

Columbia University
Graduate School of Arts & Sciences
Human Rights Studies Master of Arts Program

Navigating the System:
How LGBTQI Youth Who Engage in Exchanging Sex Seek Support

Raviva S. Hanser

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Lara J. Nettelfield

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

May 2018

Abstract

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) youth straddle a fine line between childhood and adulthood that can make accessing support and exerting independence challenging and complex. Legal definitions based on age are fluid and are neither grounded in neuroscience nor consistently applied. For LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex, navigating systems of support may be infinitely more complicated since ambiguities in the law create a framework in which youth engaged in exchanging sex may be designated both a victim and a criminal.¹

This influences the dominant narratives which situate LGBTQI young people who engage in exchanging sex between static and opposing narratives - vulnerable or at-risk youth in need of protection versus risky or deviant youth engaged in criminal behavior. These narratives lead to a structural incoherence emphasizing youth's presumed deficits resulting in unintended barriers for the institutions who aim to support them.

Through exploratory qualitative research centered on learning from young people as experts in their own lives and experiences, this study highlights the resilient and strategic ways that LGBTQI youth navigate their environments and a complex web of support services. Data from this research suggest that in an environment where youth can be criminalized, service providers may not be as effective at meeting the needs of this population whom they aim to serve. By approaching youth from a strength-based perspective, researchers and advocates alike can better support LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex.

¹ There are differing regulations at the federal and local levels regarding whether a person under the age of 18 years can be arrested for prostitution. Most cases are addressed at the local level, which means by state regulations that make it acceptable to arrest and charge minors for prostitution. See Alexandra Lutnick, *Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: Beyond Victims and Villains* (Columbia University Press, 2016).

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Terminology

LGBTQI: The acronym LGBTQI is used throughout this thesis to denote the range of sexual and gender diversity including, but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, questioning, gender queer, gender non-conforming, two-spirit.

Youth: Definitions of youth vary widely across the United States and internationally. For the purposes of this research, the author used the term “youth” or “young people” interchangeably to refer to anyone between the ages of 15 – 24 years old, as defined by the United Nations.²

Engagement in exchanging sex: The author used the terms, engagement in “exchanging sex” or “selling sex” or the “sex trade,” to refer to people who previously or currently engage in the commercial sex trade in their own terms, such as exchanging sex for money, a place to sleep, food, drugs or other resources. This is also commonly referred to as “survival sex.” These terms describe a behavior and not an identity.³

Non-profit service providers: For the purposes of this study, the term describes a range of organizations that support people on the margins. These include organizations that may receive government funding, but not organizations that are run or operated by the city, state or federal government. It is also inclusive of organizations that provide specific services, such as medical or legal services, but also outreach centers, and a range of services from temporary shelter to strategic litigation. For the purposes of this research, the majority of service providers interviewed had a specific focus on LGBTQI youth in insecure housing situations.

² “About the Youth Programme | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization,” accessed November 18, 2017, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/youth/about-youth/>.

³ Meredith Dank et al., “Surviving the Streets of New York,” *Urban Institute*, 2015, <http://www.equityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2000119-Surviving-the-Streets-of-New-York.pdf>.

Chapter 1: Introduction

On April 11, 2018, President Trump signed into law an anti-sex trafficking bill commonly referred to as SESTA – a combination of two bills proposed in Congress, the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA).⁴ The bill holds websites liable for material posted by third parties specifically with a goal of allowing victims of sex trafficking to sue websites for hosting advertisements about the sex trade. The bill has been promoted by advocates as critical to ending sex trafficking, highlighting sex trafficking of minors through ads and public service announcements (PSAs) around the film, *I am Jane Doe*, which targets Backpage.com for hosting sex ads for underage girls.⁵

Though this has the appearance of a positive step to combatting sex trafficking, an alliance of organizations and activists called Survivors Against SESTA hold that the bill is too broad to support victims of trafficking and, in reality, puts victims of trafficking in grave danger. They cite that it could disincentivize websites from reporting signs of human trafficking, eliminate tools that consensual adult sex workers use to stay safe such as screening clients on bad date lists, force websites to shut down who provide resources for those seeking to leave the sex trade, and remove investigative tools to identify victims.⁶ The Department of Justice also wrote a letter to Congress acknowledging that this could reduce their ability to find traffickers.⁷

⁴ Tom Jackman, “Trump Signs ‘FOSTA’ Bill Targeting Online Sex Trafficking, Enables States and Victims to Pursue Websites,” *Washington Post*, April 11, 2018, sec. True Crime, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/true-crime/wp/2018/04/11/trump-signs-fosta-bill-targeting-online-sex-trafficking-enables-states-and-victims-to-pursue-websites/>.

⁵ Melissa Gira Grant, “Anti-Online Trafficking Bills Advance in Congress, Despite Opposition from Survivors Themselves,” *In Justice Today*, March 14, 2018, <https://injusticetoday.com/anti-online-trafficking-bills-advance-in-congress-despite-opposition-from-survivors-themselves-e741ea300307>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ “DOJ Tells Congress SESTA/FOSTA Will Make It More Difficult to Catch Traffickers; House Votes For It Anyway | Techdirt,” accessed May 16, 2018, <https://www.techdirt.com/articles/20180227/15314039324/doj-tells-congress-sesta-fosta-will-make-it-more-difficult-to-catch-traffickers-house-votes-it-anyway.shtml>.

Kory J. Masen from the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) is quoted in *In Justice Today* about the ways SESTA could lead to greater abuse and criminalization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) people: “Limiting their access to safe working conditions and resources will exacerbate the problems of human trafficking, violence against women, and public health.”⁸ This is a result of the narrow image of what sex trafficking looks like in America and its reliance on punitive solutions for any parties associated with the sex trade.

To be clear, the issue of domestic minor sex trafficking is an extremely serious and real problem. Despite increased attention, there is both very little and very poor data on the prevalence and extent of domestic minor sex trafficking or youth who engage in exchanging sex.⁹ A growing body of literature highlights a more complex and nuanced understanding of the experience of many youth who engage in the sex trade.

Common experiences cited as drivers for youths’ entry into the sex trade include racism, homelessness, lack of access to gender-affirming medical care, and rejection and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and/or expression.¹⁰ A more complex understanding of the drivers pushing youth into exchanging sex point towards a population of LGBTQI youth who are not coerced by a third party exploiter or “pimp,” but rather circumstances that limit their availability to alternative options.¹¹ Though these youth may fall into the legal definition of domestic minor sex trafficking or commercial sexual exploitation, these labels connote a

⁸ Grant, “Anti-Online Trafficking Bills Advance in Congress.”

⁹ Lisa Fedina, “Use and Misuse of Research in Books on Sex Trafficking: Implications for Interdisciplinary Researchers, Practitioners, and Advocates,” *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 16, no. 2 (April 2015): 188–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838014523337>.

¹⁰ Dank et al., “Surviving the Streets of New York,” 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

stereotypical image that does not adequately represent the diversity of experiences of LGBTQI youth who may engage in exchanging sex for money, a place to sleep, food, or other resources.

Schools, healthcare providers, police, non-profit organizations and child welfare services are generally tasked with protecting youth from risk and harm. Researchers and advocates often promote policies or make assumptions that these institutions and service providers are “neutral” places for LGBTQI youth at the margins. Evidence of the disproportionate rates of LGBTQI youth in juvenile detention centers, and extensive bullying in schools, contributes to widespread systemic stigma and discrimination by these same institutions based on sexual orientation, gender identity and/or expression.¹² For youth engaged in exchanging sex, navigating systems for support may be doubly complicated, as ambiguities in the law create a framework in which youth engaged in exchanging sex may be designated as victims and criminals, simultaneously at-risk and risky.¹³ Additionally, youth often straddle various policy and programming opportunities that inconsistently define youth as children in some aspects of their lives and simultaneously treat them as adults in others.¹⁴

The primary question of this research was to understand how LGBTQI youth in New York City who engage in exchanging sex navigate systems to seek support. Here, navigating support systems refers both to the ways that young people access resources through informal, e.g., coping mechanisms or friends or family, and informal networks, e.g., government or non-profit service providers, as well as how they negotiate these spaces. This research focused on

¹² See Development Services Group, Inc., “LGBTQ Youths in the Juvenile Justice System,” Literature Review (Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2014), <https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg/litreviews/LGBTQYouthsInTheJuvenileJusticeSystem.pdf>; and Ryan Richard Thoreson, “*Like Walking through a Hailstorm*”: *Discrimination against LGBT Youth in US Schools* (New York, N.Y.: Human Rights Watch, 2016).

¹³ Alexandra Lutnick, *Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: Beyond Victims and Villains* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 78.

¹⁴ By way of example, young people below the age of 21 are considered youth in New York City and eligible for benefits such as temporary housing for youth but may be prosecuted for prostitution-related offenses by the police.

learning directly from youth about their experiences seeking support and perspectives on what that support means for them.

Through a grounded theory and narrative approach to qualitative research, this study analyzes key themes that emerged from interviews with young people about their lived experiences, engagement in the sex trade, informal supports, and their perceptions of institutions and themselves. The study highlights the ways in which many youth who are engaging in exchanging sex are resilient and strategic in negotiating their environments and overcoming adversity – using self-care tactics for their wellbeing, finding and contributing to their community, and effectively navigating non-profit resources to meet specific needs. Additionally, data from the study highlights how, within an environment where youth who are engaged in exchanging sex may be seen as criminals, service providers may not be as effective at meeting the needs of a population they aim to serve.

