, drug use, and pregnancy history (Edwards,

Iritani, and Halfors 2006; Estes and Weiner 2001; Halcón and Lifson 2004; Walls and Bell 2011; Weber et al. 2004).

Economic difficulties related to housing and the lack of available employment and health care options are among the predominant factors driving LGBTQ youths' engagement in survival sex. Given this backdrop of extreme hardship, this study aims to document the characteristics, experiences, and backgrounds of LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW who exchange sex for money and/or material goods—using their own words.

# Current Study Goals and Methodology

With funding from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Urban Institute researchers set out to accomplish two primary goals: (1) to describe and quantify the characteristics and needs of the LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW populations engaged in survival sex in the New York City commercial sex market; and (2) to assess their interactions with governmental and nonprofit service providers, law enforcement, prosecutors, and court personnel. This study is based on the premise that in-depth, peer-to-peer interviews are needed to fully explore and understand the experiences of LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW who exchange sex for money and/or material goods. We use a multimethod (quantitative and qualitative) approach to address the study's goals.

The Urban Institute project team partnered with Streetwise and Safe's (SAS)<sup>3</sup> program to conduct in-depth interviews with approximately 300 youths recruited using a respondent-driven sampling (RDS) strategy. Urban researchers trained SAS youth leaders<sup>4</sup> to identify RDS seeds and conduct interviews with LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW. Seven youth leaders were trained over the course of the data collection period, which lasted approximately one year, though one youth leader conducted a large number of the interviews.

Respondent-driven sampling was used to recruit and survey successive waves of youth through their social networks. We set out to recruit approximately 300 LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW involved in the commercial sex market, and ultimately recruited and interviewed 283 young people. One of the strengths of the RDS strategy is that it employs study participants as recruiters of additional participants in consecutive waves of survey interviewing. A small number of research subjects ( $n = 13$ ), considered the first wave of recruits or initial seeds, was carefully selected with the help of local service providers and SAS youth leaders.

In targeting LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW involved in the commercial sex market, we set specific eligibility criteria for inclusion in the sample. These eligibility criteria included an age of 13–21 years old;<sup>5</sup> identification as LGBTQ, YMSM, or YWSW; and involvement in the commercial sex market in New York City (i.e., receives cash or in-kind payment in exchange for sex, and trades in the New York City area). To ensure that sample and social network attributes reached equilibrium, four or more waves of chain-referral sampling were achieved (Heckathorn 1997, 2002; Wang et al. 2005). Further, to reduce any bias in the initial seeds, we sought out demographically varied participants with a large

number of relationships with youth involved in the commercial sex market, in addition to the motivation and ability to recruit participants like themselves. Using these RDS methods, we were able to interview a demographically diverse and representative sample of the LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW population involved in the commercial sex economy in New York City.

The initial seed participants were given paper business card-sized coupons with a toll-free 24-hour number that youths could call to arrange an interview appointment. Both Urban and SAS staff monitored incoming phone calls to screen prospective research subjects for study eligibility; those who appeared eligible were given an interview time and the address of the SAS office where the majority of the interviews were conducted.<sup>6</sup> Upon arrival, subjects were rescreened for eligibility, appropriateness for recruitment into the study (e.g., youth who exhibited signs of severe mental health or cognitive disabilities were not interviewed), and any other referrals or interventions that might be required.

Those who did not identify as LGBTQ, YMSM, or YWSW; were too old;<sup>7</sup> or were not engaged in the commercial sex economy were deemed ineligible for the interview but were given referrals to youth-oriented service agencies and made aware of the services those organizations provided. Those who were deemed ineligible for other reasons, including perceived negative impact on mental health or well-being, were not interviewed. Researchers documented all efforts to provide appropriate referrals or assistance in special incident reports.

Youth who were rescreened and deemed eligible and appropriate for the study were subsequently recruited and interviewed after the researchers obtained their informed assent.<sup>8</sup> At the end of the first interview, each respondent received \$20 in cash, in addition to three unique, coded coupons that they were instructed (through a brief education session) to pass to other YMSM, YWSW, or LGBTQ youth who were part of the commercial sex market. Youth participants were paid an additional \$10 per successful referral. Unique numeric codes on the front of each coupon allowed the researchers to prevent duplication, to identify which youth recruited subsequent participants, and to keep track of overall recruitment patterns. These methods also ensured research transparency for study participants and helped maintain participant confidentiality while taking advantage of peer network referrals. The participants referred by the initial seeds made up the first wave of the sample and were given three coupons to pass along to potential new recruits. After this, the process was self-sustaining and resulted in recruitment of a large sample.

The majority of interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed by a professional transcription company, which allowed detailed descriptions of the youths' experiences in the commercial sex market, including their interactions with law enforcement and service agencies, to be

fully documented.<sup>9</sup> Urban Institute researchers extracted a large amount of quantitative and qualitative data from the transcribed interviews, which ranged from 20 minutes to over two hours in length. Researchers coded quantitative data directly into a data collection instrument, which was designed using Checkbox survey software and had inputs that directly followed the interview protocol questions. For many questions, the data collection instrument included a series of “yes/no” responses based on those most commonly given by youth, though any “other” responses were also coded exactly as they appeared. Every key quantitative question (e.g., “how does youth obtain customers?”) was also accompanied by a qualitative coding of the evidence supporting that data; such evidence consisted of direct quotes from the interview itself.

Ultimately, over 700 variables of quantitative data and over 200 variables of qualitative data were extracted from the interviews. Quantitative data were transferred to and analyzed in the SPSS statistical software program. Qualitative data were examined thoroughly and individually using Microsoft Word; quotations were codified into a series of themes so relevant quotes could be easily identified for inclusion in this report and subsequent study deliverables. Quantitative analyses were primarily descriptive (e.g., frequencies, means, proportions), but also consisted of chi-squared cross-tabulations and *t*-tests to identify significant differences based on participants’ gender, sexual orientation, race, and LGBTQ versus YMSM or YWSW status. Qualitative data were analyzed separately, as described above, and the two types of information were subsequently integrated within this overview report.



# Findings

This report is the first in a series to present findings from our study. It focuses on providing an overview of the characteristics and pathways that lead LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW into the New York City commercial sex market, as well as an overview of youths' experiences with and perceptions of engaging in survival sex. Youths were asked how and why they first engaged in survival sex, who also exchanged sex for money and/or material goods within their peer network, and their self-reported risks and benefits. We also describe the youths' involvement with the criminal justice system, though future briefs, reports, and articles will present a deeper look at their experiences with the criminal justice and child welfare systems, their health-related issues, their service needs and experiences with service providers, and their experiences with violence and victimization.

## What Are the Characteristics of LGBTQ Youth, YMSM, and YWSW Engaged in Survival Sex in New York City?

In this section, we describe the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the youth respondents, as well as their living situations and financial debts. Given the importance of gender, sexual orientation, and race to youths' overall self-identities and life experiences, we report these characteristics first. Throughout the report, we note any significant ( $\alpha < .05$ ) differences in key findings by youths' gender, sexual orientation, and race.

### Gender

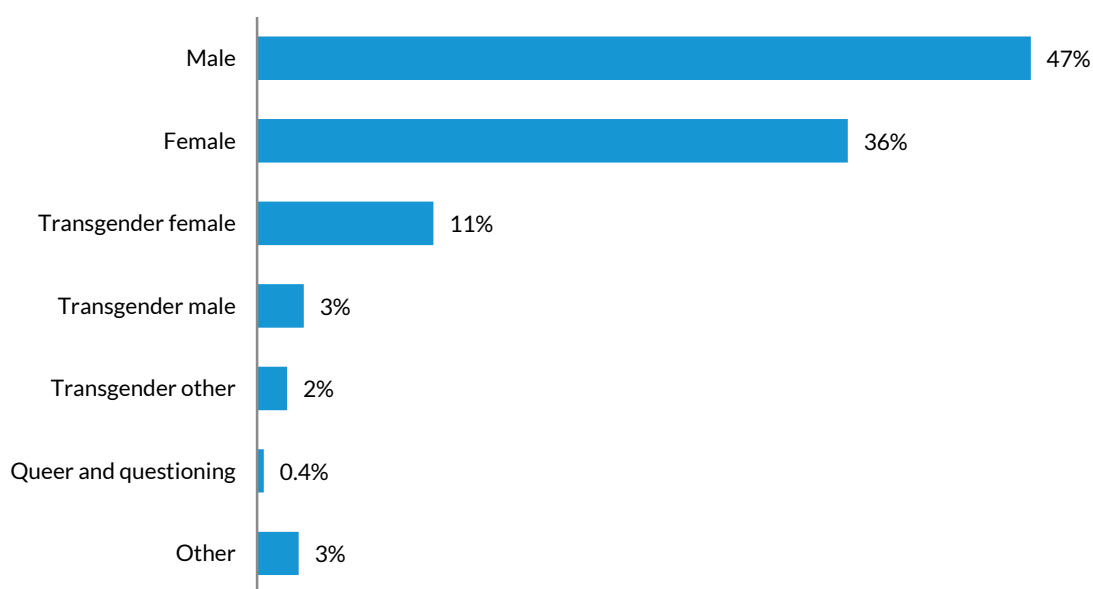
Past studies have described varied demographic characteristics of youth who trade sex in exchange for money and/or material goods. Gragg and colleagues (2007) report that 85 percent of commercially sexually exploited youth are young women, which is consistent with predominant narratives surrounding youth involvement in survival sex. However, researchers speaking directly with youth identified through respondent-driven sampling found that over half (54 percent) of youth engaged in survival sex in New York City were young men, while 42 percent were young women and 4 percent were individuals who identified as transgender (Curtis et al. 2008). These results appear to be consistent with those of a study based on surveys of homeless youth in New York City, which found that young men were three times more likely to have traded sex for a place to sleep than young women

(Freeman and Hamilton 2008). Transgender youth—who may identify as women, men, or neither—make up an important part of the population of youth and adults trading sex in New York City and beyond. Researchers and advocates have found that a large number of transgender youth have traded sex at some point, and that transgender youth are more frequently involved in the sex trade than nontransgender youth (Ray 2006; Walls and Bell 2011).

As shown in figure 1, most youth in our sample identified their gender as male (47 percent) or female (36 percent). In addition, more than one in ten identified as a transgender woman (11 percent), transgender man (3 percent), or simply transgender without specifying any additional gender identity (2 percent). Individuals also reported being queer and questioning (0.4 percent) or of another gender identity (3 percent), including androgynous, femme, gender nonconforming, and genderless.<sup>10</sup>

FIGURE 1

### Gender of Youth Respondents



**Note:** “Other” includes androgynous, femme, gender nonconforming, and genderless.

### Sexual Orientation

Researchers have found that LGBTQ youth make up a large number of youth engaged in survival sex in New York City, nationally, and across the continent. LGBTQ youth are estimated to make up only 5 to 7 percent of the youth population but 20 to 40 percent of the homeless youth population (Quintana et al.

2010). Authors of a multiphase, multiyear, multimethod transnational study estimate that 25 to 35 percent of young men in the sex trade identify as gay, bisexual, or transgender (Estes and Weiner 2001).

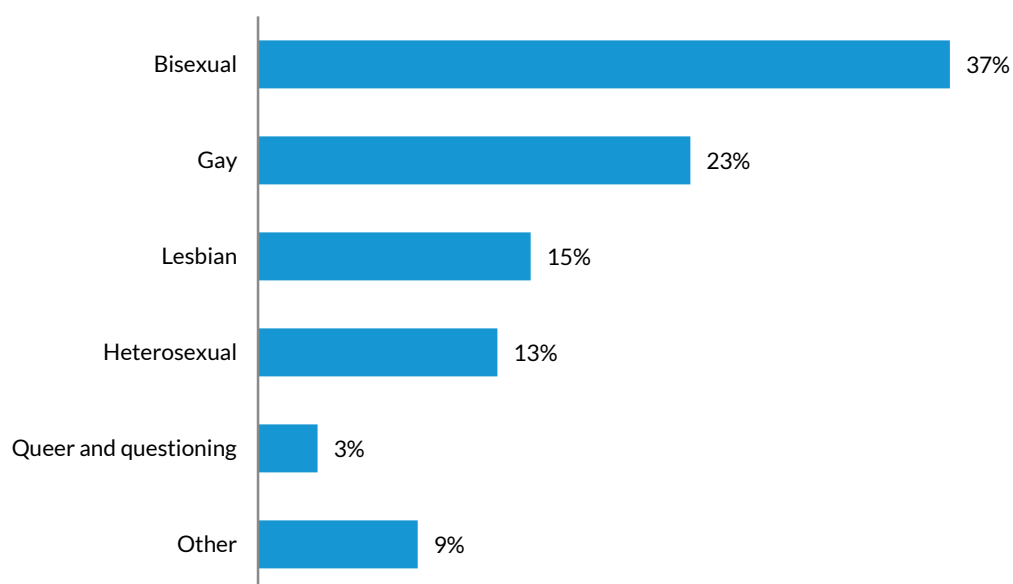
Some researchers have found that, compared with their heterosexual counterparts, LGBTQ youth are more likely to have traded sex. A 2008 study found that LGBTQ youth in New York City were seven to eight times more likely to have traded sex to meet survival needs than their non-LGBTQ counterparts (Freeman and Hamilton 2008).

The majority of existing research addressing the experiences of LGBTQ youth engaged in survival sex focuses on the experiences of transgender women, gay men, and young men who have sex with men, and frequently excludes the experiences of young lesbians, bisexual women, young women who have sex with women, and transgender men, who are generally assumed to not be engaged in the commercial sex market (Dennis 2008; Rees 2010; Weber et al. 2004).

Figure 2 shows the sexual orientation of youth in our sample: well over a third identified as bisexual, almost a quarter identified as gay, and nearly one in six identified as lesbian. Thirteen percent characterized themselves as heterosexual,<sup>11</sup> while 3 percent described themselves as queer and questioning and 9 percent identified another sexual orientation—which included open, pansexual,<sup>12</sup> no preference, and no label.

FIGURE 2

### Sexual Orientation of Youth Respondents



**Note:** “Other” includes open, pansexual, no preference, and no label.

## Race

Researchers have consistently found that the majority of youths engaging in survival sex in New York City are people of color (Curtis et al. 2008; Gragg et al. 2007; Gwadz et al. 2009). This finding is consistent with research across the United States, which finds that African American and Latino or Latina youths are significantly more likely to be engaged in survival sex than their white counterparts (Edwards, Iritani, and Hallfors 2006; Grant et al. 2011; Tyler 2009; Walls and Bell 2011; Wilson et al. 2009; YWEP 2009).

Virtually all the youth in our study were of racial minorities, with 37 percent identifying as African American or black, 22 percent as Latino or Latina, and 30 percent with more than one race or ethnicity.<sup>13</sup> Other respondents identified as white (5 percent), Native American (1 percent), or another race (4 percent).

## Age and Children

Youth ranged in age from 15 to 26 and were, on average, 19.5 years old. Although the interviews did not explicitly ask about children, a very small percentage (5 percent) of the sample mentioned having children; of these, 87 percent reported having just one child.

## Education

Most youth (76 percent) were not currently enrolled in school, although almost half (48 percent) had neither graduated high school nor obtained a general equivalency diploma. Of those currently enrolled in school, 39 percent reported not having attended class within the year before their interview. There were no significant differences in high school graduation or GED rates by youths' gender, sexual orientation, or race.

## Birthplace

Nearly all respondents were born (93 percent) and raised (99 percent) in the United States, with two in three born (63 percent) or raised (65 percent) in New York City. Approximately three-quarters were born (72 percent) or raised (75 percent) in the tristate area of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

## Living Situation

Nearly half of the youth had lived in New York City their entire lives (49 percent); those who did not grow up in New York City had lived there for an average of four years. Fifty-five percent of the youth currently lived in Manhattan, 23 percent lived in Brooklyn, and 16 percent lived in the Bronx.

Given the high correlation between homelessness and engagement in survival sex, it is not surprising that nearly half the youth we interviewed (48 percent) reported living in a shelter, and another 10 percent said they lived on the street. In addition, one in ten youth said they lived in a family home (11 percent), a friend's home (10 percent), or in their own place or apartment (9 percent). One youth reported living with an individual who, based on information disclosed in the interview, appeared to be an exploiter. There were no significant differences in youths' likelihood of living in a shelter or on the streets based on gender, sexual orientation, or race.

Young people reported being forced out of their family homes as a result of their families' unwillingness to accept their sexual orientation or gender identity. One young man described his experience of how he came to be homeless, commenting,

My father didn't respect me for who I am because he don't like bisexual people or gay people so from there I came out to him and I told him and then he just kicked me out, because he couldn't take it. (Respondent 5112, 19 years old, Latino, bisexual, male)

In addition to hostile home environments, homophobia was a factor contributing to youths' homelessness. One gay youth explained that the perceived threat that he may influence his siblings and "spread" his sexual orientation to others resulted in his removal from his home.

My mom kicked me out . . . she didn't want me being gay, she wanted grandchildren, she didn't like my lifestyle, she didn't pretty much accept it. She still loved me but she just didn't want me being there. And plus I have a little brother so she didn't want me pretty much influencing him in any form or fashion. (Respondent 531, 19 years old, black, gay, male)

Others were forced to run away from threatening, abusive, and insecure home environments. When asked about her experience becoming homeless, a young woman recounted her journey from the foster care system to the streets of New York, explaining,

When my parents had me they was crack heads and stuff, so I eventually got taken away from them and then I was adopted and my adoptive father was basically raping me. So I went to the cops and they told me to leave the house and stuff like that. And then after that there was nowhere else to go because I didn't know my real family. I just knew all my adopted family. And I knew they wasn't going to believe me. So I was at a friend's house till I ran out. I couldn't go anywhere else. (Respondent 522, 19 years old, Native American, lesbian, female)

Most of the youths' current living arrangements were relatively short-term: over 37 percent had lived at their current residence for less than one year, 23 percent for less than one month, and 11 percent for less than one week. Eighteen percent of youth had lived at their current residence for a year or more, while 15 percent had lived at their current residence for several years or their entire life.

Virtually all youths lived with other people, most commonly shelter coresidents (55 percent), friends (22 percent), or family (16 percent). Very few lived with a client (2 percent) or exploiter (0.4 percent).

The majority of respondents did not have regular bills or rent payments because of their homelessness. Of the 114 respondents (40 percent) who reported paying bills, most either shared responsibility for paying bills and rent (31 percent) or were on government or public assistance (28 percent). Others reported that their parents or guardians (16 percent) or friends (13 percent) paid the bills and rent. Eight percent reported being the sole provider for their own living expenses.

## Money Debt

Over one in five youth (21 percent) owed money to another individual or organization. These 59 youths owed money to friends or peers (35 percent), lending institutions (22 percent), family members (11 percent), peer facilitators (2 percent), clients (2 percent), exploiters (2 percent), and other people such as drug dealers and owners of local stores (22 percent). They owed money for food (31 percent), institutional loans (14 percent), drugs (12 percent), legal fees or fines (4 percent), and other items or services such as transportation. Youth reported owing amounts as low as \$3 and as high as \$15,000, with the average amount owed being \$856.

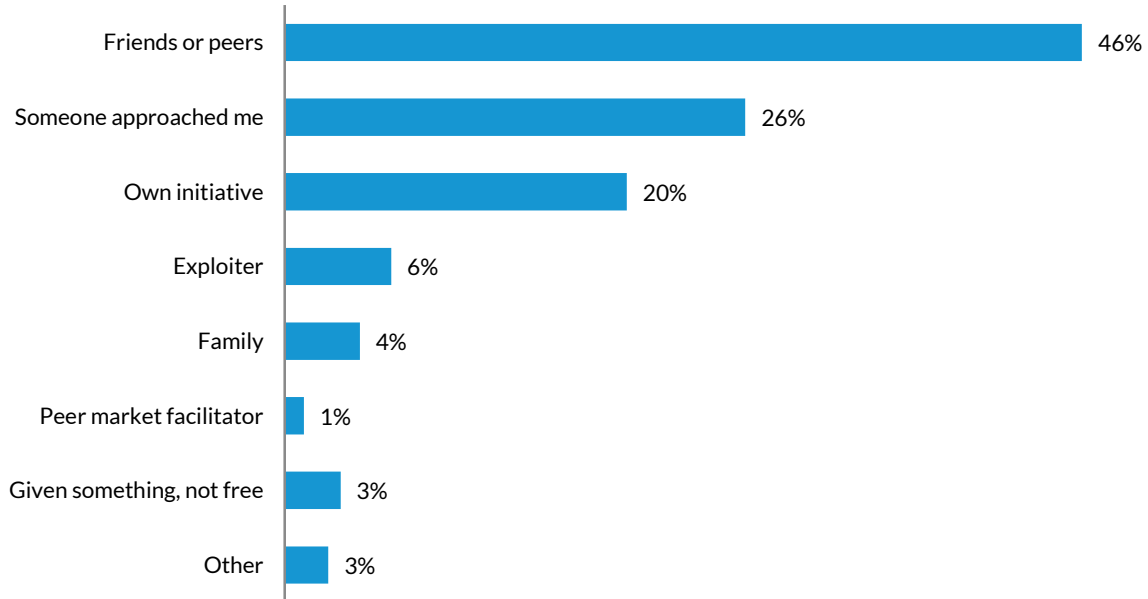
## What Are LGBTQ Youths', YMSM's, and YWSW's Pathways into the Survival-Sex Trade?

Past studies have shown that the majority of youth who engage in survival sex do so through same-sex peers who are already engaged in the commercial sex market (Estes and Weiner 2001). Similarly, in this study, the most common way youth reported first becoming involved in trading sex was through friends or peers (figure 3); however, over a quarter reported being approached by a customer their first time trading, and one in five reported beginning on their own initiative. Approximately 6 percent of youth

started trading sex and/or material goods through an exploiter (exploitative situations are described in a section starting on page 47), and 4 percent became involved through a family member.

FIGURE 3

### How Youth Became Involved in Trading Sex



Cisgender women were significantly less likely than cisgender men to report first trading sex on their own initiative: 11 percent of cisgender women reported first trading on their own, compared with 24 percent of men. Transgender women (6 percent), transgender men (2 percent), and youth who identified as nonbinary transgender (5 percent)<sup>14</sup> were the least likely to indicate initially trading sex on their own. By contrast, cisgender women were more likely to report becoming involved because of an exploiter (13 percent) than cisgender men (2 percent), transgender women (3 percent), and nonbinary transgender individuals (8 percent). No transgender men reported being recruited by an exploiter. Forty-four percent of LGBTQ youth and 58 percent of YMSM or YWSW reported becoming involved in trading sex through their friends or peers—a difference that approaches significance. There were no other significant differences in the method by which respondents of different races or sexual orientations became involved in trading sex.

### Age of Entry

On average, respondents started exchanging sex for money and/or material goods at age 17, though age of entry ranged from 7 to 22 years old. Average age of entry differed significantly by gender. Cisgender

women started at the youngest age (16) while cisgender men, transgender women, transgender men, and nonbinary transgender individuals started a year older (17). There were no significant differences in age of entry by sexual orientation or race.

Respondents had been trading for two and a half years on average at the time they were interviewed, though they reported a few months to 14 years of involvement in survival sex. On average, transgender women and cisgender women had been involved in trading sex for money and/or material goods for approximately one year longer than cisgender men, transgender men, and nonbinary transgender respondents (three years versus two years). The differences in the length of time spent trading sex approached significance.

## Reasons for Involvement

Tyler and colleagues (2001) noted that many studies have found that approximately 25 percent of homeless youth have engaged in survival sex. Past research located in a large shelter in New York City found that almost 50 percent of youth had traded sex because they had no place to stay and would not have done so if they had alternative options for shelter (Bigelsen and Vuotto 2013).

Youth in this study shared experiences that are similar to those revealed in past studies: there were a number of points of entry (as shown in figure 3) and they became involved for various reasons, most of which revolved around survival and obtaining basic necessities such as food and shelter. When asked to explain how he first became involved in the sex trade, one respondent explained,

I don't remember it that vividly, all I know is just that I was starving. . . . My friend was like, "Come to the stroll trust me, you'll get somebody." I was hungry, I was cold, so I did it. (Respondent 199, 21 years old, black, gay, male)

Other youth reported engaging in survival sex after being kicked out of their families or being denied services at homeless shelters.<sup>15</sup> A young bisexual man described how he was forcibly removed from his family's and friend's homes before finding himself trading sex in return for shelter:

The first time I got kicked out from my grandmother's house and I went to a friend's house and I was staying and I messed up with my friend and I was high and I got kicked out and I had nowhere to go for the weekend. So a boy that I knew he was like oh, you going to come chill with me. I said alright. So we went there, I went to his house in the Bronx on the Grand Concourse. We started drinking, we started smoking, and he asked me if I want to stay in the weekend. I was like, yeah. So then he asked me, he said, you know it's gonna come at a cost, and I'm like, like how? And he said like, have sex with me. So at first I didn't want to but I didn't want to stay in the streets and it was cold so I just did it . . . like I regret it, but it took me out from the streets for the weekend. (Respondent 637, 19 years old, Latino, bisexual, male)



Some transgender youth also saw trading sex as a way to secure the money needed for costly gender-affirming medical treatment, with one respondent stating, “Sex work just became the next step to helping having the resources, the disposable income to transition” (Respondent 25, 26 years old, white and Latino, heterosexual, trans female). Others had drug or alcohol habits or dependencies and saw trading sex as a way to continue purchasing drugs. One young woman explained that her girlfriend was a key figure in her entry into the sex trade:

I was really getting serious with her and we had a similar cocaine problem. So we decided [to do it] in order to just maintain our habit, do whatever, party, do what we want. (Respondent 145, 19 years old, white, bisexual, female)

Youth became involved in the commercial sex market in a variety of ways that ranged from actively seeking involvement, to being unexpectedly propositioned, to being forced into trading sex. Almost half of the respondents (46 percent, figure 3) first engaged in survival sex with the help or facilitation of a peer or friend, who may have played a passive or active role. For some respondents, witnessing their friends exchange sex for money and/or material goods was an impetus to do the same. As one male respondent said,

My best friend was doing it and I saw like he was living the quote, unquote, “the life.” And it was like, oh, well he’s getting good money and for about 30 minutes, he’d get a good 300 [dollars]. . . . I was like, well, I might as well do it too. (Respondent 434, 19 years old, black, bisexual, male)

Young people also had peers and friends who played an active role in showing them how to exchange sex for money and/or material goods. Respondents described how their friends taught them the day-to-day details associated with trading sex, such as what prices to charge, where to find customers, and how to set up an online advertisement or profile. One gay young man described how his gay family<sup>16</sup> served as a resource:

I used to hang out in [neighborhood in Manhattan] a lot like late at night and being on [street in Manhattan] and the back streets and things of that nature. I had a gay sister. She pretty much knew, like, how to do things, and getting the cars, how much to cost the rates and things of that nature. And I used to spend nights with her to just be there to make sure that she’d be okay, and then I kind of needed money too, and so she put me on and we became a skillful trade. (Respondent 531, 19 years old, black, gay, male)

Other friends referred the respondent directly to clients or contacts who would assist them in finding clients. As one young woman explained,

I needed the money and my friend hooked me up with a guy who she said would give me money and all I had to do is go out with him on a date. And it turns out that wasn’t all he wanted. But he offered me \$500 and I really needed the money to pay my phone bills, and pay for school books and everything. (Respondent 146, 18 years old, white, bisexual, female)

However, as will be discussed later, those who played an active role in recruitment did not necessarily expect or require their peers to pay a fee for their assistance. When a fee was charged, it often only consisted of the cost of posting an ad online or of travel expenses.

As shown in figure 3, over a quarter of youth found themselves presented with the opportunity to trade sex, typically through a client who approached them and offered money, shelter, or other resources in exchange for sexual acts. A fifth of the individuals described their initial engagement in survival sex as an active decision they made after assessing their economic and living situations. One transsexual individual explained,

[I didn't really think about], you know, trading sex for anything whenever I first moved here. And then whenever I got here, I realized that it was just so popular because there were so many people in my situation that were unemployed and they needed money and that it was just so widely, you know, it was so easy to get into. So I was a very conservative person. I didn't really think about doing that but times got really, really hard and I didn't eat for about a week and I didn't have anywhere to stay. I was sneaking on the train and so I decided that I was going to clean myself up a little bit. Decided to go out there and do what I have to do. (Respondent 5175, 21 years old, white, transsexual, trans female)

Six percent of youth started trading sex through an exploitative third party. While some actively agreed to an exploiter's terms when they were approached by or referred to one, others found themselves unknowingly or forcefully under the influence of an exploiter. Additionally, even if they were not initially recruited by one, there were some youth who were controlled by an exploiter at some point during their experiences engaging in survival sex. As will be discussed later, youths' experiences engaging in the commercial sex market are not static, and their involvement takes on different forms over time. For example, someone might initially become involved through an exploiter, and then over time leave that person and engage independently for survival, and vice versa. A young woman described her own changing trajectory exchanging sex for money and/or material goods, which she initially started doing on her own as a means for survival:

I met a girl who was doing the same thing I was. But, she was affiliated with the Bloods, and she was like, oh, you know if you come do this, they do the same thing, but you'll make so much more money. When I was 15, that is when I went and got involved with the Bloods and they told me, oh, you already have experience doing the sex trade thing? Okay, you going to keep doing that with us and I was doing that up until last summer before I moved to New York. (Respondent 5030, 18 years old, Middle Eastern and white, bisexual, female)

Four percent of respondents became involved in trading sex at a very young age through family members. Some youth were exploited by foster parents or foster siblings, while others were exploited by members of their family of origin. As one black bisexual male explained,

The person that raised me, my stepfather, he helped to sell my body. He [would] have clients come by like seven—ten times a day or two days a week or something like . . . it's similar to a schedule he had so. . . . It started at 16 going into 17. (Respondent 475, 18 years old, black, bisexual, male)

## Experiences of Young Men Who Have Sex with Men (YMSM) and Young Women Who Have Sex with Women (YWSW)

Only 17 people in the study identified as cisgender heterosexual individuals engaging in sex with members of the same sex (YMSM and YWSW), and their involvement in the commercial sex market also stemmed from a need to survive. YMSM and YWSW reported facing economic challenges as a result of drug abuse in their families, insecure access to housing, and the death of one or both parents; many were living in shelters at the time they first exchanged sex for money and/or material goods.

One young man described engaging in survival sex at a young age. His trade was facilitated by family members, who normalized trading sex with other men as a way to make money:

I like females. I want a wife, I want kids, all that. But for me, I've been doing all that [having sex with men] for money. And then, you know what I'm saying. It started from young, you know what I'm saying, like my family used to be on that all, like, "You could do this, get this on, walk down the street with this on, and money," alright, whatever. And then it's like boom, here I am. It was all so fast, confusing. (Respondent 454, 21 years old, Haitian, heterosexual, male)

One heterosexual male described the important role engaging in survival sex played in helping him support himself and his new family.

It came to the point where my mother had kicked me out of the house, and I was staying with him. So pretty much he was paying everything for me, so I really didn't really have a choice. I didn't know how to handle it, because he was still basically giving me my financial needs, so I couldn't—I would say no then he just came like, "I know you need to take care of your girlfriend" and stuff like that and I couldn't . . . I couldn't say no, because at the time she was pregnant . . . I figured I am sacrificing myself, my body for somebody else—I felt like I'm doing a good thing. (Respondent 507, 20 years old, black, heterosexual, male)

Other YMSM and YWSW echoed similar sentiments and said that they had to set aside any conflicting feelings about engaging in survival sex in order to provide for their loved ones. As this heterosexual young man explained, trading sex was his only option:

I'm a heterosexual male but I do this for my son; I'd do anything for him. . . . The only thing I dislike is that you know I had to come to this, come down to that to help provide for my son. I feel like I should have a full-time job, but since I have felonies on my record it's like they'll give me the interview but then once they pull up the background they throw it in your face. I went to one interview and they was like "Oh why should we hire someone like you?" What do you mean someone like me? . . . You judge me because of my color or because of my background. You can't

stay a day in my shoes, you can't walk in these shoes; you can't. (Respondent 379, 21 years old, multiracial, heterosexual, male)

## What Are the Characteristics of the Commercial Sex Market?

### Frequency of Trading

At the time of the interviews, 41 percent of youth had last exchanged sex for money and/or material goods during the last week and 26 percent had last traded a few weeks to a month before the interview. Others reported last engaging in survival sex a few months before being interviewed (14 percent), 6 to 12 months before being interviewed (11 percent), or over a year before being interviewed (8 percent). Respondents said that they traded an average of four to five days a week. They reported engaging in survival sex for an average of 12 to 14 hours during the one-week period before their interview.

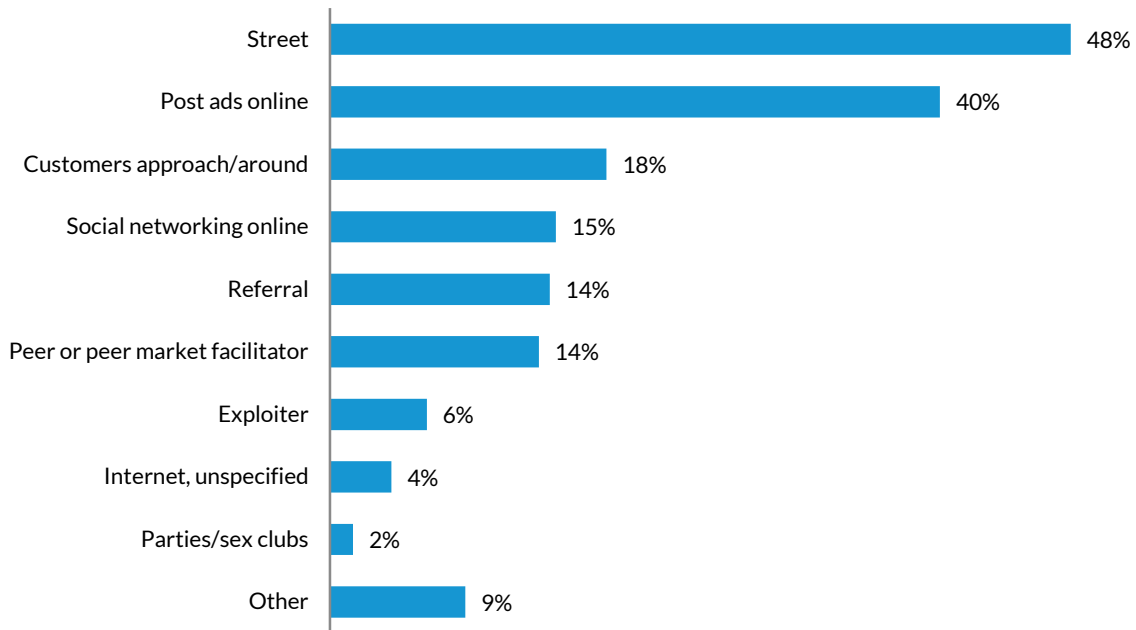
### Getting Customers

As shown in figure 4, youth reported using a wide array of methods to find customers. The most common method was on the street or stroll (48 percent),<sup>17</sup> followed by posting ads on the Internet (40 percent). Eighteen percent of young people had customers approach them while they were hanging out either with friends or alone in certain neighborhoods. Other common sources included social networking sites (15 percent) and referrals (14 percent). Peers and peer facilitators helped 14 percent of respondents find customers, while 6 percent of youth had customers who had been identified by their exploiters.

Youth of different genders, sexual orientations, and race were equally likely to turn to the street to find customers. However, bisexual respondents were the least likely to post ads online: 29 percent of bisexual youth had posted online ads, compared with 50 percent of heterosexual youth, 45 percent of gay and lesbian youth, and 46 percent of other youth. When it came to finding customers through an exploiter, no transgender youth and only 3 percent of males found customers this way, compared with 13 percent of females. The fact that an exploiter did not help a young person find customers did not mean that the youth was not or had never been in an exploitative situation. In many cases, exploiters expected youth to find their customers through whatever means possible without their assistance.

FIGURE 4

### How Youth Get Customers



**Note:** "Other" includes bars, strip clubs, peep shows, regular clients only, and rest stops.

### TRADING IN THE STREETS

Almost half the youth found customers on the streets or strolls at the time of the interview (48 percent), while 16 percent had done so at some point in the past. Of those who used strolls to find customers at the time of the interview, most worked in Manhattan (52 percent), followed by the Bronx (17 percent) and Brooklyn (14 percent). Of the few respondents (16) who were asked and reported regularly switching strolls, most did so nightly (31 percent), weekly (25 percent), or every few days (13 percent).

Several respondents did not frequent a specific stroll, but described strolling as walking around attracting clients.

Like I feel like I've never, I haven't, I never clocked out in three years, I mean every day, where I could be walking and especially in Brooklyn when I used to stay at [name of youth shelter] in Brooklyn, me and my bitch would walk down the street and get dates 'cause it's like look at me like, for one, I look crazy I don't have too much makeup on, but yeah like I'm fab and look at my hair like, I'm messy X I give off that energy. (Respondent 775, 20 years old, black, bisexual, gender nonconforming)

Youth who were familiar with specific strolls described the other individuals trading sex and clients on the strolls as diverse. They often made distinctions between strolls based on specific racial or ethnic community populations, and the gender and sexuality of those trading sex (for example, if a particular

stroll was more accepting of transgender people), and the presence of drug use. One 21-year-old woman explained, “I like [neighborhood in Manhattan]: there is more people there; there is more of my kind there, to be comfortable with” (Respondent 5037, Latina, lesbian). This sentiment was echoed by other transgender youth in reference to neighborhoods they perceived to be safe for them.

Respondents described the strolls as dangerous places. The risk to their physical safety and health, along with the risk of encountering law enforcement and arrest, made finding customers on the strolls particularly frightening—especially for those who went to the strolls when they were very young. One young man explained the difficulties of navigating the streets as a young teenager:

It was scary, it was a bit scary because I was . . . the youngest. Now I see younger, I've seen a 14 or 13 or a prostitute, but at the time I was the only one doing it. So it was kind of scary, but I had a whole bunch of home girls and they always had my back. But what is a 14-year-old doing out on the street from 12:00 till 5:00 in the morning, you understand? . . . I was working everything up as much as I can, there was a lot of stress, it was overwhelming. I'm a strong person so I could kind of like deal with things like that. But you know, to another person it would have been hell to be up all night, and then be working all night and take your shitty ass to school, and get that done and then go home and take a shower and sleep three and a half hours and get up and go about your day. (Respondent 446, 19 years old, Spanish and Indian, bisexual, male)

Youth also viewed strolls as competitive and potentially territorial locations, particularly if exploiters were involved. One young man described the danger of encroaching on an exploiter's territory on the stroll:

You wouldn't know [another worker's] pimp is like sitting right across the street or in the building on the second floor or in a car right here or whatever. . . . If you entering somebody else's territory unbeknownst to everything that came with it, which was not cool at all, it was very dangerous. . . . I heard a couple of stories, like you know, the pimps running people from out of here because they already have their strip locked down. (Respondent 1346, 20 years old, Latino, bisexual, male)

While some youth with exploiters worked the strolls under their exploiters' rules and guidelines, others had exploiters who would not allow them to work the strolls for safety reasons. When asked if she ever worked the strolls, one young woman responded, “No, because that was easy for the cops who would stop us, and they would take us in and we would lose money and he'd hit us” (Respondent 5029, 20 years old, black, bisexual, female).

Young people who found customers on the strolls selected and switched neighborhoods for various reasons. While the lucrateness of an area was important, youth also noted safety considerations as a reason for switching neighborhoods. Safety considerations included avoiding dangerous situations with other individuals trading sex, law enforcement, clients, and individuals in the neighborhood. They also

switched for other reasons, such as boredom with a neighborhood or because they were working for an exploiter who decided to make the switch.

## POSTING ADS ONLINE

Researchers and service providers have noted that youth who exchange sex for money and/or material goods increasingly consider the Internet a somewhat safer, more anonymous, and more convenient way to find and screen customers without interference from law enforcement (Curtis et al. 2008; NYCAHSIYO 2012).

In this study, 56 percent of respondents had posted an ad online to find clients at least once. Of these 154 youths, almost three-fourths (74 percent) posted the ads themselves, while one in five had friends or peers post ads on their behalf and 5 percent had ads posted by an exploiter. Fifty-two percent of these respondents never paid to post ads; the others paid sometimes (24 percent) or always (24 percent).