Literature Review

LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex experience multiple forms of marginalization. Government and non-profit service providers are tasked with protecting youth from harm. A review of the literature suggests that LGBTQI youth who engage in the sex trade are often stuck between conflicting narratives that paint them as either victims in need of support and protection, or deviants engaged in, or at risk of, engaging in criminal behavior.¹⁵ These opposing narratives complicate responses to supporting LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex, stripping them of agency in defining their own solutions.

¹⁵ Angela Dwyer, “‘We’re Not Like These Weird Feather Boa-Covered AIDS-Spreading Monsters’: How LGBT Young People and Service Providers Think Riskiness Informs LGBT Youth–Police Interactions,” *Critical Criminology* 22, no. 1 (March 2014): 65–79, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-013-9226-z>.

Problematic definitions

Funded by the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Institute of Medicine’s (IOM) and National Research Council’s (NRC) 2013 report highlights current challenges and opportunities to address the issue of young people engaged in the sex trade in the United States.¹⁶ The study evaluates the limitations of research methods in current estimates of the prevalence of “commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking,” and also describes how multiple definitions limit the ability to make connections between research and resources. Inconsistent terminology leads to disparity and difficulty in estimating the extent of young people who are engaged in the sex trade and inhibits collaboration between sectors and agencies working to support young people. Variations in terminology are not limited to, but include the following: 1) related to age – minors, children, adolescents and youth; 2) related to status – victims, survivors, prostituted child, juvenile prostitutes, adolescent prostitutes; 3) related to crimes – commercial sexual exploitation, sex trafficking of minors, trafficking for purposes of prostitution, prostitution, survival sex.¹⁷ Each of these labels induces particular associations, presents different types of challenges, and is morally charged.

Policies based on a static age-based definition of children are rarely reconsidered; however, the label of “child” alludes to a specific image that can be counterproductive. Childhood and adulthood are fluid and constructed, not based in neuroscience and not consistently applied. In a report titled “How Age Matters,” Sara Vida Coumans discusses the construction of age as a defining concept and how the different terms evoke differing images of what is acceptable or not acceptable. Since the term “children” connotes a state of innocence,

¹⁶ Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, *Confronting Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.17226/18358>. *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Minors*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 31-33.

vulnerability, virginity, and dependence, it is unsurprising that policies focused on children often apply an imbalanced approach that emphasizes rescuing dependent individuals from third party perpetrators. On the other hand, the term “adolescents” connotes a period of transition and sexual maturation.¹⁸

The broad category of children from birth to 18 years is often problematic in that it does not address the shifting needs and independence of adolescents. By using the term, “adolescents” or “youth” instead of “children,” issues around sexuality and sexual health – an area that is extremely morally charged when referring to “children” – can be addressed more adequately.¹⁹ While it can be uncomfortable to discuss children’s sexuality, it is legally permissible, and even expected, that teenagers or adolescents engage in sexual activity.²⁰ As such, perhaps this legal language based in age restrictions and “childhood” promotes a too narrow image or stereotype that may be in contradiction with the lived reality of many youth who engage in exchanging sex.

Victims or Criminals?

Alexandra Lutnick argues that language focused on children, such as “commercial sexual exploitation” and “domestic minor sex trafficking,” and prevailing problem diagnoses are based on dominant and simplistic narratives of an ideal victim – likely a cisgender, heterosexual, young girl – who needs rescuing from a villainous pimp who coerced them into the sex trade.²¹ Though this may be the reality for some, many studies with young people who engage in the sex trade contradict this conception.²² For this reason, Lutnick challenges the reader to acknowledge the complexity, diversity and nuanced experiences of young people who engage in exchanging sex.

¹⁸ Sara Vida Coumans, “How Age Matters,” *ISS Working Paper Series/General Series* 588 (2014): 1–51.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ 46% of twelfth graders reported having sexual intercourse in a national study of youth risk behavior - US Department of Health and Human Services/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance - United States 2015,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, June 10, 2016), p. 27 https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/2015/ss6506_updated.pdf.

²¹ Lutnick, *Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking*.

²² Dank et al., “Surviving the Streets of New York.”

She notes that young people “rarely think of themselves as victims,” and that this type of framing does a disservice to resourceful young people by stripping them of their agency.²³

Lutnick explains that, in practice, this “victim” status is applied unevenly to young people who engage in the sex trade.²⁴ In the United States, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) defines ‘trafficking of youth’ as any individual who engages in a commercial sex act below the age of 18 years. This broad definition is inclusive of situations where youth are engaging in ‘survival sex’ or making a choice, by circumstance or volition, to engage in exchanging sex to meet basic needs such as food, housing, or other resources without the involvement of a third-party exploiter.²⁵ The TVPA defines youth engaged in selling sex as victims of sex trafficking; however, most prostitution-related offenses are regulated at the local level and often fall outside of the federal jurisdiction.²⁶ As a result, young people engaged in the sex trade are frequently arrested for prostitution-related charges and not classified as victims of trafficking. Data collected by the FBI in 2013 indicate 550 young people were arrested.²⁷

A report by Stephanie Halter reviewed police conceptualizations of girls involved in the sex trade in six U.S. cities and found that 40% of youth were classified as offenders and 60% victims.²⁸ The report highlights inconsistencies across agencies and states; some agencies categorized all youth as offenders or all as victims.²⁹ Additionally, the report presents evidence that police make judgments on culpability based on whether the young person has an advocate, were apprehended alone or with an exploiter, whether they live locally, or exhibited resistant

²³ Lutnick, *Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking*, 111.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁵ Public Law, “Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000,” *Public Law* 106 (2000): 386.

²⁶ Lutnick, *Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking*, 75.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁸ Stephanie Halter, “Factors That Influence Police Conceptualizations of Girls Involved in Prostitution in Six U.S. Cities: Child Sexual Exploitation Victims or Delinquents?” *Child Maltreatment* 15, no. 2 (May 1, 2010): 152–6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559509355315>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

behavior.³⁰ Instead of making determinations based on need or support for youth, police are making determinations to prosecute or defend based on profiling and biased assumptions.

Although Halter's report is not very broad in scope, it raises key concerns around the ways in which protective legislation is carried out in support of the most marginalized. The inconsistencies in the data from police agencies are indicative of the challenges and uncertainty facing both young people and law enforcement. This type of attitude and subjectivity is likely to foster distrust from youth, confusion for police and service agencies.

Angela Dwyer distinguishes between two categories of risk for LGBTQI young people. She notes that the majority of the literature focuses on LGBTQI youth as 'at risk' (vulnerable and needing protection), and the second category focuses on LGBTQI youth as 'risky' (dangerous, criminals).³¹ Research focused on 'vulnerable' or 'at-risk' youth often emphasize the demographic drivers that push and pull youth into exchanging sex or seek to document the age of initiation into the trade.³² Though some public health reports acknowledge structural factors that may drive youth into the sex trade, such as discrimination and homelessness, they primarily tend to emphasize the factors that make youth vulnerable and at-risk of more severe outcomes, such as HIV, substance abuse, and sexual assault.³³ These dominant framings see LGBTQI youth who engage in the sex trade as needing rescuing and protection, as disembodied victims.

The other pervasive category of risk that Dwyer describes frames LGBTQI youth as likely to engage in risky or criminal behavior. LGBTQI youth are overrepresented in the juvenile

³⁰ Halter, "Police Conceptualizations of Girls Involved in Prostitution" 156-7.

³¹ Dwyer, "'We're Not Like These Weird Feather Boa-Covered AIDS-Spreading Monsters,'" 68-9.

³² Richard J. Estes and Neil Alan Weiner, "The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico," Full Report of U.S. National Study (University of Pennsylvania, School of Social Work, 2001), http://www.policeprostitutionandpolitics.org/pdfs_all/juvenile%20prostitution/2001_complete_Com_Sex_Exploit_Children_US_Can_Mex.pdf.

³³ Cari L. Miller et al., "Individual and Structural Vulnerability Among Female Youth Who Exchange Sex for Survival," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 49, no. 1 (July 2011): 36-41, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2010.10.003>.

justice and child welfare systems.³⁴ There is a growing body of literature, as Dwyer notes, which views this disproportionate representation of youth as an indication of the profiling of LGBTQI youth as risky based on biased practices and discrimination, primarily in school, child welfare, and juvenile justice systems.³⁵ In a report that interviewed both LGBTQI youth who engaged in the sex trade and law enforcement personnel, the Urban Institute indicates that many law enforcement officials exhibited bias against LGBTQI youth and had a widely held view that LGBTQI youth involvement in the sex trade was “causing or likely to cause criminal behavior.”³⁶ Not only did this bias emerge as a theme in the discussions with law enforcement officials, but LGBTQI youth who described how, in practice, this resulted in numerous negative encounters with police.³⁷

An Alternate Narrative

Other institutions may not be accessible to youth, thus turning them towards informal economies, such as the sex trade. A study by Gwadz et al. of homeless youth in the informal economy describes factors that lead young people into street economies (namely, selling sex and drugs) for survival needs (such as, in exchange for a place to stay, food, money or other resources). This study is unique in that it highlights both barriers to entering the formal economy (homelessness, educational levels, and history of incarceration), as well as the social and emotional benefits that led young people into the informal economy.³⁸ The Gwadz et al. study complicates the prevailing notions and research around young people who engage in the informal economy as victims, and posits that perhaps engagement in the sex trade is an indication of other

³⁴ Development Services Group, Inc., “LGBTQ Youths in the Juvenile Justice System.”