Of the youth who posted ads, 34 percent did so because they felt it was safer. As one female respondent explained,

The Internet is safer in a way. No, nothing is 100 percent safe, but you can kind of get a feel of the person, who you are talking to on the phone and everything versus on the street, right, like you really can't have a conversation with them for that long, because you have to hurry up and get in the car and get the money and then leave, so because there's so many other distractions and you don't want get snatched by this pimp. You don't want your pimp to beat you, you know for this and that. (Respondent 5280, 19 years old, black, free sexuality, female)

Another respondent similarly explained how posting ads allowed her to screen customers, ultimately increasing her comfort level:

I feel more comfortable doing it. Like sometimes I feel a bit shy when it's confrontational like, the boom, like right there. So most of the time I feel more comfortable just meeting online talking for a little and then you know, talking about what's going to be happening, what needs to be done and you know. (Respondent 267, 20 years old, Latina, heterosexual, trans female)

Avoiding law enforcement detection and the risk of arrest was also important. Some youth, such as the respondent below, perceived themselves at less risk for police stings online:

I felt like the stroll was very dangerous and it was highly populated by the police, whereas you know some . . . I don't know, like when you work things on the Internet it kind of save you almost from entrapment in some ways. (Respondent 470, 20 years old, multiracial, pansexual, female)

Over a quarter of young people who posted ads (26 percent) felt that posting advertisements was easier or more efficient. One young man explained why convenience was important to him:

I felt the need to be a little more discreet when I work. It's more risky when you hit the streets; people and law enforcement are pretty much taken more serious when you're on the streets. So I feel like cyberspace and Internet was way more . . . convenient for me. (Respondent 654, 22 years old, multiracial, bisexual, male)

Twenty-four percent who posted ads reported they could ask for more money online. As one young woman explained, online interactions allow for prices to be established in the beginning:

I would actually make more because you actually have the time to negotiate before you meet up with the person and tell them the exact spot. (Respondent 313, 21 years old, Latina, lesbian, female)

Thirteen percent of respondents felt they had a more diverse customer base online, and other respondents who posted ads reported doing so because the Internet allowed for increased anonymity, sexual freedom, and privacy, or because it was too cold or harsh on the streets. As one white gay man summarized, online ads allow individuals to continue trading despite poor weather conditions:

That's just when business is slow or something like that, like if I'm not getting customers or anything like that, or if it's raining for a long period . . . it's never really good to go out, you know so then kind of [makes sense] to go online. (Respondent 182, 19 years old, white, gay, male)

## Number of Clients and Regulars

On average, youth saw 3 to 6 customers each day or night they exchanged sex for money and/or material goods, and 11 to 18 clients a week. Of these, 85 percent of respondents had at least one client they considered a regular customer; on average, respondents had seven such regular customers. Over half (55 percent) of these 221 respondents considered their regular clients important for money, one-third (34 percent) felt they were important because they provided a reliable form of economic and social support, 15 percent considered their regulars friends or providers of emotional support, and 14 percent did not consider their regular clients important.

While some youth expressed indifference toward their regulars, most distinguished regulars from other customers as sources of extra money. For those who saw their regulars only as sources of higher income, such as this woman, the relationship was simple:

They are the ones with the money, they are the ones who got bigger prices on it; like when I see those regulars I see dollar signs. (Respondent 5019, 20 years old, multiracial, lesbian, female)

Youth also depended on their regulars as a more reliable and safer stream of income. One respondent explained,

The scattered unpredictable nature of like, you know, sex work, it's really nice to have some semblance of something reliable. Can I call it that? Because when you're making a ton of money



one week and then you're fresh out the next, it's really nice to have something to fall back on. Even if it's not always there. And it's also that I don't have to go through the same screening or I have to freak out any time whenever I find some woman on the doorstep. I can work better with them because I know what they are into. I'm more inclined to get tips that way if they like me. A variety of reasons regulars are really helpful. (Respondent 1342, 20 years old, white, queer, genderqueer)

Regular clients also served as a source of money, shelter, or other resources during emergencies, as this youth described:

I know that you're not going to try to fuck me over, like I only have five people that I really, really trust. Like if I was in trouble right now, I can call them and they like yo, stay right there, I'm on my way. Or, I got the key under the mat so if you need a place to stay for the night, go to the house and I'll meet you there and so on. (Respondent 196, 20 years old, black and Puerto Rican, open sexuality, male)

Respondents, such as the Latino man below, also described having a different type of relationship with their regulars—one that was more enjoyable than their relationships with other clients:

Sometimes they don't even want sex, sometimes they just crave the attention, and sometimes they just want that person to be next to them. I guess they just like, feed off of the attraction or whatever but, it's cool, like they, they're very nice, take me out to eat, chill, watch a movie, sometimes of course there have been sexual encounters, but like it doesn't really—it's not so strong. Not like how regular dates would be if you wanted to just have sex, you just want sex and then money and that's it. (Respondent 531, 19 years old, Latino, gay, male)

While depending on regulars was generally discussed in a neutral or positive way, some youth perceived the support they received from regulars as negative because access to a reliable source of income impeded their ability to fully stop engaging in survival sex. This bisexual woman discussed why she thought it would be hard to quit:

**Interviewee:** They are important to me because those are the people that like no matter even if I stop for a certain amount of time once I go back those are the first people I'll hit up. Like those are the first people I'll look for that I know that will get me back in. Like I feel like sometimes I always tell myself I'm giving up on the trade of sex work because I think of it as a trade but then once I think about like those regulars and once I see them sometimes because sometimes they'll be, "Oh really are you going to do that?" And it's so easy to go back like they'll make up offers first and they'll make usually some of the best offers. . . .

**Interviewer:** So you could say that they're important to you because they're there like when you need to go back, they know who you are?

**Interviewee:** Okay, you know like kind of an artist has a fan base, I kind of feel like they're my fan base. (Respondent 274, 18 years old, Latina, bisexual, female)

Youth also cultivated emotionally supportive relationships with their regular customers, expressing that they received meaningful communication or friendship, or just had more pleasant interactions with their regulars than with the average customer. This gay man explained,

The regular guys, they tend to be like loners or like guys that have been through shit or whatever and they want the real action, not the relationship like we're about to get married but a relationship like let's talk, let's communicate. . . . Because I have gotten guys that didn't pay me with like money or stuff, but paid me with a good time, a good conversation, I got a little bit fucked up or whatever and we just talk. And he hasn't had sex like in 13 years and it's like no sex involved, it's just like. . . . So it's like they feed you good stuff and they are not just talking bullshit and they are talking real stuff. (Respondent 29, 16 years old, Latino, gay, male)

A gay black man shared similar sentiments:

Yeah like I feel I can talk to him about anything, you know, have somebody else's outlook on important things, and he's like older. So it's like he's a friend he's like an older he's been through things in his life since I find to talk to him about stuff like school or anything else like that. (Respondent 128, 17 years old, black, gay, male)

Finally, many youth felt that the benefits of regular clients were familiarity and the regular clients' understanding that the youth are often not interested in getting personal. This young woman explained,

I don't want to talk to you. I don't care about your life problems I'm not your fucking therapist. You know and the regulars already know that so they are just kind of like hey, good, price, pay, done. You know, the new people they want to be like so, where did you grow up? Don't ask me shit. You should ask me price and are we done, the only two things you need to say to me, how much, where do you need me to drop you off at. I sound so terrible. (Respondent 284, 21 years old, multiracial, pansexual, female)

## Customer Demographics

While there is no way to generalize about the respondents' clients based on this study, respondents offered a wide range of insights about their clients and how they navigate and assess their potential client pool. When asked what kind of people their clients were, many youth stressed the diversity of their client base. As one Latino transgender man stated,

All colors, all kinds they were old guys, young guys, executive guys, all of them, all of them, white, black, American, African, all of them. (Respondent 5025, 20 years old, Latino, trans male)

Some respondents, such as this bisexual female, took this sentiment further, and said that they did not care who the client was as long as the client had money:

I don't discriminate—money is green. (Respondent 190, 20 years old, multiracial, bisexual, female)

Youth observed that customers who would pay them money and/or material goods often belonged to one of two high-income populations: professionals, or gang members and drug dealers. While a few respondents spoke primarily to their clients' class or wealth, these observations often overlapped with

discussions of the clients' race. Youth also said that they avoided black customers because they received better compensation from white customers, based on a real or perceived difference in income.

Most of the time they are Caucasian, and I'm pretty racist when it comes to that, like I don't like messing with black guys because from my experience they are always cheap, and cheap to me is like they are always questioning something and they are also trying to get over it. Like they have the same mentality as you to me, with . . . I hate the fact that I like have to tell the truth about. . . . This is stereotypical, but it is statistical for a prostitute you know. What I'm saying is, most of them are Caucasian. When it comes to white guys, right; you can say oh it's 200 for the hour, right? You can get them to come over 200 for the hour, and then you can have then in there for 15 minutes. A black guy will be like; no I paid you for an hour. (Respondent 1095; 21 years old; Dominican, Puerto Rican, and black; gay; male)

Youth also identified safety concerns as reasons to choose certain clients based on class or race. As this white woman articulated, wealthier, white clients were often perceived as safer:

I'll try to stick to like white . . . I don't know. Normal looking clean-cut, job everything, everything you would have, just for my safety reasons. (Respondent 607, 19 years old, white, open sexuality, female)

A few of the youth expressed that the demographics of their clients were driven by the way clients perceived them. This queer male youth explained:

At the end of the day, I usually get white or black. I get a lot of black ones too because a lot of dudes like light-skinned girls. Or get a lot of white ones because I'm like black but I'm exotic or I'm like, you know they think that you just, if you're a dark skin you're a thief but if you're light skinned . . . (Respondent 755, 20 years old, black, queer, male)

The range of youth's preferences for certain clients and the reasons behind their preferences were best expressed in discussion of client gender and age. Sexual orientation clearly played a role in preferred customer gender. Most preferred to trade with customers who aligned with their sexual orientation, yet some, such as this youth, explained that trading could bring out complexities in their sexual orientation.

I only have sex with men because women to me are a little more secret so like I fall in love with women but not who I get as clients. (Respondent 168, 19 years old, Native American and Irish, bisexual, genderless)

On the other hand, being YMSM or YWSW could introduce feelings of distress and confusion regarding sexuality. Even in the context of trading to obtain basic necessities, this perceived challenge to heterosexual youths' identity was often painful in itself. A young man described this sentiment:

I only had that one experience. And I was like, honestly I was more ashamed than confused because I know like that's not what my preference is . . . it's just like I was very desperate for money. And I was like I still, I still think about it. I don't really talk about it. Like I never brought that up. None of my friends even know that that actually happened. You know so I just . . . I just kept it to myself. . . . He asked me like do you really need the money? At that moment I thought I

did. I felt I did and . . . like it was just like he grabbed me by like my waist and he just started doing it. And it was like . . . and I just like, try to close my eyes. Just try to think about something else. (Respondent 5194, 20 years old, black and Asian, heterosexual, male)

In terms of age, many youth preferred clients they perceived as older, usually because they saw this as an opportunity to ask for more money. However, others refused to trade with older clients because they felt they were unattractive and difficult to relate to.

The reality of married clients was also a recurring theme, along with youth's interpretations of why they had so many married clients. One female explained,

Most of the people I kind of mess with are married and they have like careers, like a banker or [inaudible], and stuff like that. Reason why because, I guess the more married people you get to deal with, the more tired they get because they are with the same person every time. And you can see in their face when they have, like a troubled marriage or something like that. They always talk about their wife or kids and the temptation . . . they just simply just drift away from reality to fantasy. So when they realize their fantasy can become reality they just take the chance no matter what, no matter if they can get caught or anything. (Respondent 127, 18 years old, black, gay, female)

Some individuals, such as this young man, avoided married clients for moral reasons:

I don't really like to do married men too much I don't want to feel like a home wrecker or anything that I need to. (Respondent 5016, 20 years old, black, gay, male)

Another youth insisted on not having married clients and said that he screened clients for clues of marital status:

**Interviewee:** I would not, not a married person I would never ever, I would rather sleep outside than mess with a married person.

**Interviewer:** So do you look for a ring when you?

**Interviewee:** Yes that's the first thing. (Respondent 635, 19 years old, black and Spanish, bisexual, female)

## Locations

Youth typically traded with customers at the customer's residence (64 percent) and at hotels (57 percent), with the next most common places being cars (22 percent) or parks and alleys (17 percent). Locations varied by transaction and depended on customers' preferences and access to buildings. One woman explained that services were delivered in a multitude of sites.

As crazy as it sounds you know you have customers that say, "Just come back to my car," you have customers say, "Well there's a nice spot right there," or you have some customers just saying, "I have a house, I have an apartment," or [they say] let's go to a motel. They take you all over. (Respondent 5231, 19 years old, Latina and white, bisexual, female)

Young people also talked about the precautions they had to take while trading in diverse settings.

One respondent shared the insecurity he felt trading in various locations, explaining:

Some people might want you to go in the car when I get out I make sure I bring mace with me. I always carry mace with me and make sure nothing is wrong, and make sure everything is okay. So when they say well I want it done in the car whatever you know so I have to make sure I have my mace in my pocket all the time, I always check myself to make sure I had it with me. And then I'm like then make it quick and you know blah, blah I have other people to talk to. You know I try to make it seem like I have an urgent place to go to, because I don't like staying in people's cars for too long. I feel like safer you know like in their houses or wherever not in the car, because you never know they can drive you off and throw you in the ditch. I always think of the worst in everything. (Respondent 350, 19 years old, white, gay, male)

Others shared a laissez-faire attitude toward location. As one young man expressed, such youth often experienced a lack of agency when their clients chose the location.

They take me where they want to take me. They got a place some customer they've got a customer they got a place where to take me, sometimes in a corner, sometimes like at a park most likely. So yeah sometimes in the hallway . . . somebody's hallway. (Respondent 399, 19 years old, black, gay, male)

## Profiling by Police

Of the 70 percent of youth who reported being arrested, only 9 percent reported being arrested for prostitution. The majority of the prostitution-related arrests (53 percent) led to prostitution charges, while 18 percent of youth were charged with soliciting, 12 percent with loitering for the purposes of prostitution, and 18 percent were not charged at all.

Of the 107 respondents (38 percent of sample) who were asked, less than a quarter (23 percent) reported being profiled by police as trading sex, but all of them reported being profiled by the police. There were no statistically significant differences in the likelihood of being profiled by gender, sexual orientation, or race, but there was a tendency for white and (to a lesser extent) black individuals to be more likely to report being profiled than Latino or Latina individuals.

Many young people who reported being profiled for prostitution stressed that they were not profiled while trading but while they were spending time in the neighborhoods where they or others traded sex. Frequenting parts of the city known for the sex trade made profiling more common. As a white gay male described, spending time in such areas set the stage for police interrogation:

When I was on the stroll, they saw me and they said, "I saw you talking to somebody?" and I was like, "Okay, yeah, I talk to people." He is like, "No, no, no, I know what you guys do." I was like, "Okay, where is this going? Are you going to arrest me or something, do something, I'm waiting."

And he was like, “Have you ever been arrested?” Like he started asking me a million questions. (Respondent 350, 19 years old, white, gay, male)

Others recounted similar stories and expressed feeling angry and frustrated by the assumptions that were made of them when they were walking through certain parts of the city. One young transgender woman explained,

I remember when I first moved here I was at the [area in Manhattan] and I was like walking around and the cops must have like been watching me, because like when I came back around he was like, “Hey, what are you looking for?” And I’m like, “I’m just walking around.” And he’s like, “You better not be out here like on a stroll.” And at first when I first moved here I didn’t understand what that word meant and I’m like, “No, I’m not on a stroll.” And he was like, “I got my eye on you,” and then I was like, “What the hell?” Like I can’t just walk around a block and you just say ...? Even though I was on a stroll but like you cannot just make assumptions. (Respondent 759, 20 years old, Dominican and black, trans female)

While several youths shared anecdotes of being stopped by the police while hanging out on or near known strolls, some reported being profiled while they were trading. One respondent, a Latina female, recalls how her client intervened and prevented her from being charged:

I remember leaving one client’s house and there was a cop who stopped me and they said, “How did you get that money?” you know. Luckily, the guy came out and said, “No, it’s okay you know she actually cleaned my house and I gave her the money.” So after that I mean they harassed me a little more about trying to get the truth out but because he said what he said. They were just like, “You can go.” (Respondent 313, 21 years old, Latina, lesbian, female)

## What Do Youth Earn, and How Do They Spend Earnings?

### Payments and Exchanges

Nearly all respondents (95 percent) had received money in exchange for a sexual service, while 31 percent had received shelter, 18 percent had received food, 15 percent had received drugs, and 11 percent had received clothing. Nearly two-thirds of youth decided the price of the exchange, while one in five negotiated with their clients. For 18 percent, the clients decided the price, and for others prices were set by either their peer facilitator (3 percent) or their exploiter (6 percent).

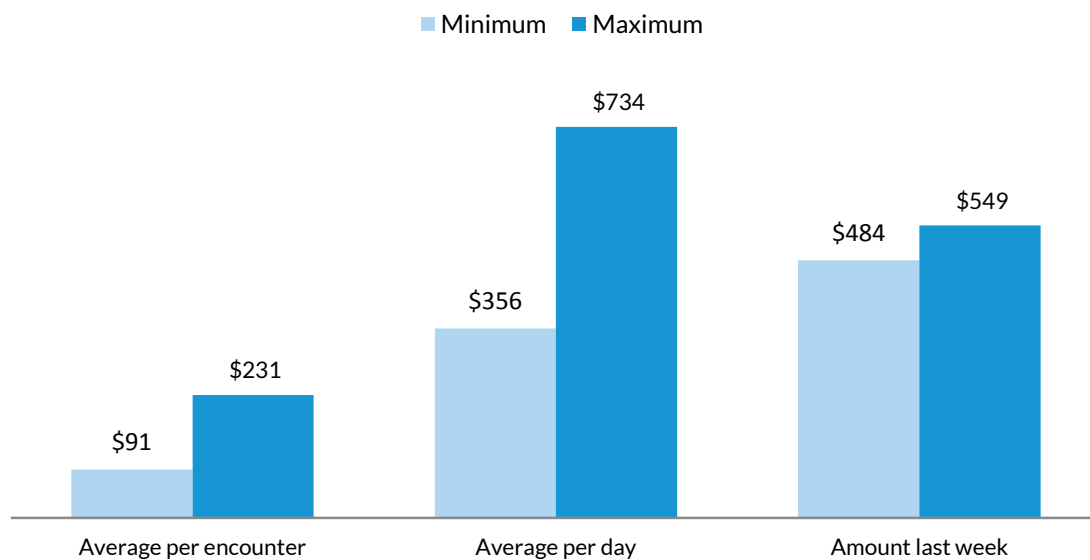
As shown in figure 5, the average price that the youth reported charging per encounter ranged from \$91 to \$231; this amount did not vary significantly by respondents’ gender, sexual orientation, or race. The average amount each youth made each day or night ranged from \$356 to \$734, and the average amount made the previous week ranged from \$484 to \$549.

## OTHER WAYS OF OBTAINING MONEY

Between 40 and 60 percent of youth in past studies reported other sources of income, including panhandling, a “legitimate job,” public benefits, and dealing drugs (Curtis et al. 2008; Gwadz et al. 2009). Similarly, in this study over half of youth had ways of receiving money other than trading, though these options were limited. The most common income sources were jobs (23 percent), government benefits or public assistance (23 percent), family (20 percent), and selling drugs (15 percent).

FIGURE 5

### Payments to Youth for Sex



The youths’ experiences echo past studies’ findings that reveal the difficulty of obtaining regular, legal employment while homeless. Employment discrimination and lack of living-wage employment opportunities have been reported as powerful driving forces of involvement in the sex trade (Bigelsen and Vuotto 2013; Curtis et al. 2008; Grant et al. 2011; Maitra 2002; Rees 2010; Wilson et al. 2009). Conversely, a study focused on the Midwest found that youth who had been employed full-time were 80 percent less likely to have traded sex than those who had not (Tyler 2009). These barriers are further compounded by employment barriers related to age and lack of education and experience (Gwadz et al. 2009).

Many of the youth in this study held irregular or informal jobs, such as seasonal work and panhandling. A young man described how he made money through a variety of informal jobs:

Whatever money I make like I’ll do like a home job, because I have skills in different areas. You know like little bit of carpentry, or like if you need your dresser to be fixed or something like that

I will come along and I fix it they are like well you do this to me, like I would do it for like no charge if I know you, but whatever but people, like my friend will still give me money. (Respondent 506, 20 years old, Jamaican, heterosexual, male)

Another respondent, a young male, also worked a series of irregular jobs, often contacting individuals he used to know:

I usually go back to my own neighborhood and I talk to my super that I grew up with and I ask him maybe if I can help with the garbage he will give me \$20, \$30. If not that, I go to a store ask them if they need any help stocking, make another \$20. Yeah I try to save it up so I can buy food like for the week. (Respondent 637, 19 years old, Latino, bisexual, male)

Respondents also discussed how homelessness made it difficult to find and maintain jobs. One youth explained how his lack of stable, long-term shelter made it impossible to go to work regularly:

I had a job. I have my security license but due to the fact I was discharged from foster care because I had a good job; I was supposed to be getting an apartment with New York City Housing Authority through foster care through ACS [Administration for Children's Services], but because of my hardship and because of me getting discharged from, I couldn't keep my job, because I had no place to stay, so . . . I resigned, I was like I cannot work for you if I don't have a place to sleep, because I'm not going to be sleeping outside, on a train, on a bus and then coming to work, so I had a good job when I, when I first turned 18. (Respondent 472, 19 years old, black, gay, male)

A young woman shared a similar experience of turning to informal work after losing her job because she lacked stable shelter:

If I have like clothes that I don't want, I will sell those or I will pull a scheme or do something. . . . Yeah. Because I lost my job. I was working three jobs when I was homeless and going to school and then the shelters, I started going to the shelters and shelters started not to give me late passes and stay for work. So I lost all jobs. . . . Now I'm looking again. It sucks. (Respondent 726, 19 years old, Puerto Rican and black, bisexual, female)

Individuals who did find legal jobs still faced difficulties obtaining a living wage. As one lesbian respondent explained:

I worked sometimes. I'm the security but that's on call, so sometimes it doesn't add up and especially like if you're trying to get housing. Housing out here is a lot of money. (Respondent 273, 20 years old, "other" race, lesbian, female)

## How Youth Spend Their Earnings

Over half of youth (54 percent) used their earnings to buy food as their first priority. Thirty-six percent bought clothing as their first priority, 21 percent paid their cell phone bills, 16 percent bought marijuana, 13 percent bought cigarettes, and 10 percent bought toiletries or necessities.



Overall, youth spent the most money on food (41 percent) and clothing (43 percent), followed by marijuana (18 percent).

## Sharing Earnings with Others

One-third of respondents never shared their earnings with others, and slightly fewer (31 percent) only shared their earnings sometimes. The other third shared their earnings always (23 percent) or most of the time (10 percent).

Among 164 respondents who responded to the question about whom they shared earnings with, 59 percent shared less than half of their earnings, 17 percent shared most of their earnings, 15 percent shared half of their earnings, and 11 percent shared all their earnings.

Nearly half (48 percent) of the 164 youth shared their earnings with friends or peers, followed by family (19 percent), a significant other (15 percent), and/or a peer facilitator (7 percent). Eleven percent of respondents shared their earnings with their exploiter, while 6 percent shared with anyone they thought was in need.

Those who never shared their earnings felt that doing so would be a large personal sacrifice. They viewed their independence as particularly important. A young black woman stated,

No one owns me or controls me, don't tell me because I don't share my money; it's not like I'm going to go sell myself to give you money, no. (Respondent 235, 17 years old, black, heterosexual, female)

When asked if he shared any of his earnings, another respondent expressed similar sentiments:

No, I figure I'm doing it for myself and I'm not working for some, nobody I'm just trying to maintain myself. You know what I'm saying, it's a cold world and to be honest I learned the hard way you can't save everybody, you can't. (Respondent 527, 20 years old, Puerto Rican, bisexual, male)

Those who did share their earnings did so in various ways. Youth generously shared resources and money without expecting anything in return, participated in trading or mutual exchanges of resources, or shared things of value with other individuals. Some youth were expected to give money to their exploiters—a dynamic that will be explained later in the report.

Youth, such as this young man, also shared money or things of value with other individuals in need, even if it sometimes meant giving away what little money they had:

Sometimes I will go and like try to give out to other people, like I see all the people out here, you know, just like starving and everything, I just give them a little money. . . . Because they're starving, they don't have anything to eat. (Respondent 463, 18 years old, black, bisexual, male)

One male respondent who was otherwise reluctant to share expressed empathy for others in need:

Well somewhat I will, say if I meet you and you are hungry I'm not going to be eating in front of you when you are starving because I know how it is to be hungry out there. I would say yeah I would I'd share. But I won't just say take a piece of mine, that's not happening. (Respondent 197, 20 years old, black, bisexual, male)

Youth who shared with members of their families of origin, their children, or members of their gay families frequently gave money and resources without expecting anything in return. One multiracial gay man described how he would take care of his gay family financially:

**Interviewee:** I was just the, we call it BQID, Butch Queen in Drag, so I was like a boy but I was just dressing up for work. My gay family, like my nieces, they were actually transitioning. So they were going from the boy to girl phase and stuff like that and I was aunty or whatever. So I used to, they were going through that whole family rejecting them, them being on their own. So I would give them money and I would try to take care of them as much as I could, so that's as far as my money went to.

**Interviewer:** But you never split your money with someone?

**Interviewee:** No.

**Interviewer:** And how much money were you giving them?

**Interviewee:** It depends, normally I wasn't like handing them money, like I would give the money in cash like a \$100 and I'd be like hold that for two weeks . . . because they were in high school so my thing is you don't really need much money because you should be in school. (Respondent 528, 21 years old, multiracial, gay, male)

Other youth shared their earnings with family members in need or served as financial providers for their families. One young woman frequently sent money to an incarcerated sibling:

**Interviewee:** I made about \$350, that whole week and then I sent it to my brother.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me a little bit about your brother, why he's in jail?

**Interviewee:** Because he had shot somebody, due to self-defense but, they didn't see it as self-defense . . . they'd seen as him doing a crime and I think that was because of his skin color because it's the whole racial thing and it was just kind of getting to him. So he had like so many people in his trial that he got it for eight years, so I put \$300 each week whenever I make it in his commissary just to make sure he's good. (Respondent 722, 19 years old, West Indian, gay, female)

Respondents' family members did not always know the origin of the shared money. A young man described how he kept the origin of the money, and sometime even the fact that he was sharing, a secret from his mother:

**Interviewee:** I mean my mother she doesn't even know what I'm doing.

**Interviewer:** How much do you share with your mother?

**Interviewee:** Whatever she needs, I'll ask how much she wants. She says she needs 200 I'll give her 400; she doesn't ask questions or anything of that nature. Sometimes she doesn't even know she has the money either I done put it in her purse and just walked out the house.

**Interviewer:** And how often do you do that?

**Interviewee:** Pretty often. (Respondent 5016, 20 years old, black, gay, male)

In contrast to respondents who sometimes shared earnings and resources without expecting anything in return, other youth only shared with others if the exchanges were mutual and reciprocal. Respondents established mutual exchanges with friends, significant others, roommates, and coresidents of shelters and other housing services. One transgender woman saw sharing with friends as a continuation of sharing their experiences:

Yes my friends that do it with me, because my thing is, if you don't, you know if you broke bread with me I'm going to break bread with you, if you starve with me, I'm going to starve with you, it's self-explanatory. (Respondent 5260, 20 years old, black, trans female)

Another youth, a transgender female, explicitly stated that she would not share unless the other person was willing to share as well:

No, I'm the type of person, I will share with you, but my thing is I have to feel like you're going to be willing to share with me. Because I know if I don't have it, and you got it and you won't give it to me, why should I have it and you want it and give it to you? So I would share but only if you are the type of person who is going to give me some if you have it. (Respondent 221, 19 years old, black, heterosexual, trans female)

Collective use of money and resources was often reserved for friends and significant others. One respondent, a bisexual black male, described how he and his friends contributed money to a common resource pool when they could afford to:

**Interviewee:** I know I have a few group of people that are homeless too that I hang out with you know what I'm saying. So we break bread with each other . . . You understand we try and pull it together for each other. . . . I share with them, I break bread with them plus I have like little siblings occasionally I got to go see who I have to you know look out for even now. I'm not really saying I have to feed a whole bunch of mouths but you know you share the role.

**Interviewer:** You share.

**Interviewee:** Every once in a blue moon which leaves me sometimes I'm broke and sometimes it leaves me so caring that I can't often care for myself.

**Interviewer:** But you since you are sharing with others, the other young people that you share it with do they also contribute to the pot? So if you have you know you don't bring in money for a couple of days and do they—will they contribute money so you can eat, you can all eat. Is that how it works?

**Interviewee:** Yes. Sometimes. I mean sometimes they do and sometimes we tend to carry our own. Because everybody needs a lesson that everybody is not going to be able to support everybody all the time. You know what I'm saying? (Respondent 194, 19 years old, black, bisexual, male)

# What Are the Physical Risks, and How Do Youth Protect Themselves?

## Arguments and Fights

Nearly half (46 percent) of the youth who responded to a question about whether they had experienced trouble with people in the neighborhood they traded in indicated experiencing trouble. Of these 89 youths, 58 percent had trouble with a client, 28 percent with another person trading sex, 19 percent with a neighborhood resident, 9 percent with the police, 5 percent with an exploiter, and 4 percent with a peer facilitator. Although these experiences did not vary significantly by gender or sexual orientation, there was a tendency that approached significance for Latino and Latina (57 percent) and multiracial (53 percent) youth to be the most likely to experience trouble. Meanwhile, 40 percent of black youth reported experiencing such trouble, and whites, at 25 percent, were the least likely to experience it.

Most respondents described the neighborhoods where they traded as supportive and collaborative communities with everyone looking out for each other's safety. Some youth reported facing competition from others trading sex and tension within neighborhoods, but, by and large, they did not report experiencing substantial trouble with people in the neighborhoods. One transgender woman explained how others in the area who traded sex for money and/or material goods initially helped her:

I've never had any trouble, they actually tried to school me on the game. And because I was real brand new I'm never going to forget. I was brand new I had a pencil skirt on with no tuck . . . my tuck was just out, no breast, no nothing I was just hard I'm not going to lie. I was hard it's a break and I'm not going to lie. So they basically taught me a lot so basically once I started gradually learning my clientele started coming up so that was more money in my pocket. (Respondent 272, 21 years old, black, bisexual, trans female)

Youth reported supporting others as well. One man described how he watched out for other individuals engaging in survival sex:

Sometimes like when I wanted to like calm down a little bit I would help the girls and the trannies. Like I'll be in like the backseat or whatever, making sure they're not getting disrespected or whatever or I'll be like a little ways away from the car . . . kind of like security and they'll pay me a cut on what they make. (Respondent 196, 20 years old, black and Puerto Rican, open sexuality, male)

Overall, 56 percent of youth who responded to the question about fights they experienced while trading reported experiencing at least one verbal or physical fight. For these 101 youths, the fights included an argument (68 percent), a beating (24 percent), theft (13 percent), rape or sexual assault (10 percent), or a physical fight (7 percent). The likelihood that youth reported having been in a fight did not

vary by gender, sexual orientation, or race. Of these respondents, 69 percent had been in a fight with a client and 24 percent had been in a fight with another person trading sex. Others reported fights with exploiters (10 percent), neighborhood residents (9 percent), peer facilitators (2 percent), and the police (2 percent).

Youth reported having altercations with customers as a result of customers withholding payments, disagreeing about prices, refusing to wear condoms, and overstepping physical boundaries. The degree of these altercations covered the full spectrum of violence and ranged from verbal arguments to threats at gunpoint and rape. One multiracial bisexual man described a violent altercation with a customer:

He walked in. He already was taking off his belt. He was getting his clothes undone. I was like not ready to get like, get it as fast as that, you know what I mean like hold up, let me see if you have the money on hand. So, he wasn't trying to hear that, threw me against the wall. I said, "get out, get out now or I'll call the cops." He got mad, he threw one of my vases and just left and I just sat on the floor like next to the broken vase like what am I getting into? Like some people think it's . . . the money is easy. It's not easy to get because you're going to suffer a loss at the end sometimes. (Respondent 654, 22 years old, multiracial, bisexual, male)

Another youth, a bisexual male, described a dispute with a client over money. The fight escalated until he almost contacted law enforcement:

I've been in one physical fight with this dude . . . I told him 200, and he wrapped 20 on a whole bunch of ones. And he thought I wasn't going to count the money after I got out of the car, and I counted the money, I opened it up and I saw it and I said this is one of my 20 dollars. And he was like well I don't have it, and I picked up the phone and I started calling the police, and I said well we're both going to jail. He grabbed my phone, he threw my phone out the window and after that I just and you know what, I got out the car and I didn't want to get into an altercation. I mean we tussled a little bit, but you can't really tussle when you in a car. So I just got out of the car, my phone was done it was over. (Respondent 262, 19 years old, multiracial, bisexual, male)

Some youth, however, reported *not* engaging in altercations or fights with clients because of safety concerns or fears. For example, one respondent described being too afraid to speak out to a client:

Fights about condoms are a big thing, I have one john who fucked me without a condom without asking I didn't realize that actually happened more than once. . . . I felt really unsafe with him physically and he was really aggressive and it was bad . . . when I did realize he wasn't wearing a condom I didn't feel like I was in any position to stop it and that's happened more than once . . . I've had clients stiff me and I haven't really felt like I was in a position of like talking back to them because they were aggressive but that's really the extent of it basic boundary or stuff like that. (Respondent 1342, 20 years old, white, queer, genderqueer)

Violence was also perpetrated by exploiters. Youth reported being raped, beaten, and threatened at gunpoint by their exploiters. A handful of youth engaged in survival sex also reported having fights with others who were trading as a result of market competition and "stealing" of clients.

## Physical Protection

Most youth (78 percent) had some way of protecting themselves physically when trading sex. As shown in figure 6, over one-third of respondents protected themselves with a blade or knife, nearly one in four used mace, and one in five relied on their fists. Just over a fifth said they had no means of physically protecting themselves.

There were no differences in methods of physical protection or likelihood of using physical protection across sexual orientation or race. The only significant gender difference was that transgender women, cisgender women, and nonbinary transgender individuals were more likely to carry mace than cisgender men. Only 13 percent of cisgender men carried mace, compared with 38 percent of transgender women, 34 percent of cisgender women, and 25 percent of nonbinary transgender individuals.

Another trend that approached significance was that cisgender women (15 percent) were half as likely as transgender women (31 percent), and nonbinary transgender individuals (17 percent) were half as likely as transgender men (43 percent), to report not using any means of physical protection. Cisgender men were in the middle; 25 percent reported not using any means of physical protection.

Youth recounted concealing their weapons in creative ways. One female respondent described how she relied on bobby pins as a makeshift weapon:

I carry like a bobby pin in my hair, I always have a bobby pin inside my hair in the night, because I can easily just pull off the rubber tip and stab somebody really quick in the eyes. (Respondent 236, 20 years old, Latina, bi-curious, female)

Those who did not carry any form of protection employed other methods to ensure safety, including getting to know their clients before meeting them and bringing friends along to the trading location. As one gay white male explained,

I'll let my friends know the addresses of the places that I go and I try to get to know the clients a little bit first beforehand. I don't want to be a total stranger to them and them be a stranger to me and yeah . . . I usually talk to them for a couple of days first. . . . Then normally what we do is go, and hang out maybe. There is one time I actually went on a walk with one of my clients through the south part of Central Park and I just like to do that so that I have a better sense of who they are. I don't want to get into anything dangerous. (Respondent 166, 19 years old, white, gay, male)

Another male youth described depending on his own instinct and social skills to protect himself when he did not have a weapon:

I usually have something sharp on me but there has been times I stepped in blind like with nothing but I usually have been okay because I know how to like talk to people, I know how to

read people and if they ever came up to that I would be able to like kind of just avoid it.  
(Respondent 29, 16 years old, Latino, gay, male)

Although youth felt a need to carry physical forms of protection, many were concerned about the repercussions of carrying a weapon and being stopped by the police. As a result, many youth abandoned their methods of protection. As a transgender woman described,

I don't carry anything with me, especially on the block . . . but sometimes I'm scared to simply because you do have to deal with clients and deal with people but you also have to deal with cops. And if cops, you give cops any reason to take you to jail, they're going to. Like so I don't want to be one that carry, so I'm trying to figure how to work that out because it is getting a little dangerous and maybe I'll just probably get something like pepper spray or something that's not going to be so. . . . Yeah. (Respondent 374, 21 years old, black, fluid sexuality, trans female)

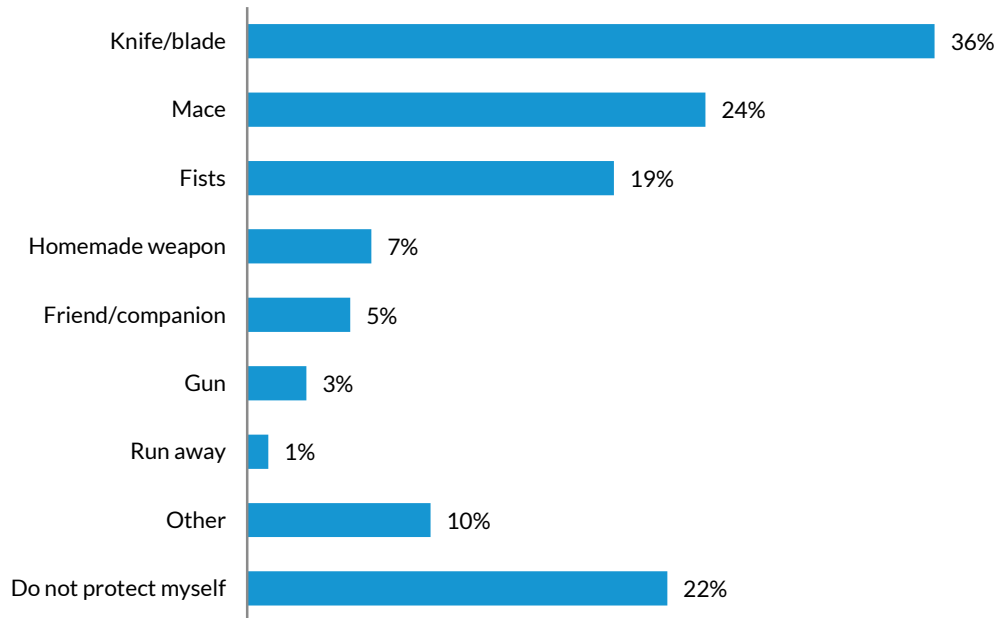
Another respondent, a gay black male, explicitly identified his fear of being stopped and frisked by law enforcement as the reason he no longer carried a weapon:

I used to carry a knife, I don't anymore. I just had a pretty big pocket knife so I don't carry that around anymore because I live in a highly stop-and-frisk area and I don't want to be frisked with it. So if I had to protect myself I can use my hands, that's about it. (Respondent 472, 19 years old, black, gay, male)

Many youth told others about their appointments as a form of protection. Forty-two percent of youth never told someone before meeting a customer, 42 percent always told someone, and 16 percent sometimes told someone. Of the 155 respondents who told someone, most (70 percent) told a friend or peer. These youth primarily communicated the meet-up location (64 percent), while others relayed a meet-up time or when to expect them back (17 percent), the customer's physical description (12 percent), or simply that they were meeting a customer (11 percent). Ten percent of youth had the person they told come with them to see the customers.

FIGURE 6

### How Youth Protect Themselves Physically



**Note:** “Other” includes Tasers, whistles, disguise/deception, and God/religion.

Among those who responded to the question about whether someone helped them stay safe while trading, 119 respondents (47 percent) reported that someone helped them stay safe. Of these, 69 percent were helped by friends or peers. Twenty-four percent turned to another person who trades sex, 8 percent to an exploiter, and 7 percent to a peer facilitator.

Youth took many precautions when trading. In some cases, friends came along but did not participate in trading. Some friends came along regularly, while others came only when the young person felt unsure about the situation. One young woman described how she would bring a friend equipped with mace when engaging in survival sex:

Sometimes I’ll take my friend and she will come with me, my best friend, like we’ll go and I’ll be like, “hey can my friend come? She doesn’t have anywhere to go.” And she’ll be there and she’ll have like pepper spray on her or something, it all, it depends. (Respondent 450, 17 years old, black, bisexual, female)

Friends’ proximity to the transactions varied. Some waited outside while others were actually present in the same room, hiding in bathrooms or closets. This Puerto Rican woman described how her friend would act as security when she traded:

The guy I live with right now he’d go with me and tell the person up front: “You have to give me the money up front. You guys do what you have to do and then afterwards we’re leaving.” You know,



so he'll literally stand outside the door and I would literally tell him if something is wrong he'll literally just come in and take me. (Respondent 313, 21 years old, Puerto Rican, lesbian, female)

Respondents, such as this young man, also reported paying their friends for serving as security:

The same people that I look after, they do the same. Like they'll be outside standing around whatever, making sure that I'm leaving that room, that I'm not bruised, I'm good and I've got the money. I give them a little cut whatever and thank you for making sure that I'm good and stuff. (Respondent 196, 20 years old, black and Puerto Rican, open sexuality, male)

Although these respondents were paying a small amount of money to their friends to act as security, neither the young people nor the research team viewed these exchanges as exploitative. In addition to bringing friends along, youth shared tips and warned each other of clients to avoid.