³⁵ Dwyer, ““We’re Not Like These Weird Feather Boa-Covered AIDS-Spreading Monsters.””

³⁶ Meredith Dank et al., “Locked In: Interactions with the Criminal Justice and Child Welfare Systems for LGBTQ Youth, YMSM, and YWSW Who Engage in Survival Sex,” Research Report (Urban Institute, 2015), 73.

³⁷ Dank et al., “Locked In,” 10.

³⁸ Marya Viorst Gwadz et al., “The Initiation of Homeless Youth into the Street Economy,” *Journal of Adolescence* 32, no. 2 (April 1, 2009): 357–77, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2008.01.004>.

circumstances that may compel young people to engage in the street-based economies for survival, social and/or emotional reasons.³⁹

Another unique study helps to shift the narrative around youth who engage in the sex trade. The Young Women's Empowerment Project (YWEP), a former youth-led social justice organization led by and for young people of color who have engaged in the sex trade and street economies, produced two reports through participatory action research that was developed and conducted by girls and transgender youth who engaged in the sex trade and street economy, aged 13 – 24 years.⁴⁰ Key findings of the report suggest that young people who engage in the sex trade are experiencing different forms of institutional violence, and also finding ways, large and small, to be resilient and resist.⁴¹

This conception of resilience aligns with Michael Unger's constructionist approach to defining resilience that emphasizes the importance of a contextual and non-pathologizing interpretation.⁴² Resilience is commonly defined as "positive adaptation despite adversity."⁴³ Michael Unger offers a critique of the dominant resilience literature that interprets this positive adaptation as a "predictable relationships between risk and protective factors," which often leads to "predetermined conclusions because they assume that one set of behaviors is maladaptive and another, more conventional set is adaptive."⁴⁴ As a result, many behaviors that are deemed to be deviant – by society and researchers alike – are mislabeled. In many contexts these same

³⁹ Gwadz et al., "*Initiation of Homeless Youth into the Street Economy*," 373.

⁴⁰ Jazeera Iman et al., "Girls Do What They Have To Do To Survive: Illuminating Methods Used by Girls in the Sex Trade and Street Economy to Fight Back and Heal," A Participatory Action Research Study of Resilience and Resistance (Young Women's Empowerment Project, 2009), <https://ywepchicago.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/girls-do-what-they-have-to-do-to-survive-a-study-of-resilience-and-resistance.pdf>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Michael Unger, "A Constructionist Discourse on Resilience: Multiple Contexts, Multiple Realities among At-Risk Children and Youth," *Youth & Society* 35, no. 3 (March 2004): 341–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X03257030>.

⁴³ Dorothy Bottrell, "Resistance, Resilience and Social Identities: Reframing 'Problem Youth' and the Problem of Schooling," *Journal of Youth Studies* 10, no. 5 (November 2007): 597–616, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260701602662>, 600.

⁴⁴ Unger, "A Constructionist Discourse on Resilience," 342, 356.

behaviors are positive examples of youth negotiating their circumstances to support their survival and wellbeing. Unger emphasizes that through a constructionist approach to resilience, evidence shows that often the most vulnerable youth who may be assumed to be less resilient than their stereotypically resilient peers cite similar health resources, e.g., “self-esteem, competence, meaningful involvement with their communities, and attachments to others.”⁴⁵ By checking our assumptions about what characteristics or behaviors lead to vulnerability and instead examining “resilience as an outcome of a negotiation between individuals and their environments to maintain a self-definition as healthy,” we can better understand the strengths and resilience that many youth employ to navigate challenging situations.⁴⁶

By interviewing young people directly, the research underlying this thesis aims to understand the ways LGBTQI young people who engage in exchanging sex navigate their environments to seek support. By approaching the data from a strength-based as opposed to a deficit-based perspective, the research investigates the ways in which young people characterize themselves and their own experiences to expose an alternative narrative from the dominant framing in policy and research. The following chapters outline the research methodology and analytical approach, core themes across the data, a discussion of key insights that emerged, and recommendations for integrating research insights into practice.

⁴⁵ Ungar, “A Constructionist Discourse on Resilience,” 354.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 352.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This exploratory study was designed and led through a qualitative approach applying dimensional analysis and narrative inquiry to semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews were facilitated with two sources of data: interviews with LGBTQI youth respondents and interviews with non-profit service providers. The primary focus was to learn from LGBTQI youth engaged in the sex trade about their personal experiences seeking support, and secondary data was analyzed to assess disconnects or gaps by learning from non-profit service providers on their perspectives of LGBTQI youth engaged in the sex trade. The section outlines the overall research design, profiles of research participants and analytical approach to reviewing the results.

Research Design

This thesis is a qualitative study to learn from LGBTQI youth in New York City who self-identify as currently or previously engaged in exchanging sex about how they navigate their environments and a complex web of institutions that aim to support them. The term “navigate” is broadly defined here to be inclusive of not only how LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex seek services, but also how they define what support means for them. This includes seeking other resources or relationships for support, as well as the ways in which they construct their own identities.

Through a combination of outreach to staff at New York City-based non-profit organizations serving LGBTQI youth, flyers and snowball outreach techniques, I identified youth who fit the study criteria: 1) identified themselves as LGBTQI; 2) have previously or currently exchange sex for money, shelter, drugs or other resources; and 3) are between the ages of 18 – 24 years. Five youth were screened, found eligible for the research study, and given a small stipend of \$20 for the participation in the study.

Due to New York laws that criminalize engagement in the sex trade, confidentiality of respondents was of utmost importance. As a result, I employed an information form to obtain verbal consent from all respondents at the beginning of each interview, and unique codes were assigned to respondent data. Throughout the report, pseudonyms have been assigned to each young person to ensure their confidentiality, and service providers mentioned by youth have been anonymized as “[x organization]” to ensure there is respondent anonymity in the research results. I also transcribed all interviews with youth.

All interviews included in this study were recorded using an encrypted audio-recording device, and the audio files were saved on an encrypted laptop. Primary data collected by the researcher and reviewed in this report include transcripts from interviews with youth and accompanying field notes.

As a secondary source of data for this study, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with staff from non-profit organizations in New York that work with LGBTQI youth in insecure housing situations, and/or provide services such as legal, medical, housing or a range of support. Secondary data included field notes from these interviews. This secondary respondent group did not receive stipends for their participation, and they signed a formal consent form prior to engaging in conversations for the research. Since the primary research focus was on the expertise of youth, the researcher provided titles of staff and names of organizations interviewed, but all examples and quotations are anonymous.

Each interview began with an explanation of the research and the signing of a consent form. Interview topics included how LGBTQI youth find out about non-profit organizations, whether they feel comfortable sharing their engagement in exchanging sex with non-profit staff, and who they turn to when they are in need of support.

Research Participants

The core data of the study were derived from in-depth semi-structured interviews with five young people deemed eligible for the research study. Three interviews were conducted one-on-one, and the fourth interview was a combined interview with two young people who fit the research criteria. Three of the interviews were conducted in public coffee shops, and one was conducted in a public park. All of the research participants were youth of color living in New York City, four are currently living in shelters, three are currently in school pursuing higher education or certificate programs, and two are currently working with LGBTQI outreach organizations. Below is chart with brief profiles of the five youth respondents:

Pseudonym	Age	Race	City of Origin	Occupation	Current housing situation
Isabella	21	Latina	Bronx	Studying nursing	Living in a shelter
Christopher	22	Black	Brownsville	Working with LGBTQI health and outreach organization	Living in a shelter
Victor	23	Latino	Boston	Exchanging sex	Living in a shelter
Kaysean	23	Black	New Jersey	Studying journalism	Living in a shelter
Omar	21	Latino	Bronx	Studying nursing and community organizer with outreach organization primarily serving youth in insecure housing	Living with family

Throughout this research, I will refer to the youth respondents by the pseudonym assigned above.