In other cases, youth screened people independently. This was a common experience for those who did not have a friend who helped them stay safe. Some respondents did not share their experiences engaging in survival sex with anyone and therefore had no one to confide in. One young man explained,

I actually need to talk on the phone with you and get comfortable and then meet. And then I don't even do nothing the first time I meet people, because I'm not going to go to jail for this, so I have to make sure I'm all the way comfortable. . . . So usually, we'll go have lunch or meet at a park or whatever for our first meeting. (Respondent 202, 20 years old, black and white multiracial, gay, male)

## How Do Others Help Youth Find Customers?

Although many peer relationships were exploitative or contained exploitative elements, the vast majority involved a complex system of mutual support. Many youth described becoming homeless, without money or familial support. Through friends or acquaintances, they learned how to exchange sex for money and/or material goods as a way to survive. These friends and acquaintances shared information on where and how to get clients, what prices to charge, and how to stay safe while trading. Many youth described having a friend, who was often also engaging in survival sex, come along to meetings with clients. Some youth discussed placing ads for one another, usually because one youth was able to place better ads or had frequent access to a computer. Many of the youth interviewed shared money and resources; sentiments like "if I have money, we all have money" were expressed frequently. Sharing their telephone numbers, clients' numbers, addresses, meet-up locations, times to check in, and Internet passwords all served as ways for youth engaged in survival sex to keep each other safe.

Of the 240 respondents not in an exploitative situation, nearly half (47 percent) reported that they had someone help them find customers; 38 percent reported sometimes having help, and 9 percent reported always having help. These percentages did not differ by sexual orientation or race, but they did

differ significantly by gender: cisgender women (64 percent) and nonbinary transgender individuals (50 percent) were most likely to have someone providing referrals, while transgender women (29 percent) and transgender men (33 percent) were the least likely. Cisgender men were in the middle; 42 percent had help finding customers.

Among youth who had a nonexploitative person helping them finding customers, half met that person through friends or peers, 18 percent met at a shelter establishment, and 17 percent met while trading sex. For 5 percent, the person was a family friend. Twenty percent reported meeting the peer facilitator at parties, online, on the streets, or at school.

Of the 113 youth with a person who helped them find customers, 41 percent had a female peer facilitator, 35 percent had a male peer facilitator, 9 percent had a transgender peer facilitator, and 14 percent had multiple peer facilitators of different genders. The average age of the people who helped respondents find customers was 24.

Most respondents who had such assistance considered the person who helped them find customers important for monetary reasons (38 percent) or because they felt it was safer to meet customers through someone else (16 percent). Forty percent considered this person a friend or partner. Most got along well (81 percent) or satisfactorily (9 percent) with the person who helped them find customers; only 9 percent said they got along poorly.

The level of support and expectations of monetary compensation for referrals varied. In some cases, youth were referred to customers through friends who were also engaged in survival sex. Customers might request an additional person to engage in sexual activities or ask the individual to bring along friends for their colleagues. In other cases, respondents relied on the support of friends only during their introduction to exchanging sex for money and/or material goods. Friends who were also engaged in survival sex introduced these youths to their initial customers and showed them how to begin trading, as this young man explains:

When I first started, there were people who had already been involved in you know the profession before so they helped me out. Some of them like I have gone to their customers like it's because you know they're good friends of mine. They would help me like find [street in Manhattan] you know, show me how to do everything, they kind of show you the ropes. Other than that I mean like yeah it's just like trading customers kind of and like you know experience. (Respondent 182, 19 years old, Italian and Greek, gay, male)

One female respondent reported sharing her earnings with a peer facilitator who taught her how to exchange sex for money and/or material goods. She did not share a specific percentage of her earnings at the end of each day. Rather, she shared her earnings when her peer facilitator did not have money:

**Interviewee:** I think what I've experienced was just them teaching how to do it, and how to be mature about it. Because it was just like you have to do this, and then if not, you are going to end up in the street.

**Interviewer:** And who was that?

**Interviewee:** The one that taught me.

**Interviewer:** Okay. But was she taking any of your money?

**Interviewee:** Actually when she was, when she didn't have stacks, I was paying for her food, whatever she wanted taxi, hotels, and pretty much. (Respondent 5230, 19 years old, Latina bisexual, intersex woman)

Not all friends who helped youth get customers were engaged in survival sex. Some friends simply pointed out customers but were not trading themselves. In some cases, this exchange of information was seen as an act of kindness, with no monetary compensation expected.

Experiences with people who helped the youth find customers varied. Some youth, such as this young lesbian woman, reported positive experiences with the people who helped them find customers and viewed them as business partners.

We would play video games go out chill, eat, do stuff bang chicks together and do projects . . . we call it projects because it's a project to us. (Respondent 273, 20 years old, "other" race, lesbian, female)

Some respondents also demonstrated immense gratitude toward the people who helped them find customers. This woman explained:

She's more like my big sister . . . so she already knew what I was going through and because she went through something similar when she was on my age it was very understandable. So one of the reasons why she did put me onto it and helped me get clients in a way before I started get on my own because she understood. (Respondent 669, 17 years old, black multiracial, bisexual, female)

Youth who worked with peer facilitators were unclear as to how many other people the person was assisting. However, in the few cases where they did know other individuals working with the facilitator, 86 percent reported getting along well with those individuals.

## How Many Youth Are Involved in Exploitative Situations?

In this section, we discuss how many youth had been involved in exploitative situations (i.e., situations involving force, fraud, and coercion, typically through an exploiter) and what these situations entailed. According to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, anyone under the age of 18 who engages in a commercial sex act is considered a victim of sex trafficking. However, not all the youth we interviewed were engaged in commercial sex under an exploitative third party, and only 15 percent ( $n=43$ ) of the youth had experienced an exploitative trading situation at some point during their involvement.

It is necessary to describe the youths' experiences in a nuanced way that accounts for their experiences both in survival sex and in third-party exploiter situations, as well as their access to services and resources based on whether or not they had an exploiter. As a result, Urban researchers used a strict, prespecified set of guidelines to determine, based on how youth described their own experiences, whether youths' involvement in the commercial sex market was exploitative. The guidelines were based on the existence of force, fraud, and coercion and also took into account the content and context of youths' relationships with different kinds of market facilitators. **In coding the interviews for exploitative situations, we looked for clear instances of force, fraud, and coercion where a third-party exploiter was involved.** The majority of youth who reported being in exploitative situations were no longer in those situations at the time of their interviews.

Of the youth who had experienced an exploitative trading situation, most (82 percent) were involved with one exploiter. Seventy-eight percent were in the exploitative situation for a year or more, 22 percent were in the situation for several months, and just under one in ten were still involved with the exploiter.<sup>18</sup> Although there were no differences by sexual orientation or race in youths' likelihood of experiencing exploitation, there was a highly significant gender difference.

Cisgender women had the highest percentage of exploitation (34 percent), compared with transgender women (10 percent), nonbinary transgender individuals (8 percent), and cisgender men (4 percent). These findings are similar to what previous studies have discovered: New York City studies have generally found few instances of recruitment of young men and transgender youth by an exploiter (Bigelsen and Vuotto 2013; Curtis et al. 2008; Gwadz et al. 2009; Rees 2010). That said, there were young men and young trans women who had been recruited by exploiters; further research is needed to understand these dynamics. Overall, four out of five exploited individuals (81 percent) were female; one such young woman reported,

I was supposed to be going to meet up with a guy from Backpage and he told me that he wanted to manage me and it was in the Bronx so I said, "Okay, fine," you know being naive. So I went and I met up with him, and . . . all I hear is materialistic things, he drove a BMW at the time, he was really popular, you know . . . he was also Hispanic like me and so I trusted him, I know it sounds a little off to trust somebody because of his ethnicity but it's just reminding me of home. So I felt like I was comfortable with doing that so he got me in the car and took me to a location, he said you're going to work here and . . . it was a drug building . . . he called it you know a trap house. And so he took me there and he was just like drop everything and I mean like basically like have sex with me right now; and we did use protection but he was just, he told me that he was breaking me in and so I didn't understand what that meant, still naive, okay I'm all like, "Money, yay," and he's like, "Oh now you're my Bitch," like basically I'm his property. And I don't know what was wrong with me maybe because I was missing my mom and I didn't have the support that I wanted or needed from my dad and at first I was sad, I was sad through the whole thing then it was just like I thought I was starting to fall in love with him.

I was what they call a bottom, which makes a lot of money. A bottom is like the main girl, the girl who brings in the most money and I mean quotas and I was meeting my quota, it was \$4,000. It went from being \$150 every half hour to being \$1,000 every night to being \$4,000 every day. So the money came to me and I wasn't paying attention to it. Like okay your focus is to be here for your brother and then you're scared when you get enough, get that much money to disappear with it because of the consequences or repercussions but you're like, okay well the money still going to come. (Respondent 470, 20 years old, multiracial, pansexual, female)

## How Youth Met Exploiters

Of the 43 youths in an exploitative situation, 34 percent met their exploiter through a friend or peer, 27 percent on the street, 20 percent through a family member, and 16 percent in their neighborhood or at service provider facilities.

Youth frequently met their exploiters while they were homeless and living on the streets. One youth met an exploiter after running away from a residential treatment program and being approached at night on the street:

**Interviewee:** Honestly okay that night I had been away from [location in New York State]. I used to live in [residential treatment program]. I had run away from there so I had nowhere to go and I happen to be roaming around the street because one of my friends stood me up. So walking in the street cold as hell and I see it's a school night and I see a little boy outside and in my mind I'm like it's a school night what are you doing outside?

**Interviewer:** How little or how old?

**Interviewee:** At least 9, 10.

**Interviewer:** Oh yeah.

**Interviewee:** So I'm looking at you, it's 12:00 in the morning what are you doing outside. So I started I had this small boy fight with him a little whatever then told the boy to ask his father to come outside. So as I was talking to the father I realized that he was a pimp and he was all about money and in my mind I needed money, I said why not.

**Interviewer:** And how did he tell you that he is?

**Interviewee:** Actually he came out flat out to me and said he was a pimp and I was just like, oh okay that's nice, and then in the back of my head what I see is thousands. (Respondent 5024, 18 years old, Latino, lesbian, gender nonconforming)

Twenty percent of the youth met their exploiters through family members, including several whose family members served as the actual exploiters. One lesbian woman described how her mother served as her exploiter when she was only 9 years old:

**Interviewee:** My mother was basically my pimp, I started very young when I was in Trinidad, I lost my virginity when I was 9 to a guy who basically paid my mom to have sex with me. And it was a lot of money and she liked that idea of it. I didn't but it made my mom happy, so I did what I did whatever it took but you know I was just you know that.

**Interviewer:** Did you ever get any of the money that your mother got, did it ever go to clothes or anything for you?

**Interviewee:** I mean after that she did buy some things when I got older but usually those things would go for her benefits because that's what she wanted, she wanted that luxury and using me to get that, that was her way, but.

**Interviewer:** And when you started back up again, was it by yourself?

**Interviewee:** It was by myself. (Respondent 5281, 20 years old, black and Dutch, lesbian, female)

Another respondent, a young woman, shared a similar story of being exploited by her mother:

Yeah usually like because my mother was a crack whore so usually she would like . . . I didn't know, because she would like dress me up, put makeup on me and she would like, she started making me look very pretty and she would just have these guys come in and I, she would be trading stuff, I didn't even know them or what it was and I always just sat there, I don't know every time I usually have a blackout. I don't know why. And when I wake up, I'm in my room, I have no clothes on, I'm lying in my bed, so I'm like, oh my gosh, what just happened? (Respondent 191, 21 years old, black, heterosexual, female)

One young woman explained how she met her exploiter after her sister was initially involved with him after leaving the child welfare system.

My sister met him, because she was a foster child too and they sent her to some juvenile thing. And when she got out her friends helped her and she met him through a friend. It was one of those. Met through a friend and she got hooked on him. She thought they were going to be lovers and it turns out he wanted. . . . There was just that. (Respondent 726, 19 years old, Afro-Latina, bisexual, female)

## Nature of Exploitative Situations and Relationships with Exploiters

Thirty-four percent of youth in exploitative situations were required to give all their earnings to their exploiter, 24 percent gave their exploiter most of their earnings, and 21 percent split their money with their exploiter. Thirteen percent of respondents received most of their earnings, and 8 percent received all of their earnings.

While the majority of youth did receive some percentage of the money they earned, youth who received none or very little of the money they earned formed the largest proportion of respondents who had been in exploitative situations. As a gay Afro-Latino man explained, he could make as much as \$1,500 in a week but would ultimately receive very little of it because of his exploiter:

**Interviewer:** Yeah, so when you were like younger, like maybe 13 to 15 or something, like how much do you think you were making in a week?

**Interviewee:** Oh my goodness like \$1,000, \$1,500. . . . But people were taking it from me. Like my friend he used to . . . I was dating him so, while I was working them [the customers], he was working me.

**Interviewer:** Can I ask how old he was?

**Interviewee:** He was 17.

**Interviewer:** Is this the guy who was setting up the appointments?

**Interviewee:** Yeah. . . . And when I turned 17 I started dating a new guy, and it was almost the same situation.

**Interviewer:** When he was living off of you, or like actually physically taking your money?

**Interviewee:** Well he was like basically pimping me, because even though he did help me out and helping meet a lot of different types of people. He changed the game for me though, I have to admit. (Respondent 1095, 21 years old, Afro-Latino, gay, male)

Another youth, a transgender woman, revealed that she kept only 20 percent of her earnings and gave the other 80 percent to her exploiters in return for drugs and necessities:

**Interviewer:** And about how much would you share with them?

**Interviewee:** If I had somebody I was working for I would give them all my money, but like the first couple of times going to pull and then coming back then I would not give them all the money right up. I would give them probably like if I had a \$60 day then I would give them 40.

**Interviewer:** So you would give them basically, like 80 percent of what you made?

**Interviewee:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Okay, and what did this person provide for you?

**Interviewee:** Supports my drug habit, shelter, clothes, food. (Respondent 5286, 20 years old, black, gay, trans female)

For one youth, having an exploiter meant she could not always make her own decisions regarding when or how frequently to work:

**Interviewee:** I worked every night, maybe I will take the weekend off, you know sometimes, but I mean . . .

**Interviewer:** Could you, could you not work if didn't want to or?

**Interviewee:** If I wanted to, yes, but that is not always the case, because most pimps they do force females to work. You know, they beat them, they threaten them, or they say they have no other options. Where are you going to go? They bring down you know, their hope and especially if you are young, that's why the young are vulnerable, because they are quick to hope, so they prey on young girls. (Respondent 5280, 19 years old, black, free sexuality, female)

Another youth echoed similar sentiments regarding the limits her exploiter placed on her ability to make decisions. This young woman explained that her exploiter did not let her come and go from his apartment until he had built up trust:

**Interviewee:** He had one apartment, which had four bedrooms.

**Interviewer:** So you guys were doubling or tripling up each room and were you kind of in shifts where some will be working and some will be sleeping and that sort of thing?

**Interviewee:** I mean it was kind of shifts, but for the most part you know like there was there a period when I couldn't leave and people would just come and visit me, so then you have your own room for that but once you're allowed to leave and do different things, you kind of leave and get that time to sleep.

**Interviewer:** So when you weren't allowed to leave, is that in the beginning when he was kind of showing you what to do and things of that sort, try to build it like get your trust in, things like that?

**Interviewee:** Yeah I don't know if he was building a trust or building a fear, you know. (Respondent 470, 20 years old, multiracial, pansexual, female)

Of the 43 respondents in an exploitative situation, 24 were asked about travels with their exploiter. Of these 24 youth, over a third (37 percent) said they had traveled with their exploiter—most commonly in the tristate area. One black woman explained how she disliked traveling in New York State more than other states because of the dependency that her exploiter fostered:

I will have to say the worst is New York. Because New York is very real, your eyes are opened quickly like I don't know but the other states they are okay, they are slow and then you come to New York and everything is fast. And then it's like oh you know and I don't know but here, it's kind of hard not to find like other options and not to be isolated because everything is always around you. But what they are trying to do is keep you isolated, so they keep you in a hotel room, you can't go outside, you're just in there, so that you can be dependent on them, so that you won't leave. But all the other states like down south, is very quiet, is very open so, you are very isolated, but then, yeah you are in New York, it is not, it was very open. (Respondent 5280, 19 years old, black, free sexuality, female)

Another respondent described going on cruises with her exploiter and traveling as far as Florida:

**Interviewee:** I went to Orlando City that was the furthest I went.

**Interviewer:** And were you working there or?

**Interviewee:** It was in hotels and getting them to come to the hotels.

**Interviewee:** And did he?

**Interviewee:** Sometimes we went on cruises.

**Interviewer:** Those booze cruises kind of thing like out on the Hudson or cruises like on the Caribbean?

**Interviewee:** No, like the booze, like the booze cruises

**Interviewer:** And did he ever get customers for you or were you the one that had to get them?

**Interviewee:** I would get them.

**Interviewer:** You would get them, he just wanted the money?

**Interviewee:** Yeah. (Respondent 706, 19 years old, black, bisexual, female)

Many youth who had been involved in exploitative situations reported receiving shelter (73 percent), food (49 percent), and clothing (42 percent) from their exploiter; only 12 percent said they received protection. One youth received not only shelter, but also more than the basic necessities:

Oh yeah, oh yeah he made sure we ate, he made sure our hair was done he made sure we were in the house you know, I had my own apartment at one time with him. (Respondent 606, 20 years old, Latina, bisexual, female)

## Others Working for Exploiters

Most exploiters (88 percent) had other youth working for them, at least some of whom identified as LGBTQ; respondents reported that these youth were demographically similar to themselves in age and racial breakdowns.



One woman described how her exploiter recruited other young women at the homeless shelter where she stayed:

**Interviewee:** Yeah, he did, and mostly young girls they look young but they're old, he brought them to the [homeless shelter] to pick out different females, who like one of the females.

**Interviewer:** So he would, so he kind of was recruiting within [the homeless shelter] and he brought the girls who were already working for him to help him recruit?

**Interviewee:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** So how many girls was he able to recruit in [homeless shelter]?

**Interviewee:** At least five, one of them was. . . . She was like she was young, she was only 16. He actually sold her to a guy and the guy killed her. And then he told us that she committed suicide but we know he was lying. Because she was tired and she like two years she came and she went away and then he brought her back though, and then the next day we didn't see her and we knew what's up so . . . (Respondent 5029, 20 years old, black, bisexual, female)

Another young woman explained that after she ran away from her family because of issues at home, she met her exploiter through someone she considered a friend. She was under the impression that this friend was also trading for the exploiter, but it turned out that she was just recruiting other girls for him:

**Interviewee:** I had a lot of issues with my family and we were almost estranged so I had been like youth shelters, and staying with friends and everything and that's kind of how my the person I knew that introduced me to him kind of knew my situation.

**Interviewer:** Where you at all involved in any ACS or anything like that at time?

**Interviewee:** No because for the most part like our issues I never want [to] like cause my family harm because I've like younger siblings. . . . And it's unfortunate because I found out that she [my friend] wasn't really working for him she was more like recruiting for him.

**Interviewer:** Wow so was she working for herself or not even trading sex?

**Interviewee:** She was someone I was going to school with and obviously it somebody like she knew and everything.

**Interviewer:** From the neighborhood or . . . ?

**Interviewee:** Yeah or something like that and so he obviously like kind of paid her to kind of get girls and everything but she made it seem like it was just like a simple situation and that he was more like a john. So when you got with him and everything and he's like well, this how it's going to go, and it got really scary from there and you don't see her anymore. (Respondent 470, 20 years old, multiracial, pansexual, female)

Another respondent, a lesbian woman, explained how her exploiter had approximately 50 other women working for him, including one young woman she had recruited herself:

**Interviewee:** He had his own business first of all like it wasn't even, like I mean a legitimate business like a New York City Government-stamped business of his own, and the girls, it was a whole bunch of us and we never used our real names. He knew my real name only because of the situation that he had put me in, but so many girls, beautiful girls.

**Interviewer:** Like would you say like 5, 10?

**Interviewee:** Try 30, 50 or more. No it was a lot us.

**Interviewer:** And did you know any of them?

**Interviewee:** I recruited one girl and I feel so horrible about it, like but yeah I only knew one girl personally. I got to know them personally, I got to know their numbers just because I was a

bottom. There was two of us, it was only two bottoms out of all those girls, because they had been with him long, but they were like, he just wasn't sure about them, he knew there was still fear in my heart, so he knew that he could trust me because I wouldn't do nothing to get him upset. (Respondent 642, 20 years old, Latina, lesbian, female)

This woman said that the other youth who were controlled by the same exploiter were also LGBTQ. But similarly to the previous respondent, she did not know the other youth well because of the number of individuals he controlled:

**Interviewee:** Two of them were transsexual, two of them were lesbians, other ones were bisexual and gays, but it was like 20 or 30 of us.