Secondary data consisted of interviews with staff of non-profit service providers. The interviews were approximately one hour long and took place in the offices of staff at their organizations. One of the interviews was conducted with a professional who continues to work in the non-profit field but is no longer a staff representative of a specific organization. Below is a brief overview of staff and organizational profiles of interviewees:

Staff Title and Organization	Brief Description of Organization
Director of Health Outreach to Teens (HOTT) Program, Callen-Lorde Community Health Center	Callen-Lorde’s Health Outreach to Teens (HOTT) program offers medical and mental health services to LGBTQI youth and young adults ages 13-24 years at their youth-only medical clinic and through their mobile medical van. ⁴⁷
Paralegal II with the LGBT Law & Policy Initiative, The Legal Aid Society	Legal Aid provides legal support services through civil, criminal defense, and juvenile rights practices, which include both direct client defense and strategic litigation in New York. ⁴⁸
Assistant Professor Pediatrics, Adolescent Medicine, Mt. Sinai Adolescent Health Center	The Adolescent Health Center provides a range of comprehensive health services for adolescents ages 10 – 24 years, specializing in adolescent medicine and preventive services. ⁴⁹
Executive Director, New Alternatives	New Alternatives supports LGBTQI youth with a range of services, including case management, recreational activities, learning opportunities, tutoring, and STI testing. ⁵⁰
Director of Membership, Sylvia Rivera Law Project	Sylvia Rivera Law Project is a collective organization that works to increase the political voice and visibility of low-income people and people of color who are transgender, intersex or gender non-conforming through legal services and movement building. ⁵¹
Coordinator of Training and Advocacy, The Ali Forney Center	The Ali Forney Center supports LGBTQ homeless youth through a 24-hour drop-in center, meals, medical and mental health services, and housing. ⁵²
Director of Movement Building, Urban Justice Center, Sex Workers Project	The Sex Workers Project provides client-centered legal and social services to people who engage in sex work and survivors of human trafficking. ⁵³
Former Staff Person at Sylvia Rivera Law Project, Urban Justice Center’s Peter Cicchino Youth Project	See above for a profile of Sylvia Rivera Law Project. Peter Cicchino Youth Project supports homeless and street involved youth through legal services, advocacy, case management and community education. ⁵⁴

⁴⁷ “Health Outreach to Teens (HOTT),” Callen-Lorde, accessed April 4, 2018, <http://callen-lorde.org/hott/>.

⁴⁸ “The Legal Aid Society,” The Legal Aid Society, accessed April 4, 2018, <https://www.legalaidnyc.org/>.

⁴⁹ “Primary Health Care for Young People,” Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://teenhealthcare.org/core-services/primary-health-care/>.

⁵⁰ “New Alternatives | About Us | New York,” New Alternatives | New York | LGBTQ Homeless Youth, accessed April 5, 2018, https://www.newalternativesnyc.org/about_us.

⁵¹ “About SRLP,” *SRLP (Sylvia Rivera Law Project)* (blog), August 18, 2012, Accessed April 8, 2018 <https://srlp.org/about/>.

⁵² “About The Ali Forney Center.” Accessed April 8, 2018. <http://www.aliforneycenter.org/about-us/>.

⁵³ “About | SWP.” Accessed April 8, 2018. <https://swp.urbanjustice.org/swp-about>.

⁵⁴ “PCYP,” Accessed April 8, 2018, <https://pcyp.urbanjustice.org/>.

Quotations in this research are not attributed to specific service providers in order to allow the reader to focus on trends across non-profit services providers, and not to critique specific organizations. Additionally, as secondary data, the researcher hopes that anonymizing these responses helps to maintain the focus on the primary data, youth respondents.

Analytical Approach

The methodology for analyzing the results of this study relied on a qualitative methodology combining dimensional analysis and narrative inquiry.⁵⁵ The analysis of interviews relied on narrative inquiry and its deductive methods as well as grounded theories that focus on an inductive analysis of personal stories which are assumed to be a “negotiation and presentation of a self in context.”⁵⁶ Narratives served as a “personal resource for making sense of a life (particularly of difficulties) and a resource for coping with that life.”⁵⁷ Rather than simply document the number of times an individual received services or account specific hardships they may have experienced, this type of analysis sees the way that people shape stories that describe their lives as an important way in which they make sense of their experience. It also provides a framework for addressing “interactions between structures and agency,” or the ways in which they negotiate their interactions with structures.⁵⁸

The narrative inquiry approach applied to this research is a combination of dimensional analysis as a type of grounded theory methodology and a thematic content analysis. Transcripts of youth interviews were divided into categories that supported theoretical concepts related to the research question. Inductive processes (based on the core themes generated through interviews)

⁵⁵ Susan Kools et al., “Dimensional Analysis: Broadening the Conception of Grounded Theory,” *Qualitative Health Research* 6, no. 3 (August 1996): 312–30.

⁵⁶ Judith Green and Nicki Thorogood, *Qualitative Methods for Health Research*, 4th Edition (SAGE Publications, 2004), 300.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 300.

and deductive processes based on an analysis of the data. Through interviews, I worked to understand common themes across interviews about how LGBTQI youth who engage in the sex trade characterize their lived experiences, their engagement in the sex trade, their perceptions of themselves, their informal supports, and their perceptions of institutions. Secondary data on how institutions perceive of LGBTQI youth in the sex trade was also collected to look for gaps or disconnects. These themes were used to gain insights into how LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex navigate and negotiate systems to seek support.

Chapter 3: Findings

From the data, key themes from the interviews highlight a more holistic understanding and narrative of how LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex seek support and negotiate their environments. These included common experiences, such as experiences of homophobia, complex feelings around engagement in the sex trade, mature and forgiving perceptions of themselves, meaningful engagement with informal supports, and cynical perceptions of government and non-profit service providers.

The secondary data from the perspectives of non-profit service providers complements this analysis by providing a comparison to understand where there may be a disconnect or commonality in understanding this core question of support for youth. For non-profit service providers, trends included harm reduction approaches across organizations as a strategy for engaging LGBTQI youth who engage in the sex trade, and challenges emerged in navigating government funding and programs with differing age limits.

Lived Experiences

Homophobia stood out as common experience amongst all respondents. Three cited homophobic reactions by parents that resulted in being kicked out of their childhood homes and entering the shelter system:

I think one of my sisters outed me by accident, and my mom literally packed all my stuff up in two minutes, told me to stand outside the house, told me to get into the backseat of the car, brought me to the bus station - the Plymouth and Brockton bus station - bought a bus ticket for me to Boston, and said "good luck faggot," and threw a bible at the back of my head. (Victor)⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Victor (pseudonym), interviewed by author, February 10, 2018.

In addition to specific homophobic encounters in their familial homes, youth also described more widespread experiences of stigma and discrimination in their communities that pushed them out into instable housing situations:

I grew up in Brooklyn, in Brownsville - a really bad neighborhood - and it was like, even living there I was happy to leave because it was like if you were gay, people were trying to beat on you. I was like ridiculed every time I got off the train. I'm like, okay, it's time for me to go anyways [after being kicked out of his childhood home] cuz it was just like two ways out of that - either jail or death. I'm like I can't do that. (Christopher)⁶⁰

From this description, Christopher almost describes being kicked out of his family home by his mother as a sort of last straw for him to leave his neighborhood, and a way for him to take hold of his own future. However, after leaving his family home and community, he continued to experience homophobia, such as in applying for jobs:

I got a job in the [x store], but I walked in and then the manager fired me, like as soon as I walked in. Cuz he was like, this is a straight environment... I came back and I wrote it to the supervisor and they fired him, but like I'm like I still don't want to work there. That left a bad taste in my mouth. (Christopher)⁶¹

Even though Christopher knew that this was wrong, and was successful in seeking justice, the experience left a deep impression on him.

Though respondents were open about discussing tense and challenging topics, such as abusive relationships [n=3], rape [n=2], drug addiction [2], or getting kicked out of their homes [n=3], none described a third-party exploiter or a feeling of being exploited. None of the youth described themselves as “victims” or “survivors,” either when referring to their engagement in exchanging sex or in relation to extricating themselves from abusive relationships. Though four of the youth respondents described experiences exchanging sex below the age of 18 years, they did not characterize these any differently from experiences or choices once they turned 18.

⁶⁰ Christopher (pseudonym), interviewed by author, February 10, 2018.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Engagement in the sex trade

Most references to engagement in exchanging sex was as a behavior and not an identity, e.g., “make coins,” “take a date,” “sex working,” or “exchanging sex.” Most youth [n=4] described engagement in sex work as an activity that they went in and out of, describing times when they decided to start and stop for various reasons:

I've done it for a lot of different reasons - drugs, having money, drinking... I told him [ex-boyfriend] the only reason I do the stuff that I do is because I need to do it. I need to survive. Yes, it's the shittiest way to do it but sometimes you don't have another option. And I told him, I've tried to get jobs, nobody calls me back. I need the money now and I need to do something now. (Isabella)⁶²

Only because I make more money. I can make enough money in two days to be all set for the whole week. (Victor)⁶³

When I was in the shelter I felt so intimidated because like people come in with like brand-new stuff and they're like look at my this and look at my that, and I'm just like, oh... okay. So then it was like my friend introduced me cuz she was making a whole lot of money, so then I was like okay let me try it out. By the end of the week, I had like \$2,000, so it just kept going on and going on for like a year and a half. (Christopher)⁶⁴

Youth respondents engage in exchanging sex because it is lucrative, but also to meet various needs ranging from survival to fitting in.

Youth also described ways in which they strategized to stay safe while engaging in the sex trade. Four respondents described strategies to stay safe while on the job by working with friends and keeping tabs on one another to ensure each other's safety:

A long time ago, when I was like 18, someone told me, said always take a photo of the license plate because it will always come back to their name, their address, and everything. (Omar)⁶⁵

While I was at [x organization] they had housing in Sunset Park and someone that I was with did it as well, so I was like oh I do it too. When he would leave to get hotels for the night, he would invite me to come with him and whenever he was doing his business I'd

⁶² Isabella (pseudonym), interview with author, February 4, 2018.

⁶³ Victor (pseudonym), interview with author, February 10, 2018.

⁶⁴ Christopher, interview.

⁶⁵ Omar (pseudonym), interview with author, February 21, 2018.

be in the bathroom and whenever I was doing my business he'll be in the bathroom. We're always listening out for each other. So for two to three months, he was like my partner in that, my business partner I guess. (Christopher)⁶⁶

Not only did youth describe these as important ways to be strategic in their work, but also ways that they found support through an informal network.