**Interviewer:** Okay that were working for him? And did you know all of them?

**Interviewee:** No.

**Interviewer:** But how did you know that there were so many people working for him?

**Interviewee:** Because when it was time for us to work, he would do an in call or an out call, that's what I guess it was called, and he'll have everybody in a room and for the guy to pick all of us have to line up and if he likes what he sees then we have to do it.

**Interviewer:** And where would this be happening at?

**Interviewee:** In the house.

**Interviewer:** In his house?

**Interviewee:** Yeah it was a homestead. You know some girls stayed there, some of them didn't. (Respondent 681, 19 years old, black, lesbian, female)

## Leaving Their Exploiters

The majority of youth who were in an exploitative situation at some point were no longer in that situation at the time of the interview. Those respondents spoke about the difficulty of leaving their exploiters, which often took several attempts. One young woman discussed how she went back to her exploiter after being arrested on several occasions, starting at the age of 14:

**Interviewee:** My pimp—I met him when I was 12. I was out there and I went to a party one night. And it was like underground strip club party. So you know there, you know you dance. But most of the time you go to the back and you do like a VIP.

**Interviewer:** And how old were you when this . . . ?

**Interviewee:** I was 12. And I met him and just like nobody at that point in time cared or anything about me so it was like he was there . . . I mean five years, we were really close, but he's kind of like if I leave, see we have this episode where I'll leave him and he'll find me and snatch me up and take me and you know he'll be like why do you keep trying to leave me, because like I'm trying to change but . . . he's not a bad guy.

**Interviewer:** Were you living with him at these points?

**Interviewee:** Yeah, I lived with him.

**Interviewer:** For how long were you living with him, once you first met him?

**Interviewee:** When I first met him I stayed with him for two years straight then I got arrested then I came home I stayed with him again until I got arrested again then I came home got arrested again.

**Interviewer:** And you say came home you mean to him?

**Interviewee:** Yeah. . . . Like you know home.

**Interviewer:** And when was the first time you were arrested?

**Interviewee:** When I was 14. (Respondent 450, 17 years old, black, bisexual, female)

Another transgender male explained that being under an exploiter's control caused him to ultimately leave the situation; however, he remained in contact with his exploiter after leaving:

**Interviewee:** It was a struggle because he turned violent; he turned violent more towards the end and that's when I left. . . . Because he was beating on the other girls . . . he wasn't hitting me because I'm more of a structured person, and I wouldn't let him tell me what he thought I was going to do or anything. Because I had to grow up early, so I've already had that kind of structure, so he knew he wasn't going to play the game he was playing with them on me. He would take their money and I seen it, and I seen how he would beat them, he'll never put his hands on me, I think I would have never let it get that far.

**Interviewer:** And then how did you leave that situation or why did you leave that situation?

**Interviewee:** I left. I just packed up and left. He wasn't home, I took my stuff, I left and I called him, when I got to the . . .

**Interviewer:** You were living there permanently for that year?

**Interviewee:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** And you just left and did he ever try to get a hold of you, did you ever contact with him again or that was it?

**Interviewee:** I called him that night and I spoke to him like three weeks after that, like we spoke on and off and I would call him like yeah, I'm okay. And he'll be like do you have money or whatever, and he would make sure I was okay but I didn't go back because I knew the kind of attitude I have was going to lead us to get violent and I didn't want it to go that far. (Respondent 446, 19 years old, multiracial, bisexual, trans male)

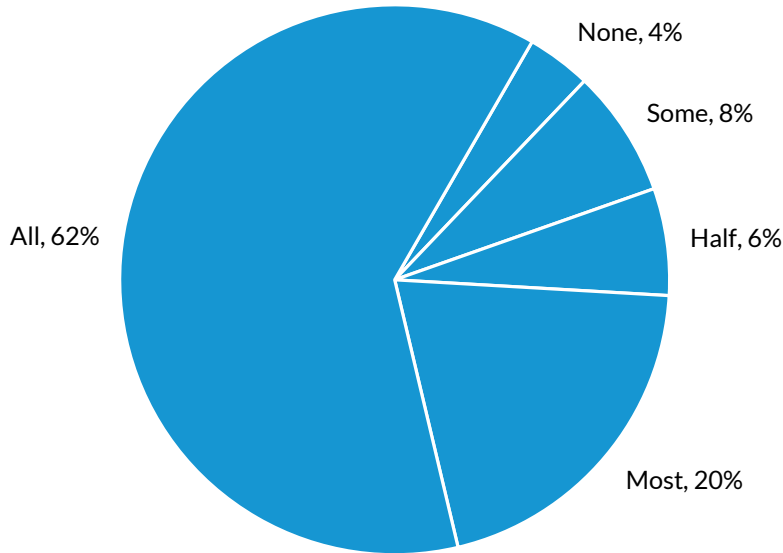
## What Do Youths' Networks Look Like?

Almost all respondents (94 percent) knew other young people between the ages of 13 and 21 who engaged in survival sex in New York City. The size of their networks ranged from 0 to over 400; respondents indicated knowing a median of 9 to 10 other youth who exchanged sex for money and/or material goods. They reported that approximately 30 percent of these contacts were cisgender male, 22 percent were cisgender female, 10 percent were transgender male, 13 percent were transgender female, 20 percent were transgender unspecified, and 5 percent were an unspecified gender.

As shown in figure 7, the large majority of respondents' networks of other young people engaged in survival sex were made up entirely (62 percent) or mostly (20 percent) of youth who identified as LGBTQ. Seventy-one percent of respondents reported that their networks included black individuals, 67 percent that their networks included Latino or Latina individuals, and 22 percent that their networks included white individuals. Youth also said that multiracial (8 percent), Asian/Pacific Islander (4

percent), and Native American/Alaskan Native (2 percent) individuals were part of their networks. Most respondents (58 percent) saw the individuals in their networks frequently, 18 percent saw them occasionally, and 25 percent saw them rarely.

**FIGURE 7**  
**Share of Network Identified as LGBTQ by Respondents**



Some youth who no longer engaged in survival sex expressed concerns about associating with individuals who still did. As one young woman explained: “I’m not going to lie. Ever since I got out of this situation, I try to stay away from people that have that issue because I don’t want to be wound up back in the situation for helping somebody else” (Respondent 483, 20 years old, black, lesbian, female). Another respondent shared his sentiments by explaining how his new focus on school did not “mix well” with others who still trade sex (Respondent 434, 21 years old, black, bisexual, male).

Youth also described trying to mentor or help younger people who trade by encouraging them to leave the trade or helping them decrease risk and stay safe while trading. One man described the difficulty of trying to protect a 15-year-old from engaging in survival sex:

I’m like, wow, like you’re 15, what are doing out here? I can’t take this because she’s bothering me very much, so it got to the point where I had to constantly watch her. And, like, I would scream at her and like it got really, really bad. Because I’m like, listen, I have little sisters, I have nieces and nephews, but I can’t physically put in my mind about a female being out here, okay? A little guy, a feminine boy, whatever like that, I can slightly deal with it because it’s in [neighborhood in Manhattan], whatever. But a girl? Women go missing all the time. Women get raped and there’s no defense. You’re out here in these clothes and you expect me as a guy not to like, you know what I’m saying, be overprotective and stuff like that. (Respondent 196, 20 years old, black and Puerto Rican, open sexuality, male)

Other respondents expressed similar sentiments and said that they saw others face situations that were frequently violent and exploitative at the hands of clients as well as exploiters.

Youth in the shelter system or heavily involved with service providers reported knowing others at the shelters and drop-in centers who traded, and certain respondents who traded on the strolls reported regular interactions with other youth on the strolls.

## What Are Youths' Perceptions of Engaging in Survival Sex?

### Positive Perceptions of Engaging in Survival Sex

More than 8 in 10 youth (82 percent) said there were positive things about engaging in survival sex—with most of these 225 respondents citing income (68 percent) or the fact that trading sex helped fulfill their basic needs for food and shelter (25 percent). Eleven percent of respondents reported that exchanging sex for money and/or material goods helped foster a sense of community, and 12 percent reported that they enjoyed the sex act itself.

Respondents most frequently said that the ability to get money to survive was a positive aspect of engaging in survival sex. As one bisexual man explained,

There's only two positive things that I found, the fact that it helps you survive and the second thing is that I felt that it made me stronger because it's like I'm able to go through these tough situations while being in the streets and able to live with it throughout my whole life, but it shows how much I am willing to determine to keep living and surviving and not let death take a hold of me. (Respondent 5094, 21 years old, Latino, bisexual, male)

Many thought of their participation in trading sex as a character-building experience and considered trading their best choice given their limited options. As one bisexual female expressed,

It's not as bad as sleeping under the bridge, it's not as bad as going without food, it's not as bad as walking around slanging [selling cocaine or other narcotics]. It's not as bad as being that person without, period. (Respondent 635, 19 years old, Spanish and black, bisexual, female)

Another youth, a gay male, expressed similar sentiments:

There are many positive things for trading something of value. You can trade sex for the life of your kids, you can trade sex to keep your apartment, you can trade sex to feed yourself, you may be on the verge of losing an arm and you might not have any money to pay the doctors, you know,

to pay any way and that can be a last resort and it can get you far. You can, some people think that sex trade is the worst thing to do cause you're selling yourself, who people believe God gave you but it's like when it boils down to it, if you have no food in your stomach, if you have no transportation, but you have a man in your face willing to give you money for a half hour. You put your pride to the side, you throw everything out the window and you forget who you are and you forget what you're doing and you learn to be someone else. You have to teach yourself these things. (Respondent 1, 19 years old, Latino, gay, male)

Youth also reported feeling a sense of accomplishment since trading allowed them to meet basic needs and they did not have to rely on others to have those needs met. They were able to take care of themselves with the limited options afforded to them, as this lesbian female was able to do:

Even though it's not like a job on the books, it still kind of feels good to like be able to say I made my own money. I have money. Or I did this. And I did it by myself even though it's not like not approved by a lot of people. Or it's not basically legal, and all this other stuff. It still feels good to like. . . . Yeah I have money. I made money. (Respondent 1011, 18 years old, Latina, lesbian, female)

## Negative Perceptions of Engaging in Survival Sex

The things youth in the study by Curtis and colleagues (2008) most disliked about involvement in the sex trade included sex (26.1 percent), “everything” (15.7 percent), customers (13.7 percent), and being homeless (10 percent). Danger and feeling degraded were reported to be among the top downsides of trading sex in other studies (Gwadz et al. 2009). In this study, the large majority of youth—9 in 10—said that there were things they disliked about engaging in survival sex.

As shown in figure 8, most of these 250 respondents disliked how trading made them feel (31 percent) or specifically stated that it made them feel dirty (7 percent). Others said they disliked being with strangers or the clients themselves (17 percent), and/or dangerous or unsafe conditions (12 percent). Eighteen percent said that they disliked “everything” about trading sex.

Many youth who reported feeling dirty after engaging in survival sex used the word “degrading” to describe the experience. They also struggled with a great sense of stigma that came with engaging in survival sex and reported feeling judged and alone. One youth described the difficulty of social stigma:

I mean the violence as a whole whether it's coming from a john or anyone else. The ostracism from your peers from your family and society at large. And fucking STIs. Yeah I mean the high volume of like sex partners can be something tricky to navigate but that's something that's really miniscule in comparison. Really a lot of it is the social stigma that I find really difficult. I think that's primarily it actually. (Respondent 1342, 20 years old, white, queer, genderqueer)

Other youth reported feeling frustrated that they had lost the intimacy that comes with sex. Many respondents, such as the young man below, talked about the safety concerns and health risks they had to confront daily:

I mean I like sex. I like money but I don't like to have sex for money because it just kind of cheapens the whole experience. Like with sex, I'm more intimate and I like to get into it but when we're on the clock, I'm not that person so it kind of makes me a bit stale . . . if you will.  
(Respondent 349, 20 years old, black, gay, male)

Respondents also disliked having to work with clients with poor hygiene or people they were not attracted to or who were verbally disrespectful to them. As one young man expressed,

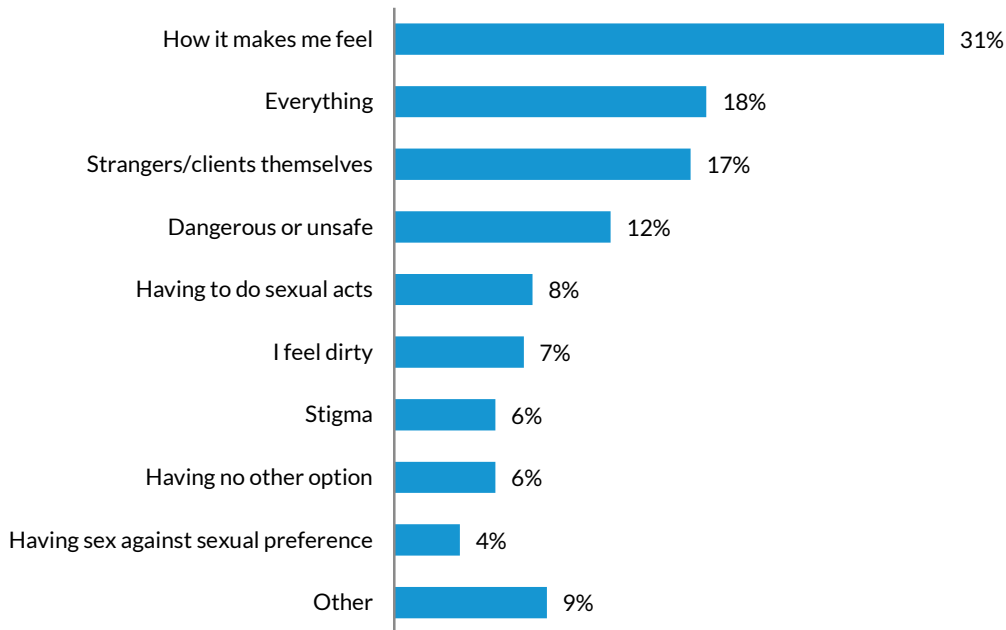
How the way people treat you, how degrading it is, emotionally disturbing it is. . . . They talk down, they get physical, they hit you and you got to learn to defend yourself. (Respondent 350, 19 years old, white, gay, male)

The greatest frustration reported by youth was the reality of knowing they had no choice but to exchange sex for money and/or material goods to survive. Youth, such as the bisexual man below, had strong opinions about this reality and talked at length about how limited employment opportunities and familial support had forced them into sex work.

It makes me feel like less of a person . . . because, it's I was raised to treat my body as a temple and I don't do that anymore . . . Now I just, it's just an object of getting money it is, it's not something I would, like I said it's not something I would suggest somebody to do. It's not something I encourage people to do. But you have to do what you must do to survive. (Respondent 491, 19 years old, West Indian, bisexual, male)

FIGURE 8

### What Youth Dislike about Trading Sex



**Notes:** *N* = 250 respondents (91 percent of sample) who disliked trading sex. “Other” includes demands of the job, fear of police, clients’ contraception preference, and “dependence on fast money.”

Things I dislike—there are a lot of things. First there’s the safety issue; you don’t know what’s going on, you don’t know where you like you don’t basically have control over the situation in a way, so you never know if this person might physically abuse you or because of the riskiness you never know if he might chop you up and stuff, like you have things going on in your head. Second thing is the fear of not getting paid. So it’s like you feel like you did this and getting nothing out of it. . . . There’s also the publicity, because I always feel like everybody is looking at me or like I feel like something is going to happen and also just to have fear that something might happen, because there’s such a lot of things that it’s like that I ended up disliking because it lowers down my self-esteem . . . because it’s like I had to go this far just to get money and survive. It also like brings out your fear because you never know what’s going to happen. There’s also the nervousness about what will happen if your friends find out, how they will look at you or stuff like that. . . . it’s like a whole a lot of emotional aspect to it and that’s because it’s like it’s a memory that’s scarred in to your life and it’s hard to cope with it especially how like you have to keep things away from friends or family, and it’s like it’s hard and even if you open up to some people, it’s like you don’t know how they are going to react and it’s something you always want to release, so it’s really hard. (Respondent 5094, 21 years old, Latino, bisexual, male)



## Does Engaging in Survival Sex Define Who Youth Are?

Fifteen percent of the youth reported feeling defined by their engagement in survival sex. For some of these youth, participation in the commercial sex market was a form of empowerment. As the bi-curious Latina woman below indicated, exchanging sex for money and/or material goods allowed her to have a sense of control over something in her life. The agency she derived from trading gave her strength:

I feel as though [survival sex] defines who I am or how I deal with people. I also feel as though sometimes I use it as an excuse . . . to feel in control sometimes. Sometimes I feel like I got a lot of ego. And certain days I'll go out there just out of spite . . . just because I can do it. I feel in control. (Respondent 236, 20 years old, Latina, bi-curious, female)

Many respondents, however, saw survival sex as an occupation that they were driven into and not something they wished to identify with because of societal stigma. A bisexual woman explained,

It doesn't define who I am, because I am a woman first, but it helps me to live on the basics. That's just like somebody telling you what you should and should not do, and you know what they are saying is right but they are not with you, holding your hand, walking in your shoes. You know, they are not crossing that old lady across the street, yeah she's got two feet, she can walk, she's not even walking with a cane. But all these cars, it's terrifying. Why not take your hand and grab hers and walk across the street instead of telling her you can go now. Yeah she know, she's going to walk, but who's going to help? A lot of people are talking but nobody's helping, that's the problem today. Why everybody out here doing what they need to do for themselves regardless whether it's safe or not. (Respondent 635, 19 years old, Spanish and black, bisexual, female)

Many voiced concerns about being judged for their engagement in survival sex and wished for more understanding and less judgment from others. As one bisexual Latino man expressed,

Who I am, is a person, my actions shape how I look at the world or how I still keep living in this world. It shapes how I live, but it doesn't define who I am. What defines who I am is basically how I see through things and how I do things and how I do whatever it takes to survive because I know if people were placed in the same situation, especially if they haven't eaten for like about week or so and they had no place to live and their clothes are smelling like piss. They will have no choice. To some it's like no choice, but to do it's either that or live in a life where your clothes are dirty every day, people are looking at you with a weird look, you're hungry, you are about to die it's like that's all you have. (Respondent 5094, 21 years old, Latino, bisexual, male)

Other youth, such as this black man, echoed similar sentiments, advocating against reducing people to their occupations.

Would you define a person that works as an exterminator and stuff like that or that cleans shit up all day? Can you define him? He's just trying to make money. At the end of the day it's a job. (Respondent 456, 19 years old, black, heterosexual, male)

## Desire to Stop Engaging in Survival Sex

Almost all youth wanted to stop trading sex: three-quarters of respondents wanted to stop at some point (67 percent) or immediately (5 percent), while another 21 percent said they had already recently stopped. As one youth stated, “I would like to stop completely. Hopefully I get a job soon, get back on my feet” (Respondent 200, 18 years old, Latino, heterosexual, male). Only 7 percent of respondents said that they had no desire to stop trading. Past studies revealed similar findings: the vast majority (86.8 percent) of youth, particularly transgender youth (94.7 percent) interviewed by Curtis and colleagues (2008) reported that they would leave the sex trade if provided the opportunity.

In past studies, some transgender youth reported that limited social and economic options led them back to sex work in spite of their desires or attempts to stop trading sex to avoid risks of HIV, violence, or jail time, or to fulfill personal goals for their future (Rees 2010). Almost half of young men in the sex trade interviewed in Western Canada reported that they remained in the trade because they felt they had no choice and that there were no other options or safety net available to them. They identified the need for a better job and for residential support services for young men in the sex trade (McIntyre 2005, 2006, 2008a, 2008b).