Young people also discussed complex feelings about their engagement in exchanging sex. Three respondents shared feelings of shame and stigma, both internal shame as well as hiding their engagement from friends, boyfriends, family or non-profit staff:

That's the other reason I stopped doing it, my self-worth was just so low, and I felt like shit, and plus my baby father wasn't the greatest boyfriend. He was very abusive, and he made me feel like shit about the shit that I was doing because he knew about it. (Isabella)⁶⁷

But at the same time I have a boyfriend, so like I can't do that and still have my boyfriend, so I'd rather just have my boyfriend. (Christopher)⁶⁸

I told one person, and my sister looked down at me over it so, since then, when people ask me just randomly, I'd be like no... never did it. (Omar)⁶⁹

These experiences highlight how widespread stigma around engagement in the sex trade can lead to isolation, judgement or low self-esteem. Despite these strong negative feelings of shame, none of these young people expressed regret when reflecting on their engagement in exchanging sex:

So, I'm not ashamed to talk about it cause, I did it, it wasn't like I did it for certain reasons. Yeah like to save my mom's life, of course, I'm doing anything I can. She's my world so I going to do anything I can. I'd have sex with a thousand people to save my mom, I don't care. (Omar)⁷⁰

In these depictions, respondent reflect on their engagement as a formative experience in shaping who they are and have grown to be, but does not a label that define them. In sharing about their experiences, youth interviewed were clear that they were engaging in the sex trade for specific

⁶⁶ Christopher, interview.

⁶⁷ Isabella, interview.

⁶⁸ Christopher, interview.

⁶⁹ Omar, interview.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

reasons or to meet specific needs and did not feel like this behavior defined who they are or their identity.

Perceptions of themselves

All respondents shared positive stories that described characteristics such as maturity, forgiving and/or caring for others as core aspects of their identities:

I just don't play with the judging, like judging people, I don't like bullying or judging people. I will stick up for somebody, I don't care if you're LGBT or not LGBT, if I see you getting bullied or judged, I'm gonna stick up and I'm gonna defend you. Whether you feel like it or not. You're gonna thank me in the long run. (Omar)⁷¹

It's the way I was raised. My mom is a minister. I give people 4th, 5th, 6th chances... but when I see the negative in someone, I also see the positive... I will help you no matter what. (Victor)⁷²

We all look out for each other out here. I've got money in my pocket or a pack of cigarettes, so I make sure everyone's good, and vice versa. (Victor)⁷³

I think that's why I protect others or I'm always looking out for people. Because I had to do that growing up, I had to be the big sister because we were in some random people's houses where I had to protect my sister at all costs. Because the people that we were staying with were fucking horrible... I always looked out for her no matter what. (Isabella)⁷⁴

Additionally, four respondents specifically noted ways that they mentor or support their peers.

Youth respondents described numerous ways that they contribute to their community and friends, expressing important roles they play in supporting other young people or even strangers they meet who are in challenging situations – from giving money to people busking on the street to listening to a friend when they needed support.

Four respondents also described stories of journey or transformation where they reflected on themselves and their experiences:

⁷¹ Omar, interview.

⁷² Victor, interview

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Isabella, interview.

That's why I just keep moving. I don't regret any of the things that I did. I did them for a reason. Some of them are stupid, but I did them for a reason and it made me who I am. I'm appreciative of the experience that I've had. (Isabella)⁷⁵

Honestly, I'm trying to get myself less and less involved with the homeless services because like I'm trying to like focus on like being non-homeless. (Christopher)⁷⁶

Additionally, three of the youth who described being kicked out of their homes, spoke about rekindling relationships with family members. Christopher, for example, described how he now speaks with his mother regularly and introduced her to his current boyfriend. This highlights a level of maturity and forgiveness that could be challenging for anyone.

Informal Support Mechanisms

Youth described strategies they used to take care of themselves when they are down or people that they could turn to in times of need. Individual coping strategies included writing poetry [n=2], taking a bath [n=1], smoking cigarettes or marijuana [n=3], and drinking [n=3]:

I usually take a bath or go smoke a cigarette to calm myself down, or I smoke weed... Sometimes I take a bath with my daughter... when I see her I know I have to bring my stress level from here, down to here. (Isabella)⁷⁷

In addition to individual strategies, all respondents described strong friendships or chosen families that provided them support when they are feeling down:

It's not the organizations that help you, it's the people in the community that you meet. The people out here. Like out here, like when I used to make money out here on Christopher street, as you can see people come out to say hi and check in on me. It's those people that you can turn to. Those are the people that if you get locked up, they're gonna know you got locked up, and they're gonna come and visit you while you're in jail... Those are the people that are gonna, when you're having a shitty day or someone attacked you, are going to step in. (Victor)⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Isabella, interview.

⁷⁶ Christopher, interview.

⁷⁷ Isabella, interview.

⁷⁸ Victor, interview.

I have a lot of people. But my number one is my mom. She's my rock. Even though she's sick, she will flip out in a quick heartbeat and cursing y'all in Spanish and come with a broomstick, so that's my rock. (Omar)⁷⁹

Three respondents specifically distinguished the support from informal networks of friends and family from organizational support. In the example above from Victor, there is a sort of unconditional care and support that peers, friends and family provide that is unique.

Experiences with government institutions

Youth respondents discussed three government-related service providers with whom they had interactions – Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), government shelters and police. Overwhelmingly, all these experiences were characterized as negative. Two respondents discussed early and negative experiences with ACS as they were split from their siblings and placed in abusive homes. One of these respondents is a new mother who also described her ongoing bad encounters with ACS. She highlighted several instances where they made demands from her but were unable to find solutions to fit her needs:

That was another problem I had because ACS was like why aren't you going to your drug program, and I said, ‘who is going to watch my kid?’ You gonna watch her? ... The reason why I don't go is because I don't have anybody to watch her and I'm not putting my kid in that environment so if you can find somebody to watch her then be my guest, but if you're not gonna help me. And she was like, “oh okay, just find a babysitter. Here's another place that you can go to do your drug treatment.” I'm like you still didn't answer my question. Where am I supposed to put my daughter? She's like, “figure it out.” (Isabella)⁸⁰

In Isabella’s story, the ACS employee was not able to see Isabella and her current needs. From Isabella’s perspective, she saw the ACS employee prioritizing her own needs to check off that Isabella was meeting the drug program requirements over Isabella’s wellbeing, staying sober and caring for her daughter.

⁷⁹ Omar, interview.

⁸⁰ Isabella, interview.

Youth respondents also described profiling and harassment by the police. Through these stories, young people emphasized a deep distrust of police:

Starting in 2015, it became an issue where with gentrification... The cops they don't want us out here, we've become invisible. They will lock you up for some bullshit thing, crossing the street, talking to some guy. (Victor)⁸¹

I have so many friends that are going through the system, and then they don't do nothing and they're sitting there for six months and then when they go to trial, they let you out. That's six months of your life wasted for no reason. (Victor)⁸²

I got a plea two years ago to get out of jail because they wanted me in prison, and I refused to do that so I told them that I did drugs, and that's the reason that I been acting out like that. It was a bullshit lie but I had to do something, and they put me in rehab. (Isabella)⁸³

From these stories, police or the criminal legal system are perceived to have bad intentions and focused on locking away youth. It is clear from these depictions that police are not seen as a viable support mechanism.

Experiences with non-profit service providers

All youth respondents discussed multiple ongoing interactions with a range of non-profit service providers. The four respondents who are currently in shelters, discussed numerous transitions between, in and out of shelters. As a result of short term emergency housing placements anywhere from one night to several months, waitlists, aging out of programs or periods where folks were able to find more stable housing, respondents were regularly moving between housing facilities. These respondents discussed being in and out, and back again at numerous supportive housing facilities, placements, shelters, and friend's apartments.

[x organization] was the first shelter I was in. And then I went to [x organization] for the night and the next day somebody told me about [y organization], and then I went to [y

⁸¹ Victor, interview.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Isabella, interview.

organization], and then I was there for like 5 months. Then I switched to another shelter and I was there for like 5 more months. (Christopher)⁸⁴

For each encounter with a new agency or organization, respondents discussed meeting new case managers for intake processes. Four respondents discussed frustration around how disconnected communication can be between service providers.

Respondents also described ways that they are savvy or strategic in finding different organizations or events to attend: “[X organization], they’ve got the best clothes there” (Victor)⁸⁵; “[Y weekly event] always go for the hot catered meal” (Kaysean)⁸⁶. Three respondents noted asking for a specific social worker or staff person at an organization to meet with that they heard was LGBTQI-friendly or good resource person.

Every respondent mentioned numerous organizations they sought for different supportive services or to have a place to be off the street. In addition to visiting organizations for specific purposes, such as temporary housing, clothing or other material resources or events, all respondents mentioned visiting organizations to have a place to be. Three respondents highlighted frustration around the hours services are available at organizations. Two emphasized that most organizations close on Wednesdays to allow staff to do paperwork: “They call it ‘Homeless Wednesdays’ because all of the organizations close on Wednesdays. [Two organizations named] you literally have nowhere to go,” (Victor).⁸⁷ In response, Kaysean emphasized, “And they don't work that hard so it's kind of a joke day off, it sucks.” Not only did they express frustration about the hours, but these respondents felt like this signaled non-profit service providers were unresponsive to their needs, and simply performing a job.