While the majority of youth reported wanting to stop engaging in survival sex and needing support to leave, others talked about their internal dilemma with leaving the commercial sex trade—recognizing that they needed to exchange sex for money and/or drugs to survive, but wishing they could stop. One youth, a heterosexual female, explained just how difficult it was for her to stay away from trading sex:

I actually stopped for a while I was employed and then I got laid off and it's like when you go from—I call it pulling— when you go from pulling to working and you don't really want to get back into the workforce just yet, but you know you need the money . . . I would say the only hard part about being in the workforce is the fact that, you don't get to see your money as readily as you do when you are pulling. (Respondent 5190, 20 years old, multiracial, heterosexual, female)

Youth also cited their limited skill-sets and opportunities as hindering their ability to stop engaging in survival sex. A young Latino man explained,

Yeah, there will be a day like I've got a job like everybody else and shit but like for now is like this is all I know how to do. As a 16-year-old . . . it's not a good thing to do at the time but this is all I know. (Respondent 29, 16 years old, Latino, gay, male)

Not all youth saw exchanging sex for money and/or material goods as a long-term experience. Some youth thought they would stop trading in the near future and viewed their participation in the commercial sex market as transitional. As this transgender male who identified as lesbian said,

I won't be doing this forever, but in the meantime until I can get to that point where I see the light and I can actually go from there, it's just for a short period of time. (Respondent 1029, 21 years old, multiracial, lesbian, trans male)

Another respondent, a bisexual man, indicated that he was waiting for the right weather conditions to leave the trade:

I'm retiring from it, I can't do this like I have dignity, I'm not going just trade myself for something else but it beats sleeping in trains sleeping in parks, and plus it's the winter and it's cold. (Respondent 637, 19 years old, Latino, bisexual, male)

Others, such as this Latino man, recognized that even if they stopped, they may have to engage in survival sex again in the future:

I really had stopped because ever since I started working on myself I started getting away from it because it's something that I don't want to do, it's something that I did because at the time I had nothing but now that I'm in a shelter I have at least an off-the-books job. At least I'm able to help myself like at least I'm able to work on myself and work towards something so I could get out of that situation, but I know that if I ever get back into this situation, I will be tempted to go back when I don't have nothing. But now that I have at least something, at least a bed to stay and money I use currently even though it's not a lot, I know that if I end up losing all that I might eventually go back to it, but it's not unless I have something, I know that I'm able to stay away from it because I'm able to work on myself, and I also want to live a life, a life that . . . I don't know how to explain it's like I want to live a decent life and not go back to that life because it affects me, like emotionally and mentally and I don't want to live depressed all the time. I don't want to be physically scared. (Respondent 5094, 21 years old, Latino, bisexual, male)

Many of the youth who voiced a desire to stop trading also expressed a need for support:

I would love to [not] have . . . to worry about like you know an appointment, if it goes wrong then I can't eat or something like, to know that I'm doing something I've got to consistently turn out. . . . I feel like I just need guidance like you know if somebody could like sit with me and show me how to do an application. Because I feel like I have skills and stuff but I just get a lot of anxiety, I get very self-conscious when it gets to like interviewing and meeting people. (Respondent 470, 20 years old, multiracial, pansexual, female)

Past studies reveal that youth identify steady employment (60.2 percent), education (51.4 percent), stable housing (41.4 percent), and quitting addiction (11.2 percent) as most important to making the changes they want in their lives (Curtis et al. 2008; Maitra 2002). When asked about life changes or services that would help make their lives better, the youth in this study described needing to find employment (44 percent), obtain any or better housing (29 percent), and improve their education (21 percent). As this male respondent explained, housing was seen by some as the beginning of stability:

I just need my own apartment and stuff, I need my own apartment a stable job like not even a stable job, I will take you know should I work at Burger King if it meant like it could pay my rent, and pay my little expenses and this time like a little some left over yeah, I would do that I'm not very like a complex person I'm very content with my life. (Respondent 199, 21 years old, black, gay, male)

Other respondents reported needing self-improvement (9 percent) or some type of counseling (7 percent) or support (5 percent). Two in five respondents said they needed other types of changes or services, including obtaining documents, such as personal identification and birth certificates, applying for public assistance (food stamps, in particular), and changing their social environment—including moving out of New York City. Many youth said they needed different kinds of assistance and did not have a hierarchy of priorities. A bisexual woman described what she needed to stop trading sex:

For me to stop trading sex I need to have a continuous and comfortable job, have a place to stay, just have my own stuff, then I won't need to have to do it, have food, continuously. And not having somebody over my shoulder you know, telling me what I should do, I want to be able to do it myself as a woman. So as I'm continuously doing this I'll also start saving my money, little bit by little bit. It might take a little while but everything count. When you're trying to go for it you need to take some steps. And that's what I'm going to do, try to save some money, you know, I'm just, I just want a job, something. (Respondent 635, 19 years old, Spanish and black, bisexual, female)

Two-thirds of those who described services or changes that they needed to improve their lives also said they needed help obtaining those services or making those changes. Of these 122 respondents, 44 percent wanted help from service providers, 23 percent from family, 19 percent from anyone, 10 percent from friends or peers, and 7 percent from the government.

One young man who had positive experiences receiving services from various providers recommended that other youth use these services to improve their lives:

Basically like with a lot of programs out here you definitely need to look into it because they offer a wide range of services that can help you in your specific what you need like some places help out with like legal services. So many different things so I definitely encourage people to check those things out. And they could definitely if you are honest with them they could help you step by step what's the right road to like choose so. And I don't know like for anybody else but for some people there is definitely they need to look at it as a temporary situation because you can't be like 80 years old still on the stroll so yeah. Just move on from that. (Respondent 301, 21 years old, Latino, bisexual, male)

Another youth, a bisexual man, explained how his own family members disapproved of his life. Ultimately, the fact that his family could not provide him with any financial, educational, or other support rendered their opinions less relevant:

This is, kind of felt good, it is like a therapy session or something. . . . Being able to talk about it because like I don't really talk about it much. It's just kind of like, I'll do what I'll do and like that's it. And it's like my mum, she's kind of like, I don't like what you do, I don't like the lifestyle you live, but is like, you're not helping me . . . like, you're not putting money in my pocket, you're not feeding me or that you're not making sure I get to school. (Respondent 434, 20 years old, black, bisexual, male)

Notably, 11 percent of respondents said they did not need to make any life changes or receive any services to improve their situations, and of those respondents who did cite changes or services that they needed, a third did not want any help obtaining those changes or services. Often, young people who reported not needing external support referenced disillusionment with social services. As the quote from the young man below demonstrates, youths' poor experiences with social service providers made them hesitant to seek such support:

I don't really think these services really exist to help people, I think they just exist to help themselves but. . . . It's about numbers, getting your numbers out so that you can get your funding, it doesn't really matter about the individual story. They are meant to be a revolving door. If there was real like follow-up on the individual and concern then I'm sure it would be more successful. (Respondent 414, 19 years old, black, gay, male)

For other youth, hesitance to seek support also derived from histories of disillusionment and abandonment by former systems of support. As the quote below from a young man illustrates, youth felt they had no one to rely on because they had been conditioned to survive on their own:

I guess, I don't know, since my mom kicked me out and stuff like I felt like my mom that was her responsibility and I felt like if she can't do it then no one else can do it for me but myself so. (Respondent 1329, 19 years old, black and Latino, gay, male)

Another woman described the difficulty of surviving without any support or stability at a young age:

The system needs to change themselves. They just need to say hey and look at the reviews like what people actually going through. And like to get something done like so they can provide themselves is hard. Especially if you are really young and you have nowhere to go. You have no place. I don't have my family, I don't have nothing else but a shelter and to have sex to get money so it's hard. A lot of people don't understand that. And they don't see the real picture of life, they see, oh, shopping, having fun with your friends, but these people they got to struggle and make money. (Respondent 1012, 18 years old, Jamaican, lesbian, female)

Youth also felt that those who did not share their experiences, particularly institutions that should be supportive and helpful, could not empathize, and therefore were ultimately unhelpful. One transgender man explained,

I think this survey is a great way for people to comment and get their voices heard about what's really going on because a lot of time when we face a lot of institutions they don't really . . . they don't take a walk in our shoes and if they did they don't acknowledge it. And that's the whole reason they got there in the first place, and it's really sad that a lot of times people get shafted and they're just trying to do the thing, and it's like I didn't want to have to sell sex. It was like my family wasn't helping me and I'm an only child, my mum was just sick it's like what was I supposed to do, I ain't gonna no sell no drugs. (Respondent 5164, 20 years old, multiracial, lesbian, trans male)

## Concluding Personal Statements

Before we concluded each interview, we asked the youth if they had any last thoughts that they wanted to share with us. While the majority did not, a few took the opportunity to talk freely and candidly about their lives and what led them to where they were today. Below are two very powerful final statements that, while not necessarily representative of the experiences and views of all respondents, offer individual perspectives on youth involvement in survival sex:

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**Interviewee:** The sex trade that I was doing was for money, was for weed, was for cigarettes and it was just to make me feel like I had something like, I had to be an adult, I had to take care of myself. I didn't know how but I knew my looks was gonna get me somewhere or get me something, so I did . . . at a certain age you do have to, at a certain age, there is only but so much that you can do at a certain age because you have no experience, you have no resumes, you barely have anything at a certain age in life, you're still being taken care of by your parents. So, for you to stop the sex trade, it's never really possible to stop it unless you have a legit job and you have a stable home and you have things to keep you good besides selling yourself for money, the only way to do that is to, you have to think positive. And you can think positive about sex trade but it's a, it's just a certain level, it's a certain level that you're on. If you're doing sex trade it's because, it could only be for a few reasons, not only a few reasons, it's because we all have something in life. Either we're alone, either we have no one, or either we have nothing, what other reason are you gonna want to sell yourself? I mean, unless, my reason for stopping is because I stopped being lazy, I stopped feeling sorry for myself and telling myself oh, my mom isn't here for me. I stopped feeling like I needed my parents. I stopped waiting on parents' signatures. I started speaking up for myself. I started being honest and telling the truth which was I didn't have my parents. I wasn't being supported. I wasn't eating. I spoke to my school, I'm still in high school, so I spoke to my school about it, they set me up for group homes and things like that, that I didn't wanna do, 'cause they knew I was alone. They didn't know until I told them but after I told them that they set me up to group homes and shelters and things like that. And then they told me about walk-in centers. I had no idea that there were people to help us.

**Interviewer:** So, you chose the walk-in center and they were able to help you to a degree. Do you wish they were other people who could help you or other services?

**Interviewee:** I didn't know, I didn't know it could be this good, I didn't know they could help us like this. Because if that was the case, I would have never done the sex trade to begin with but I didn't know that. . . . So ever since I did the walk-in center, they set me up for like shelter, the group homes, and things like that, to get my health benefits. So, I did the health benefits, I did the welfare. I sat in the welfare for days, waiting for them to approve my food stamps, it didn't work. I did it over and over and over. In the time of doing welfare and trying to get my health benefits, I was still doing sex trade. And even when it worked, I still had to do sex trade 'cause it was too much. It's like it's not enough food, it's not enough money. Life was too fast for me. I still need my parents and they weren't there. That's all I knew. (Respondent 1, 19 years old, Latino, gay, male)

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**Interviewee:** A lot of girls that do this lifestyle, it starts off with being promiscuous and their promiscuousness mostly comes from their fathers not being in their lives. You can't love; you can't really honestly care about the next human being without having that structure in your face. The ultimate type of love is the family love. If they don't come from a good household, they're going to try to go find it on their own and they are going to have to go through a lot of storms and a lot of tornadoes. And if they don't have a good father, that they can look back and cry on, when that boy, that girl done broke their heart, it's not going to work. And not only just that, they've got to be able to believe in themselves. If they don't have accepting people in their lives, they're going to try to find some people that will accept them no matter what the cost is. It don't matter if they've got to get on their knees every night. If they accept what they do and who they are, sometimes these girls only need somebody to tell them that they are beautiful. And that's why they go to all these men, because one thing that they do, do with you prostituting, they always compliment you, always. They either compliment you or tell you they like the way you do something, and that's always good to hear. That's why a lot of girls go back and keep doing what they are doing because it's not as bad. Because the world we live in alone, because people these days don't care about other people, they care about themselves getting ahead. . . . Nobody reaches their hand out to help no more and when they do reach it out for help, they always get their hands smacked back down, so what's the sense of asking. Nobody gets help, but I guess it just starts with how they got brought up in their household, and beyond that. There's another big thing too, everybody thinks that it's safe to send their kids to school, half of the time that's where they are getting turned out, that's where they are getting bullied, that's where everything that you would not even imagine your child going through, that's where they go through it. And you force them to go there too.

**Interviewer:** Do you feel like there is nobody in schools that can help?

**Interviewee:** You know why there is nobody in school to help? Because they don't have the same protection program that you have. There's a lot of kids that want to say something, to speak up, but they won't do it because they know that it leads to the next thing and the next thing somebody is going to call a social worker. CPS is going to be involved. They love their families; they just want something to change about them. That does not make it better to send people to their house. It doesn't. It actually makes it worse because you know what? You don't stay in that house with them. So you don't know what they've got to go through on a daily basis. They might, you know, shoot, soon as you close that door, they might get beat with a frying pan just because you said something. How does that make you feel at the end? You know what I'm saying? You came to help a situation, but a child just got brutally beaten, almost died, because you wanted to send these workers. Why couldn't you just help that child individually?

**Interviewer:** If you don't mind me asking, is that something that you've experienced? Social workers coming to your house?

**Interviewee:** Of course that's something that I did experience, I experienced that probably three times, three times and it never gets better. That's why kids can't open up to people, they can't open up to them because there is always a, they say oh I won't judge and it's all about you but it's not about them you know what I'm saying. It's about themselves and their job, they want to make you feel better, make you feel safe but you can't even express yourself to them how can you do that? Sometimes you just need somebody to understand but they don't understand how can you understand if the course that you understanding is everybody knowing. I thought this was confidential, they say confidential but really what is the meaning to it. There is no meaning in this school, they don't have any no protection program, not at that. They don't know what their life is like. . . . There some kids that actually go through that type of stuff, when they come back home their family member be disowning them. They don't want to be involved with them, I'm not doing nothing for you. (Respondent 635, 19 years old, black/Spanish, bisexual, female)

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# Discussion and Summary

The experiences of LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW who are engaged in survival sex are best understood when they are not viewed in black and white terms. As this report illustrates, the 283 young people we interviewed shared an array of stories about why and how they became involved in survival sex, which often involved complicated and difficult situations. It was important for us to describe their experiences using their words and to avoid using labels to explain their behaviors and circumstances.

What we found echoes past research findings: LGBTQ youths' past experiences are drivers for their current situations. These experiences include racism; family poverty; homelessness and its associated stigma; lack of adequate or safe housing options; lack of access to gender-affirming medical care; and rejection and discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity by families, communities, and employers (Bigelsen and Vuotto 2013; Gwadz et al. 2009; Lankenau et al. 2005; NYCAHSIYO 2012; Rees 2010; Wilson et al. 2009). Many of the young people we interviewed were kicked or thrown out of their homes because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, or ran away because of abuse they were experiencing at home, in foster care, a program or shelter, or in their community. Others left or were left because of economic problems or other factors.

Youth also reported abuse at the hands of those charged with their protection, including discrimination and abuse by law enforcement or staff at residential treatment programs and shelters. These findings are consistent with those of studies that have documented how LGBTQ youth experience ongoing homophobic and transphobic harassment, discrimination, and physical violence within the child welfare and foster care systems and emergency and short- and long-term shelters, as well as from health care providers, social services, law enforcement, and other government institutions (NYCAHSIYO 2012; Ray 2006; YWEP 2012).

Almost half (49 percent) of the young people we interviewed had lived in New York City their entire lives and nearly half (48 percent) reported living in a shelter, while another 10 percent reported living on the street. What we can glean from these statistics is that many of the young people who are engaging in survival sex are homeless in their hometown: they do not have a familial support system or normative social capital<sup>19</sup> they can rely on to help them through a difficult time. With only about 300 shelter beds available to homeless and runaway youth in New York City, the likelihood that they will be provided immediate shelter and assistance after leaving home is small. This lack of support greatly increases youths' vulnerability and sense of urgency when it comes to meeting their basic needs. However, not all the youth were homeless: 11 percent of our sample lived with family members while



engaging in survival sex. Many of those young people described living in abject poverty and felt pressure to contribute to household bills and ensure that their siblings were properly clothed and fed.

Although some research has reported that the average age of entry into the survival-sex economy is as low as 11 years old (Estes and Weiner 2001; Smith, Vardaman, and Snow 2009), we found the average age to be between 16 and 17 years old. Based on the narratives we heard, this tended to be the age when youths felt comfortable coming out to their parents, which led to them being kicked or thrown out of their homes. This age was also important for those in the foster care system because it marked when they started to realize that they were close to aging out of the system and would soon be forced to figure out how they would survive on their own.

Forty-two percent of our respondents began to learn about trading sex in exchange for money and/or material goods through the peer networks they formed by socializing in certain areas of the city, or by visiting drop-in centers and after-school community programs. Some of these peers, the majority of whom were engaged in survival sex themselves, played a passive role in introducing others into the survival-sex economy by providing tips on where to find customers and how to stay safe, while others played a more active role by posting ads online on behalf of youth, introducing them to prospective clients, and going with them on dates to act as a lookout. These situations were not exploitative in nature, and these individuals did not profit or expect to profit from assisting their peers. They simply were trying to help others survive in the same way they were surviving.

Although the majority of youth first engaged in survival sex with the assistance of a peer, 6 percent of the young people were initially recruited into the survival sex economy by an exploiter. That said, 15 percent of the youth experienced a situation involving force, fraud, and/or coercion at the hands of an exploiter at some point during their lives. The likelihood that a young cisgender woman would be involved in an exploitative situation was greater than that of a young man, transgender woman, or transgender man; however, several young men and transgender woman we interviewed described being forced and coerced into trading sex by an exploiter.

It is important to note that the experiences of the young people we interviewed were not static. The fact that they might have been initially recruited by an exploiter did not mean that this was their only experience engaging in the survival sex economy. The experiences and the situations many of these youth found themselves in were fluid. They might be under the control of an exploiter one week and trading independently the next. Several youths described their feelings toward their exploiter as complicated, as he or she was often the only person in their lives to ever give them any kind of emotional support and love, in addition to shelter, food, and clothes.

The overwhelming majority of young people we interviewed (72 percent) wanted to stop engaging in survival sex, and 21 percent had already stopped trading. However, most youth said that engaging in survival sex seemed their only viable means for meeting their basic needs. These youth expressed a need for alternatives that would enable them to stop trading sex for money and/or material goods. The needs they identified included job training; educational opportunities, food security, mentorship, gender-affirming health care, assistance with legal documents and benefits, mental health care and counseling, livable-wage employment opportunities, and short-term and long-term voluntary and low-threshold affordable housing options. Among the few service providers and public benefits programs that exist, LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW reported service denial, as well as breach of confidentiality and unsafe and discriminatory treatment by staff and other clients. Although the youth found several of the service-provision programs in New York City helpful, especially those that are low-threshold and voluntary, these programs were not sufficient and were often underfunded and underresourced.

Youth weighed benefits, such as survival and financial independence, against the known and perceived risks of involvement in the sex trade, including incarceration; sexually transmitted infections; unwanted pregnancies; drug use; profiling and policing; feeling devalued and stigmatized; risks related to using unregulated hormones and other transition interventions to “pass” sufficiently to be successful in the trade; and the possibility of being arrested and forced back into families, foster care, or the juvenile facilities they were running from; in addition to the risk of death or physical and sexual violence at the hands of customers, exploiters, police, or other participants engaged in the commercial sex market. That said, the youth we interviewed demonstrated an extraordinary level of “resilience and resistance” (YWEP 2009, 2012), taking many affirmative steps to take care of themselves and others and turning their skills to making changes in their own lives and in society.

# Policy and Practice Recommendations

Our interviews with young people engaged in survival sex highlight the reality that there is no universal or typical narrative among youth who exchange sex for money and/or material goods. The interviews also point to the importance of providing individualized services and support. Nonjudgmental, voluntary, and low-threshold services that meet the basic needs of youth without necessary criminal justice system involvement are among the primary recommendations of past national and local studies (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council 2013; NYCAHSIYO 2012; Walls and Bell 2011; YWEP 2009, 2012). Our study's findings echo these recommendations and further support the creation and expansion of services for LGBTQ youth. While some states and municipalities specifically reference "gender-specific," "separate," or "gender-responsive" services in their laws to protect youth who have been exploited for sex and labor purposes (also known as Safe Harbor laws), no program has defined gender-supportive or culturally competent care in the context of LGBTQ youth. Our study illustrates the importance of strengthening and expanding such services so they are not only gender responsive but also culturally competent, age-appropriate, and supportive of LGBTQ youth.

Our recommendations include the following:

- Develop peer-led outreach and accessible street-based and comprehensive drop-in services.
- Improve safe and supportive short-term shelter, long-term affordable housing, and family-based placement options subject to periodic review.
- Create safe and supportive housing and placement protocols specific to transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals.
- Broaden access to and improve gender-affirming health care.
- Adopt nondiscrimination, confidentiality, and complaint procedures in shelters, programs, and out-of-home placements.
- Develop living-wage employment opportunities.
- Improve food security among LGBTQ youth.

- Design police training curricula to improve relationships with LGBTQ youth and decrease profiling, harassment, and abuse.
- Include uniform sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (SOGIE) questions on screening tools and intake forms.
- Encourage federal, state, and local government interagency coordination.