⁸⁴ Christopher, interview.

⁸⁵ Victor, interview.

⁸⁶ Kaysean, interview.

⁸⁷ Victor, interview.

For youth in insecure housing situations, the challenge of program hours and regulations were particularly frustrating for respondents [n=4]. Whether in a formal shelter or an LGBTQI outreach center with temporary overnight beds, these programs are required to comply with Department of Health Services (DHS) rules with mandatory curfews and wake up times to vacate their rooms. In some programs, this means leaving the building entirely, and other programs require that if a client stays they must join a group meeting or activity. Only one shelter or housing program mentioned allowed clients to make use of other recreational activities available in the building after the morning wake up.

You had to wake up at 6:30 in the morning every day and leave by 7:30 every day and then Tues. – Fri. It would be opened back up at 5:30 and all other days it was 9pm so you had to find something to do. (Christopher)⁸⁸

Exceptions are made for individuals with pay stubs to verify that they can be up at different times for work. For young people engaged in exchanging sex, this schedule may not sync well with their work schedule:

I used to be out all night and then rely on [x organization drop in center] to sleep on the couches/beds. (Victor)⁸⁹

I had such a problem with being curfewed because I felt like, in my personal situation, I didn't do anything wrong... it's like a punishment. You're not doing anything with your life, so you should be waking up at this time and try to be productive. I already am productive, I'm already doing things, so I felt like personally it was an attack on me, so I was like rebelling. (Kaysean)⁹⁰

Not only did these types of rules and regulations create logistical barriers for youth to find safe places to relax, but also were perceived as punitive measures.

⁸⁸ Christopher, interview.

⁸⁹ Victor, interview.

⁹⁰ Kaysean, interview.

Four youth were ambivalent in how they qualified the kind of support from non-profit services providers as simply part of their jobs, and not necessarily because providers genuinely care for youths' needs:

Places like these organizations like [X organization], it's limited. They are only there to help you because that's their job. Real help comes from the community. The people, older people that you meet, that are your friends. You need to keep them close out here because that's all you got. (Victor)⁹¹

Kaysean went further to describe how he felt that he was often overlooked or unsupported by organizations because of his maturity and independence: "You have to be busted and crazy for someone to care about you."⁹² Overall, many youth described their experiences with non-profit service providers with a cynicism or distance.

Youth respondents also noted the importance of seeing themselves reflected in the staff both in experience and identity: "The staff at [named two organizations] were also LGBT so they understood us," (Kaysean)⁹³. For Isabella, hearing personal stories was key:

She's like don't be like me. Yeah, I have a great job now but my life was shitty five years ago. She's like I lost my kids. She's like I was doing drugs, was having sex for drugs, doing all types of crazy shit and forgot about my kids - the most important thing. But when I lost them is when I got my mind right. (Isabella)⁹⁴

Two respondents shared that they continued to maintain good relationships with staff members from some organizations but attributed this to the individuals and not to the organization.

Perceptions from non-profit service providers

Despite a diversity of programming and offerings, secondary data from interviews with non-profit service providers suggest common ways that they address LGBTQI youth who engage

⁹¹ Victor, interview.

⁹² Kaysean, interview.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Isabella, interview.

in exchanging sex seeking their support, and some of the challenges that non-profit service providers face in carrying out their work most effectively.

All non-profit service provider respondents acknowledged that their constituents included LGBTQI youth who engaged in exchanging sex, but had different approaches to gathering this information. In respondent interviews, most noted that it is assumed or commonly understood that engagement in the sex trade is a viable practice for many youth, particularly youth in insecure housing situations.

Three service providers specifically stated that they gather data on their clients who exchange sex by asking them during intake processes. One interviewee noted: “My hunch is that there are a number of people who have never really been asked, and that is a classic teenager thing. They are looking at you intently like, “just ask me”.”⁹⁵ Additionally, service providers emphasized that there is a high prevalence of transgender women and gender non-conforming youth engaged in exchanging sex because of systemic discrimination that makes it especially challenging for them to access employment opportunities in the formal economy.

Despite this broad recognition that all respondents’ organizations are serving LGBTQI youth who engage in the sex trade, few had clear responses about what they do when a young person discloses that they engage in exchanging sex. The most common response was to bring in a social worker to assess if youth want to talk about it further or are looking for help leaving the sex trade [n=4]. Two respondents noted that they ask youth if they want the staff person to call the police or administration for children’s services. All respondents discussed a harm reduction approach and used similar language, such as “judgment-free” or “meeting folks where they are.”⁹⁶ In most interviews, respondents described a focus on fixing or addressing a specific need

⁹⁵ Anonymous, interview with author, February 1, 2018.

⁹⁶ Researcher field notes.

that youth were bringing to the organization, such as housing, documentation, or legal issues, rather than focus on whether a person is exchanging sex.⁹⁷ This was often compared with how organizations serve youth who are using substances. Four respondents noted that they would not treat these young people differently or judge them, but do what they can to meet their most pressing immediate needs.

Similar to stories from youth, service providers also described strategies they employed to navigate barriers to doing their work. Four respondents described navigating the robust bureaucracy they must go through to support youth through different age restricted cut-offs. New York City's definition of homeless youth only extends to age 21, but New York State's goes up to 24 years, so "a bunch of opportunities are cut off" for youth between the ages of 21 – 24 years. Where resources do exist for this age group, there is high demand, "people wait easily six months for 20 beds... served 700 21 to 24-year-olds last year who wait months for 20 beds."⁹⁸ As a result of similar policy barriers, all organizational representatives [n=8] highlighted advocacy work beyond direct service provision.

Non-profit service providers also highlighted challenges in their own work both from a programmatic and values perspective. Several organizations noted challenges with restricted funding, in particular government funding, as well as competition with other organizations for resources: "There is this idea that resources are scarce and we're all fighting for the same pot of money."⁹⁹ Respondents emphasized that this "scarcity mentality" or fear of losing or not getting future funding led organizations to be opportunistic, sometimes at the expense of meeting programming priorities:

⁹⁷ Researcher field notes.

⁹⁸ Anonymous, interview with author, February 14, 2018.

⁹⁹ Anonymous, interview with author, February 27, 2018.

Often funding drives the work instead of the work driving the funding and it's like this constant dance that organizations and providers have to have. What it means structurally with leaders at the top, and then what it means one-on-one with clients in service delivery, are sometimes lost in translation. As a direct service provider, why is it sometimes so hard to assist my client housing, etc. something like this. Organizationally, leaders trying to figure out how to get any money to do the little bit that we can do or as much as we can do. (Anonymous)¹⁰⁰

Three staff representatives also stressed challenges in communicating and programming between the staff that meet with clients directly and upper level leadership. All organizations stressed the importance of having case managers or other staff who are LGBTQI or people of color to reflect the constituents they serve; however, several respondents noted [n=6] that this priority of representation is not reflected up the management chain. In particular, respondents [n=6] noted that leadership was not representative or listening to staff, particularly those who work directly with clients. Further, one respondent noted that when LGBTQI youth, people of color, or former clients are hired, they are often not promoted or given appropriate salaries, “Youth drop-in centers for example, where they [LGBTQI youth or people of color] are also on staff and also receiving benefits because their salaries are shit, also on the verge of potentially being homeless, or being homeless.”¹⁰¹ Additionally, respondents shared that in most organizations clients do not have a say in decision-making, and when they do, their suggestions or recommendations are often overlooked.

Overall, non-profit service providers expressed a desire and sensitivity to meeting the needs of their constituencies, including LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex, but are also struggling to address challenges internal, such as with management, or external, such as funding or policy-based.

¹⁰⁰ Anonymous, interview with author. February 23, 2018.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Chapter 4: Discussion

The findings from this study tell a nuanced and complex story about how LGBTQI youth who engage in the sex trade are navigating their environments to seek support and negotiating informal and formal networks. A close read of the respondents narratives depict youth who are actively adapting to their environments by finding informal, e.g. coping mechanisms, self-esteem and meaningful friendships, and key services from non-profit service providers.

These data suggest labels commonly applied to youth do not fit their personal identities, and hint at how labels can create problematic depictions of youth. These data suggest that the “victim” label and characterization, that is typical in the literature and codified in the law, is not how many LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex identify themselves or view their engagement in exchanging sex.

In reviewing the data carefully, a different picture emerges of youth who are resiliently navigating complex environments and finding meaningful informal and formal support systems. Additionally, the data also reveal some gaps between the experiences of youth respondents with government and non-profit service providers, and the intention of these services to support them.

Resilience

By returning to Unger’s definition of resilience as “an outcome of a negotiation between individuals and their environments to maintain a self-definition as healthy,” it is important to understand how youth are negotiating their environments – or seeking support – and how they perceive of themselves – such as coping mechanisms, self-esteem, and community engagement.