## Develop Peer-Led Outreach and Accessible Street-Based and Comprehensive Drop-In Services

The services I would say like more of an awareness to prevent . . . where kids have a place to go, even on weekends, Saturday and Sundays so they don't have to be in that situation. So they could reach out to the homeless kids because if they don't learn about [services] then they're going to eventually get into that lifestyle and it's something that is really hard. Because when I grew up I never knew about [services] until like a year after. So I feel like, there should be like a lot of advertisement, especially on the subway about all these places for homeless youth. You have advertisements about all these like 110,000 homeless kids, but you don't advertise about drop-in centers or shelters, it's like why are you even advertising if there is 110,000 kids homeless and [you] give a website knowing that most people don't know where to access a computer. So I feel like these places should be more broadly advertised because it's something that is really proactive. (Respondent 5094, 21 years old, Latino, bisexual, male)

Throughout our study, youth overwhelmingly reported needing the support of others to stop trading. Two-thirds expressed interest in receiving external support; 44 percent of these cited service providers as the external support they were interested in receiving help from. Youth also shared what they specifically needed help with: finding employment (44 percent), obtaining any or better housing (29 percent), and furthering their education (21 percent).

Mobile street-based services in locations where youth engage in survival-sex work would allow them to conveniently receive the services they need. Additionally, creating drop-in services and providing comprehensive or full-service support in a safe and accessible location that integrates various programs, including LGBTQ-affirming and inclusive health services, would allow youth to receive the large majority of the services they need without visiting a large number of service providers. When creating programming, it is important to offer a wide range of voluntary services, including legal, medical, and psychiatric services; individual and group counseling; case management; advocacy; stipends; transportation reimbursement; help obtaining identification; emergency and crisis housing; GED preparation and support; help obtaining Medicaid and other benefits; hot meals; showers; clothes;

wellness activities including acupuncture, yoga, nutritional counseling, and HIV prevention counseling; parenting groups; drop-in groups; and the opportunity to socialize in a safe, nonjudgmental setting.

## Improve Safe and Supportive Short-Term Shelter, Long-Term Affordable Housing, and Family-Based Placement Options Subject to Periodic Review

**Interviewee:** I have friends that are 12, 11 years old that have nowhere to go because they are gay and their family won't accept them. So they are sleeping [outside], they are getting beat up, they are getting raped. And I felt like they should have more shelters for younger ones and like just like they make older [youth] go to welfare, Social Security office . . . make them go to school make them get a job. I feel like that.

**Interviewer:** So just creating more like an environment like a kind of a one-stop shop where they can kind of get the care and love they need and not have to deal with a lot of prejudices out there.

**Interviewee:** Yeah. (Respondent 186, 20 years old, West Indian, heterosexual, transgender female)

Youth engaged in survival sex in New York City have consistently identified access to housing as necessary for their care and support (Curtis et al. 2008; NYCAHSIYO 2010, 2012). Housing may be even more crucial for LGBTQ youth, as they lack appropriate and acceptable shelter options (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council 2013) and, even if admitted or placed, LGBTQ youth in out-of-home care are particularly vulnerable to failed placements, resulting in multiple rejections and frequent changes (Wilber, Ryan, and Marksamer 2006).

Youth in our study expressed frustration over the limited number of beds available in youth homeless shelters and the stringent policies that shelters enforce. Many also credited the instability and rules associated with emergency housing with driving them back to the street. Nearly half the youth we interviewed (48 percent) reported living in a shelter, and another 10 percent reported living on the street. LGBTQ youth engaged in survival sex often experience strained relationships with caretakers, especially when they reside in new foster homes, escape abusive parents, or are moved to and from various housing situations. Findings from our study further illustrate how intermittent access to shelter increases the likelihood that a young person will engage in survival sex. Improved housing options that are responsive to the needs of LGBTQ youth could enhance their quality of life and prevent young people from having to trade sex for shelter and other basic needs.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness has recognized the critical need for housing for homeless youth engaged in survival sex, as well as the importance of providing a continuum of services. Such services include transitional housing, permanent supportive housing, guest homes, and rental

assistance. For LGBTQ youth in particular, these services should be culturally competent and trauma informed, should incorporate positive youth development principles, and should be coupled with case management support (Able-Peterson and Mueleners 2009). In addition to congregate care, it is equally important to create in-home placement options. The Child Welfare League of America recommends that agencies intentionally reach out to LGBTQ families and communities when recruiting foster parents and consider in-home placement as an alternative to secure detention for youth adjudicated as juvenile delinquents (Wilber, Ryan, and Marksamer 2006, 43).<sup>20</sup> We recommend the expansion of such housing services, including housing for LGBTQ youth ages 16 and younger.

## Create Safe and Supportive Housing and Placement Protocols Specific to Transgender and Gender-Nonconforming Individuals

The needs of transgender youth should be considered during the development of LGBTQ-sensitive programming. Transgender youth in our study frequently shared anecdotes about being forced into spaces that were incongruent with their gender identity:

**Interviewee:** When I went to [name of shelter] I was the first transgender in like a very long time. So it was really hard.

**Interviewer:** Like was it like physically abusive or something?

**Interviewee:** No just boys really treated like . . . it was a lot of mental abuse.

**Interviewer:** They were calling you names and stuff?

**Interviewee:** Yeah. But, I was fine with them like as long as you don't put your hands on me, you can say whatever you want. (Respondent 364, 21 years old, Trinidadian, heterosexual, trans female).

**Interviewee:** I really want to go to [name of program]. I really, really want to go there but I believe they are denying me because I'm transgender.

**Interviewer:** What kind of [place is it]?

**Interviewee:** It's a coed place. They told me that I have to come up as a boy and like I have breasts already. Before I even told them I was transgender everything was going well. I went for the interview, did the intake, once I identified myself because they had this male or female, and I told them I'm transgender, she gave me that look like . . . (Respondent 186, 20 years old, West Indian, heterosexual, trans female)

In congregate care such as group homes and shelters and detention, it is especially necessary to create safe space for transgender and gender-nonconforming youth. Staff must appropriately address LGBTQ identity during the intake process and ensure LGBTQ youth are not treated differently from heterosexual youth in such determinations (Lambda Legal et al. 2009; Wilber, Ryan, and Marksamer

2006). In making housing or classification decisions, personnel must not isolate or segregate LGBTQ youth from other participants, and should not automatically place youth based on their assigned sex at birth but rather in accordance with an individualized assessment that takes into account their safety, gender identity, and preference (Lambda Legal et al. 2009; Wilber, Ryan, and Marksamer 2006).

Proactive steps should be taken to accommodate transgender youth, including (1) arranging for some youth to sleep in a private area if they do not feel comfortable in a male or female dormitory, (2) offering private rooms to all youth, and (3) establishing a written agency policy specifying that youth are to be assigned to dormitories based on their gender identification or offered the option of a private room if safety is a concern (Burwick et al. 2014).

## Broaden Access to and Improve Gender-Affirming Health Care

**Interviewee:** Like working wise, like because how, if I'm dressed like a transsexual woman, it's very hard. And most of the time I do, and if I don't it's just like one of those off days . . .

**Interviewer:** Now what do you mean like when you say it's really hard?

**Interviewee:** Like being a transsexual and most transsexuals haven't changed, from male to female . . . they [don't have access to] hormones and something like that so, I just felt like it's harder, like when I go and ask for a [job] application, I feel like people are looking at me. . . . But, I get put down, they are like no, but I already know what it is, why are they saying Especially when I go to an interview, they're like what is your name, and I'm like I know what my name is, and they're like but you're . . . and then they just gag. I understand how they feel but I'm like, you have to also understand, like what I'm doing, I'm not trying to do this to play around . . . (Respondent 312, 19 years old, black and Spanish, gay, trans male)

It is critical that transgender and gender-nonconforming youth receive gender-affirming health care, whether in or out of state custody. The lack of adequate medical and mental health care for these youth is a recognized barrier to positive outcomes (Burwick et al. 2014; Lambda Legal et al. 2009). The lack of free or affordable care leaves transgender youth with few choices but to seek street hormones without medical supervision (Majd, Marksamer, and Reyes 2009; NYCAHSIYO 2010). As the youth quoted above shares, another negative outcome for youth without access to gender-affirming health care is the inability to find employment, particularly when they are not perceived to “pass” as the gender they identify with.

For transgender youth engaged in survival sex, such care is often reported as necessary to conform to enforced gender binaries and stay safe in the face of violence and discrimination in public spaces and gender-segregated shelters and programs (Rees 2010). For this reason, lack of transition-related care

drives transgender youth to meet their medical needs through involvement in the commercial sex market and other underground economies.<sup>21</sup>

## Adopt Nondiscrimination, Confidentiality, and Complaint Procedures in Shelters, Programs, and Out-of-Home Placements

Nearly a decade ago, the Child Welfare League of America recognized as a best practice the adoption and dissemination of written nondiscrimination, grievance, and antiharassment policies prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Lambda Legal et al. 2009; Wilber, Ryan, and Marksamer 2006). It is critical that facilities train personnel in competency with LGBTQ youth, establish sound recruitment and hiring practices, collect and evaluate data, and monitor personnel in charge of institutionalized children and those who come in contact with them, including police (Conner, Mago, and Middleton-Lee 2014; Lambda Legal et al. 2009).

## Develop Living-Wage Employment Opportunities

A job would make my life just a little bit better. Just a nice stable place with no remnants of what I've been doing . . . I guess in a sense to make the past two years go away, and just have a job.  
(Respondent 258, 18 years old, black, gay, male)

Past studies have shown that some youth engaged in survival sex have prior employment experience but may have left jobs because of employer harassment and abuse, wage theft, low wages, or failure to pay salaries on time (Conner, Mago, and Middleton-Lee 2014). Our study had similar findings: over half of youth (53 percent) received money other ways besides trading, with 23 percent working legitimate jobs. However, the income received from these other sources was often not enough for youth to survive. The comparatively high remuneration offered by exchanging sex for money and/or material goods, structural barriers to alternative employment, and low barriers to entry into the trade all act as incentives to engage in survival sex in some contexts (Conner, Mago, and Middleton-Lee 2014). The barriers to employment faced by LGBTQ youth, including workplace harassment and discrimination in hiring and promotion, are well documented (Burwick et al. 2014; Ray 2006; Wilber, Ryan, and Marksamer 2006). Transgender youths' engagement in survival sex has been linked to limited economic choices resulting from harassment and discrimination (Rees 2010).



Creating job training programs with a practicum component would allow youth to receive supervised, hands-on application of their newly acquired skills. This approach would afford youth the opportunity to make contact with potential employers and secure employment. Paid practicum opportunities would also allow youth to have independence and experience employment stability.

The New York City Department of Youth and Community Development maintains a Summer Youth Employment Program that provides New York City youth between the ages of 14 and 24 with summer employment and educational experiences. The agency recently announced that 40 slots would be set aside to specifically serve youth in specialized foster care placement for the sexually exploited. Such programs must be exponentially expanded to meet demand, disconnected from any requirement of an adjudicated placement, and made voluntary and low-threshold, and employment providers must be screened for affirming policies and practices and cultural competency with LGBTQ youth.

## Improve Food Security among LGBTQ Youth

I don't think [trading sex] makes me a bad person. I think it gives people the option. . . . It's helpful, because I mean it's not like you are just doing it for the hell of it, you are like doing it so you have like food to eat, so you are not starving to death and so you are not like freezing to death. (Respondent 152, 18 years old, white, bisexual, female)

I'm 17. ACS won't take me. I'm looking for a job, no jobs are calling me back, I can't get food stamps because I'm 17, they will not give me food stamps at all and I'm telling them like I have nowhere to go I have nowhere to eat and you guys well you are all denying to feed me because of my age. How is that okay? (Respondent 450, 17 years old, black, bisexual, female)

Limited access to food forced many youth into engaging in survival sex. Youth reported difficulty acquiring food stamps based on age limits for those under 18, as well as hardship retaining public benefits because of their lack of a consistent place of residence, programs' onerous work requirements, and discrimination and service denial from city agencies and contractors. Over half of youth, 54 percent, reported that food was their top priority when it came to spending their earnings. Further, 31 percent of respondents reported receiving food in exchange for a sexual service. Throughout interviews, youth said that the limited avenues they had to obtain food led many of them to trade sex. Improved access to food would reduce the pressure on young people to obtain their basic needs through survival sex. Access to food could be improved through food pantries, food trucks, and initiatives that enable youth-serving organizations to provide daily meals.

## Design Police Training Curricula to Improve Relationships with LGBTQ Youth and Decrease Profiling, Harassment, and Abuse

Honestly like that they need to get rid of stop and frisk; they need to like not have that stupid law about the condoms. I think that's ridiculous because like if people have to do what they have to do to survive, then why should you then punish them for trying to be safe, like I don't understand that. (Respondent 156, 19 years old, white and Native American, gay, androgynous male)

Although the City of New York has taken steps to strengthen relationships with the LGBTQ community, including creating LGBTQ liaison positions within the agency, these efforts have not been enough. Youths' experiences of police harassment and profiling highlight the importance of continuing efforts to increase their safety. Twenty-three percent of youth who said they were profiled for engaging in the commercial sex market were profiled by law enforcement. Further, youth who were arrested were frequently charged for soliciting (18 percent), loitering (12 percent), and prostitution (9 percent).

Police departments should adopt policies, practices, and training that address the needs and protect the rights of LGBTQ youth engaged in survival sex.

## Include Uniform SOGIE Questions on Screening Tools and Intake Forms

As this report demonstrates, LGBTQ youth are at a high risk of engaging in survival sex. Inclusive intake forms will provide evidence of the scale of their representation in the sex trade compared with non-LGBTQ youth. Government agencies like New York City's Administration for Children's Services have incorporated SOGIE questions on their juvenile justice and foster care intake forms to connect LGBTQ young people to affirming services and programs.<sup>22</sup> We can better understand the scope and characteristics of LGBTQ youth engaging in survival sex by including uniform SOGIE questions on screening tools and key intake forms.

## Encourage Federal, State, and Local Government Interagency Coordination

Addressing the challenges faced by LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW engaged in survival sex requires the involvement, coordination, and resources of key government leaders at all levels. When developing a plan, whether at the federal, state, or local level, agencies should consider leveraging existing structures to improve communication, coordination, and resource allocation to effectively address this issue. For example, work focused on addressing the commercial sexual exploitation of youth in New York City includes representation from the Mayor’s Children’s Cabinet, the Interagency Coordinating Council, and the City Council. Such approaches convene key government leaders to listen to the concerns of community members, advocates, and other interested parties, and to take appropriate action when possible.

# Main Findings

We hope this report addresses some of the important knowledge gaps surrounding the experiences of LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW who engage in survival sex—in their own words. We believe that the findings will help promote a better understanding of these youths' experiences and needs to ultimately support policies and practices that will serve them better. As stated at the beginning of this report, the main findings are as follows:

- Youth reported experiences of social and familial discrimination and rejection, familial dysfunction, familial poverty, physical abuse, sexual abuse and exploitation, and emotional and mental trauma.
- The experiences of youth engaged in survival sex are not static; they change over the course of youths' involvement in exchanging sex for money and/or material goods. For example, young people might be recruited by an exploiter but then eventually trade independently to meet their basic needs, or vice versa.
- LGBTQ youth tend to have large peer networks, which include youth who engage in survival sex. Many young people are introduced to the survival-sex economy through such networks.
- LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW lack access to voluntary and low-threshold services, including short- and long-term housing, affordable housing and shelter options, livable-wage employment opportunities, food security, and gender-affirming health care. Many of the youth who are able to access these services experience institutional barriers. Among the few service providers and public benefits programs that exist, LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW report high rates of service denial, as well as violence from breach of confidentiality and unsafe and discriminatory treatment by staff and other recipients of these services, on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and age.
- Many youth engaged in survival sex experience frequent arrest for various “quality-of-life” and misdemeanor crimes, creating further instability and perpetuating the need to engage in survival sex. In custody, many youth experience violence on the basis of their perceived sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Youth experience violence and abuse from multiple sources, including families, exploiters, clients, strangers, peers, and law enforcement. Youth also experience violence at the hands of staff and clients at social service organizations and other locations that are intended to be safe.

- Many youth reported disappointing or frustrating experiences with social services systems and providers, which often fail to meet their need for safe housing, reliable income, and adequate mental and physical health care, as well as for freedom, independence, and self-expression.
- Youth are extremely resilient in the face of external challenges (such as violence and lack of housing and employment) and internal challenges (such as emotional and physical trauma and gender and sexual identity issues). They find ways to survive, often relying on their informal networks, street savvy, and quick learning abilities to share resources and skills and to adapt to difficult and often dangerous situations.

# Notes

1. Including the lead author of this report, Meredith Dank.
2. Couch surfing is when a person frequently moves from one friend's home to another over short time periods.
3. Streetwise and Safe is a multistrategy initiative working to build and share leadership, skills, knowledge, and community among LGBTQ youth of color who experience criminalization, particularly in the context of the policing of poverty, "quality-of-life" offenses, and involvement or perceived involvement in survival economies.
4. As part of the Streetwise and Safe program, youth leaders are trained to develop and implement online and in-person outreach strategies designed to share "know your rights" information with their peers, many of whom may not be in the position to directly access services or legal assistance.
5. There were a handful of respondents older than 21 who we decided to keep in our sample because they first engaged in survival sex under the age of 18 and because they had a large network of peers they were willing and able to recruit into the study.
6. A handful of interviews were conducted in a public space because of space constraints at SAS; however, the youth consented to be interviewed in these public spaces and the researchers ensured confidentiality while the interviews were being conducted.
7. A few exceptions were made with respect to age, particularly in the beginning of data collection when we were trying to achieve waves of recruitment into the study.
8. Urban's Institutional Review Board waived parental consent for study respondents under the age of 18. It was impractical to seek parental consent since many of the youth were no longer in contact or affiliated with their parents.
9. Five respondents chose not to be recorded; detailed interview notes were taken instead.
10. We did not ask the youth in our study to choose from a list of gender and sexual identities; instead, we asked them to self-identify however they wished.
11. This share includes youth who are either cisgender male or female or transgender male or female and are sexually attracted to someone of the opposite sex.
12. Pansexual refers to someone who is sexually attracted to anyone, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.
13. During the interviews, youth were asked to identify their racial and ethnic backgrounds. Many youth who identified with more than one race or ethnicity did not specify whether they were claiming Hispanic ethnicity, multiple racial backgrounds, or other forms of mixed heritages that included familial nations of origin. As a result, the 30 percent of our population who self-identified with more than one race or ethnicity includes a diverse body of racial, ethnic, and national identifications, including multiracial youth and youth who are racially black and ethnically Latino or Latina (Afro-Latino/Latina).
14. Nonbinary transgender refers to someone who is on the transgender spectrum but does not identify as female or male.
15. Although we don't have an exact number for how many youth were kicked out of their homes since it was considered a "triggering question" by the project team, a significant number of youth disclosed that they had no choice but to trade sex for survival after being kicked out of their homes.
16. A gay family is a network of close peers who identify as LGBTQ and help provide support and, in some cases, resources to one another.
17. A stroll is a known area where individuals engaged in the commercial sex market find customers.
18. Although a small percentage of youth were still involved with their exploiters, almost all of them were connected to service providers. The research team provided all youth with a list of organizations and agencies that they could seek assistance from, and offered to call these agencies on their behalf.

19. For more information about normative social capital, see Dank (2011).
20. Avenues for Homeless Youth, in Minneapolis, provides emergency shelter and transitional living programs for 16- to 21-year-olds. The organization runs an LGBTQ Host Home Program that recruits, trains, and supports volunteer hosts who open their homes to LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness (Burwick et al. 2014, 7, 38). Volunteers commit to hosting for a year while youth participants receive support from their hosts and case managers (see Avenues for Homeless Youth GLBT Host Home Program brochure 2014, p. 2, [http://www.avenuesforyouth.org/images/glbthhp\\_022714\\_2.pdf](http://www.avenuesforyouth.org/images/glbthhp_022714_2.pdf)).
21. The Health & Education Alternatives for Teens (HEAT) program at SUNY Downstate Medical Center focuses on heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adolescents and young adults ages 13 to 24 living with or at risk for HIV (New York City Administration for Children's Services 2013). The HEAT program operates a low-threshold, one-stop, full-service clinic that is set in a youth-friendly, discrete, and easily accessible location. The clinic offers services regardless of youths' ability to pay while maintaining client confidentiality: youth ages 13 and older do not need parental permission for exams and testing, and they may be undocumented (New York State Department of Health 2011). HEAT's clinic offers a full range of medical, mental health, supportive, and preventive services, including HIV treatment and hormone therapy at no charge (New York City Administration for Children's Services 2013). The program also integrates youth by helping them develop leadership skills through paid and volunteer positions with the HEAT program (New York State Department of Health 2011).
22. The Administration for Children's Services' SOGIE questions were informed by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System's optional SOGIE questions. They may be found at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/acs/downloads/pdf/lgbtq/Respectfully%20Asking%20SOGI%20Questions.pdf>.

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