Youth respondents in this study all described self-narratives and tactics of resilience. Youth interviewees articulated strategies of resilience in how they constructed their identities, in the ways they engaged in exchanging sex, and in their interactions with non-profit service

providers. A report from Young Women’s Empowerment Project (YWEP), by and for young women who engage in exchanging sex, aligns with Unger’s contextual understanding of resilience and defines resilience as young people finding ways to “bounce back or heal whether they be conventional or unconventional.”¹⁰² The report lays out an expansive understanding of coping strategies that include individual soothing strategies “like aromatherapy, medical drug use, bubble baths, or food,” as well as connection strategies like “hanging out with girlfriends, reading books about the movement, or educating younger girls about how to protect themselves.”¹⁰³ These types of coping strategies also emerged from interviews with young people in the current research – such as smoking cigarettes or weed, poetry, or taking a bath.

Youth respondents shared stories of resilience regarding where they turn when they need support. All youth respondents also talked about having friends that they turn to: Victor noted, “I have friends from Harlem to here that have my back. And even if I go to boroughs like the Bronx and Brooklyn, too.”¹⁰⁴ Three respondents also mentioned that they had close relationships with their mothers – this is particularly noteworthy, since two of these respondents described being kicked out of their childhood homes due to their mother’s, or family’s, homophobic feelings. Since that time, these two young people have been able to rekindle their relationships to varying degrees. These data suggest that LGBTQI youth are developing deep connections and relying on informal support networks of friends, family and chosen family. Personal and connection strategies show how each young person is engaging with their environments in a resilient way.

Another way that we can see resilience emerge in the data is through stories of personal transformations or journeys of growth. One personal story that captures this nuance is from Isabella:

¹⁰² Iman et al., “Girls Do What They Have To Do To Survive,” 34.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 34.

¹⁰⁴ Victor, interview.

My mom was like 15 and she was on heroin and she had me, and she was still doing her bullshit. You know and that's why we went into foster care because she could not get clean. And you know, I was mad at her for years for that shit, but then when I was going through my own drug addiction, I understood why she did what she did because it's fucking hard. It's hard you know, you have so many good things going for you. But because you do drugs, you just don't give a shit. So I forgave her. You know, I haven't seen her for like 15 years, but I forgave her because I understood the struggle.
(Isabella)¹⁰⁵

In this story, Isabella does not focus blame on her mother as setting off an unfortunate chain of events, trauma, or the struggles that it caused for her; rather, her story expresses a deep level of empathy, maturity and understanding. It is reflective of her resilience in learning from past challenges, empathizing and adapting to grow. As a new mother herself, Isabella focused much of her personal story in the interview on how she sees herself as a mother and how she intends to use the knowledge she's gained from her personal experience to provide a positive future for her daughter.

Lastly, the data show the ways in which youth expressed resilience in the strategies they employed related to exchanging sex and working with non-profit service providers. Two respondents shared strategies that they used to 'work they system,' meaning tactics to negotiate their independence and engagement in exchanging sex while also seeking supportive services from non-profit organizations. This ranged from being savvy and knowledgeable about what organizations had the best food or were open and available at various times to figuring out ways to get curfews extended or sneak out so that they could both engage in exchanging sex and also have a safe place to sleep at night. Four youth also described strategies for staying safe while engaging in exchanging sex. These included taking pictures of license plates, setting times to meet up with friends at the end of the night, and sharing a hotel or apartment to be on lookout for

¹⁰⁵Isabella, interview.

one another in case of a “bad date.” Each of these are small examples of the ways that youth are developing creative approaches, adapting, and negotiating resilience in different environments.

“It’s just a job”

Youth respondents highlighted only negative interactions with government institutions. Youth shared harmful experiences with Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), government shelters and police. Three youth described being targeted and profiled by police specifically because of the presumption that they were engaging in exchanging sex: “We know what goes on in the street.”¹⁰⁶ Victor and Kaysean highlighted how police routinely placed charges on young people who they assumed engaged in exchanging sex in order to clean up streets as neighborhoods begin to gentrify. This highlights the discrimination facing LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex from police who are legally obliged to support them, and the kind of distrust that is bred. It also suggests that policies that rely on police intervention to support youth are likely to be less effective.

Unlike government institutions, respondents had complex and at times ambivalent feelings about non-profit service providers. While all respondents were taking advantage of numerous non-profit organizations as well as resources across the city, every youth respondent expressed skepticism about their motives and programs. They did not seem to characterize them as a network of support that genuinely cared for them.

When youth respondents discussed support in relation to organizations, it was predominantly framed on an individual level, either naming specific staff members from organizations or a friend that helped them when they arrived at an organization – attributing meaningful support to individuals and not organizations. Three respondents did mention specific staff or case workers following up, checking in even when they were no longer seeking services

¹⁰⁶ Victor, interview.

from the organization; however, they rarely named the organizations where they worked and seemed to move them from a category of organizational staff to personal friends. When questioned directly about support by organizations, most respondents lumped organizations together and focused on other forms of community as genuine support. Four youth respondents specifically noted that for non-profit service providers, it is “just a job,” and that support is temporary.

Additionally, many youth characterized problems in the models of programming. Curfews and organization working hours stood out prominently in four respondent interviews. From the perspective of organizations, these policies may be regulated by the Department of Homeless Services or due to funding restrictions, but for youth, it can be perceived as degrading or punishment. In Kaysean’s personal narrative, he sees describes himself as mature and resourceful, which seemed at odds with the ways that he was treated by non-profit services: “You have to be busted and crazy for someone to care about you.”¹⁰⁷ Highlighted in this depiction and data is a feeling from many respondents of being perceived or treated solely by their deficits, and not as a person with dignity.

Youth were not passive recipients of services but exhibited strategic resourcefulness in their choice of and ongoing engagement with service providers. Navigating services was not only about getting specific needs met, but also about negotiating challenging spaces while exerting agency and independence. Youth were skeptical that service providers would be there to meaningfully support them in the short and long-term.

Hidden in Plain Sight

Every non-profit organization interviewed acknowledged that their clients included LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex. Direct service providers described different ways

¹⁰⁷ Kaysean, interview.

that they were aware of this information. Some respondents noted that they have specific questions asked during intake sessions where they gather and track this information, and others described hearing youth discuss their engagements in exchanging sex informally in other settings.¹⁰⁸ None of the direct service providers could recall a specific policy around what case managers, social workers or other intake staff should do, if youth disclose engagement in selling sex. Most organizations shared similar recommendations to “meet youth where they are,” “help them get out if they want to,” or “help them stay safe,” such as through providing STI and HIV screenings, Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) and condoms.¹⁰⁹

This judgment-free approach to LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex from non-profit service providers seemed to be in contrast with the perceptions of three youth respondents. Two of these three respondents are currently working with direct service providers, and still noted that they would not feel comfortable disclosing that they engage in exchanging sex with a case manager or another staff person.

One of the youth respondents was able to describe both perspectives. As both someone who has exchanged sex and a staff person, he was able to articulate some of the conflicts between disclosing that he engaged in exchanging sex and why service providers might be interested in knowing this information. When asked why people may or may not feel comfortable disclosing that they have or are currently engaged in exchanging sex to a case worker, Omar said:

I can speak from my experience. I have nothing against [x organization] cause I work there but if someone did an intake for me and they asks me have you ever done sex work, I would be really devastated to answer because like, I wouldn't know how they would look at me as a person, how they would judge me, if they would treat me different, or if they would go around talking to certain people about it. Or if they would think oh he's done sex work or she did sex work, she's got HIV or he's got HIV, oh let's keep our

¹⁰⁸ Researcher interview field notes.

¹⁰⁹ Anonymous, interviews with author, February 4, 7, 14, 2018.

distance. Or if they're not going to give me the right services so for them to save face. Or how are they going to tell my parents or who are they going to tell. I'm staying with or are they going to tell my partner. There's multiple reasons why. Or they might feel like they're going to get judgment and commit suicide, you never know. So people keep it to themselves. (Omar)¹¹⁰

Omar's answer highlights a range of complex emotions and anxieties that might shape whether young people would feel comfortable sharing that they have engaged in exchanging sex. Omar's response begins internally and then distances himself and talks about others. He highlights three layers of concern – concern for stigmatization and judgment of the individual, concern that the institution will not provide appropriate services, and concern that the organization might take actions to share this information with others.

The stigma that Omar highlights is not only passive judgment, “how they would look at me as a person,”¹¹¹ but that it could also result in spreading false rumors that might be associated with exchanging sex, namely, “she's got HIV or he's got HIV.”¹¹² In Omar's example, the stigma around engagement in exchanging sex extends beyond the individual to a fear by the institutions for their own reputational risk that would result in discriminatory services: “They're not going to give me the right service for them to save face.”¹¹³ Lastly, he notes a fear that service providers may do additional harm by reporting to parents or others. Though this cannot be extrapolated to describe all concerns by youth about why they would not disclose that they engage in exchanging sex, it does outline several internal and systemic concerns that contribute to distrust.

In contrast, Omar also has a thorough explanation for why he thinks that a case manager or service provider would ask individuals to disclose their engagement in exchanging sex:

¹¹⁰ Omar, interview.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

I can say we probably do it because we want to get to know people's health. I think that's the reason why, cuz people want to know about people's health, like if they did sex work. To see if they if they want to stop or need help with condoms or syringe exchange, you never know if they exchange it for drugs or whatever, you never know. We want to know so we can make sure we're not going to say hey, don't do sex work it's bad, or don't do it cause it's dangerous, we're gonna be like ok you're doing sex work, here's supplies, and here's how you do it to be safe. We want you to be safe. We want you to feel comfortable while you're doing it. So we can know. (Omar)¹¹⁴

When Omar considered the question from the perspective of a staff person, he took a nuanced approach to recognize that many people engage in selling sex for numerous reasons. From an organizational or service provider's perspective, he focused on harm reduction health-related responses, such as "condoms or syringe exchange," and taking a non-judgmental approach to providing support for youth.

Overall, Omar's story highlights that despite the intention of many to be hold no judgment, they may not be effectively communicating these values to youth or not building enough trust for youth to feel comfortable disclosing. Though there are likely numerous contributing factors, such as issues of program design and the internal challenges shared by non-profit service providers, it is also possible that the operating environment obscures the intentions of non-profit services providers.

By interpreting the data in the legal and policy context, it is possible to assume that by virtue of operating in an environment where engagement in the sex trade is criminalized, service providers are taking protective measures that downplay explicit or public conversations on the topic. Of the organizations interviewed, only one explicitly notes anything related to serving people who engage in the sex trade on their websites. From the data, it is possible to speculate that this may contribute to further stigmatizing or invisibilizing many of the youth who they seek to support.

¹¹⁴ Omar, interview.

Limitations

As an exploratory qualitative research study, there are numerous limitations. The sample size was small and not representative of the diversity of LGBTQI youth in New York City who engage in exchanging sex. All interviewees were between the ages of 21 – 23 years and self-selected to be interviewed. As a result, they may have a higher level of maturity and distance from their younger selves. Discussions were often looking back and reflecting after having overcome challenging periods. Additionally, due to ethical considerations around interviewing youth below the age of majority, this study was limited to interviewing youth between the ages of 18 – 24.

Another critical limitation of the study is that interviews were conducted by the researcher and not by peer youth who also fit the research criteria. This not only limited the ability of the researcher to find individuals who fit the research criteria, but also meant that there was little time to establish trust and openness between the researcher and the interviewee. This, in part, explains the small research sample size.

I heard numerous times from service providers and outreach organizations that the most prevalent demographic for youth engaging in exchanging sex are transgender women of color; however, unfortunately due to various limitations in outreach and scheduling, the researcher was not able to interview any young people who identified as transgender or gender non-conforming.¹¹⁵ For future studies, this would be a critical demographic to include and perspective to learn from. Additionally, one of the interviews was a joint interview. This may have made the interviewees more comfortable in some ways, but could also have made their responses more similar or allowed for one interviewee to overshadow the other respondent.

¹¹⁵ Researcher interview field notes.

Finally, the researcher was the sole interpreter in reviewing the transcripts and data. While this helps to maintain the confidentiality of participants, it also presents some bias in the key themes highlighted. Despite these considerable limitations, this researcher believes there are still important results and insights that are not only worthy of discussion, but can contribute to the field of study more broadly.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

This study contributes to an emerging literature that seeks to understand the strategies and perspectives of LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex to determine how they seek support and what support means for them. The data suggest that LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex are not simply youth in crisis, but young people who are highly resourceful and resilient to adversity. Insights from this study have practical implications to relieve structural barriers that criminalize youth, improve research that includes their voices and knowledge, and shift programmatic approaches to supporting youth by building on their strengths.

Decriminalizing youth

There are numerous structural barriers that challenge the ability of youth to negotiate their needs as well as for institutions to best support them. The data suggest that the criminal status of sex work in New York, and the United States more broadly, creates obstacles and harm preventing youth from accessing support. Youth described police harassment and profiling related to engagement or perceived engagement in exchanging sex, which concurs with other studies of police interactions with youth engaged in the sex trade.¹¹⁶ Rather than connect youth with supportive services, examples from the data highlight discriminatory practices that resulted in distrust, stigma and fear.

For non-profit service providers, the data point towards a disconnect between well-intentioned values of harm reduction in organizations, and distrust from youth in disclosing that they engage in exchanging sex. Due to a policy environment that criminalizes sex work, non-profit service providers are often cautious about publicly naming or discussing youth engagement in the sex trade, which could contribute to obscuring their intentions and approach.

¹¹⁶ See Dank et al., “Locked In,” and Iman, et. al., “Girls Do What They Have To Do To Survive.”

One recommendation from these findings is to call on policymakers to decriminalize sex work to reduce stigma facing LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex and create an environment where youth can seek support from service providers without fear of discrimination, arrest or punishment.

Generating knowledge

Evidence-based research is critical to engaging policymakers, seeking funding, and implementing programs; however, LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex are rarely shaping research questions or even represented as more than data points. Unlike traditional research methods, participatory action research is a dynamic, self-reflective inquiry that engages impacted communities to better understand and improve programs and practices. The focus is action-oriented, meaning it not only seeks to generate empirical data, but implement research insights in an iterative way to benefit participants.¹¹⁷

Not only does this approach ground research insights in the experience and expertise of the communities, but it also increases the effectiveness and sustainability of actions for implementation as those who are involved in the research methodology are also best placed to carry forward the learnings. Particularly for communities that are isolated or marginalized, integrated community participation is key to reaching the most hard-to-reach participants in sensitive ways.

Baum et al. highlight that “power is the crucial underpinning concept” in participatory action research.¹¹⁸ This type of research challenges the historical system of surveillance and knowledge control of mainstream research, and instead, allows community members to gain power over the practices of institutions and the production of knowledge.

¹¹⁷ Fran Baum, Colin MacDougall, and Danielle Smith, “Participatory Action Research,” *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 60, no. 10 (October 2006): 854–57, <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech.2004.028662>.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 855.

Participatory action research led by and with LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex is an important step in shifting narratives and advocating for resources to create an enabling environment for youth to feel safe and supported.

Building on strengths

Data from this study highlight the resilient and strategic ways that LGBTQI youth who engage in the sex trade navigate and negotiate their environments to seek support. In addition to the creative tactics, the data also highlights the meaningful ways that they meaningfully contribute to their communities and caring ways they see themselves. By emphasizing these strengths, rather than defining these youth by their deficits, policymakers and service providers could arrive at more productive and impactful ways of engaging youth.

A strengths-based approach could permit a more effective way of viewing young people's engagement in the sex trade. The foundational premise of strengths-based counseling is around centering a practice on the strengths, supports and resources that each individual possesses, "This belief is the hallmark of the strengths perspective, which asserts that all people have inherent value, the ability to grow and change, a tendency toward self-correction, and remarkable resiliency."¹¹⁹

The results of this study reveal that strengths, supports and resources are not only apparent in the examples that youth shared about themselves, but are also reflected in the ways that youth expressed their identity and agency. Throughout each interview, youth respondents expressed numerous strengths and skills that translate across various scenarios and contexts. Supports included informal networks of friends and family as well as individual soothing or coping strategies, demonstrating resilience. Resources for youth required careful navigation and

¹¹⁹ Laura E. Welfare, Laura B. Farmer, and Jesse J. Lile, "Empirical Evidence for the Importance of Conceptualizing Client Strengths," *Journal of Humanistic Counseling* 52, no. 2 (October 2013): 147, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1939.2013.00039.x>.

negotiation to determine which providers and staff would be able to support specific needs and make them feel safe.

There was one non-profit organization staff respondent who described this approach to their work:

I think a lot of the folks we've seen over the years have very bad experiences with direct service providers, that are either seeing them in this sort of like stereotype of being just a victim because they are sex workers - something is wrong someone is hurting them, someone is forcing them, wanting to sort of save and rescue them, you know. And we're operating from a strength-based place versus you have all these deficits, all these things are lacking in your life. So, it's like what are the good things? You're here. You're resilient. Before us, you were figuring it out. We're just like, if you want us to be your sidekick, you're the leader in the services. They are very tailored. There isn't like a recipe of what you need to do in order to move through our services. (Anonymous)¹²⁰

What stands out from this response is both how staff should approach young people, and also the role that service providers can play. Instead of service providers as the expert 'fixers' leading youth through benefits, this staff member positions youth as the leaders in their own experience and trajectories. She acknowledges that youth who approach organizations for support are not passive, vulnerable recipients, but are active agents who bring strengths from different lived experiences that shape their choices and inform their strategies for resilience and growth.

In contrast with crisis-based interventions, strength-based responses treat young people with dignity and respect, provide opportunities for creative collaboration in problem-solving, and support their leadership. While service providers play a critical role in helping to create pathways for youth to find community with peers and access benefits, the young people whom they serve need to be a part of decision-making at individual and institutional levels. Those who are most impacted, regardless of age or circumstance, should have a voice in prioritizing their needs and determining solutions.

¹²⁰ Anonymous, interview with author, February 27, 2018.

To truly uplift the strengths, supports and resources of LGBTQI youth who engage in exchanging sex, researchers, policymakers and direct service providers should center their voices, experiences, and knowledge in all aspects of their work and decision-making. This study challenges the dominant narratives of LGBTQI youth who engage in the sex trade as victims or criminals, and highlights a more nuanced story from young people of resilience and strength. By analyzing in-depth interviews with LGBTQI youth engaged in exchanging sex alongside perspectives from non-profit service providers, the data highlight gaps between good intentions and effectively creating a supportive environment for youth. Data suggest that within a criminalized environment, young people are cautious in negotiating their environments and service providers may not be effective in supporting this population that they aim to serve. By decriminalizing youth who engage in the sex trade, developing participatory research, and programming focused on the strength that youth bring, we can go a long way to building a more supportive environment for youth.

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