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## TRAUMA-INFORMED INTERVENTIONS FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS ON THE EXIT PROCESS: AN EMPIRICAL REVIEW

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TRAUMA-INFORMED INTERVENTIONS FOR SEXUAL  
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ON THE EXIT PROCESS: AN  
EMPIRICAL REVIEW

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Lorraine Marie Armenta-Buelna  
June 2017

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years much effort has been dedicated to the purpose of combatting commercial sexual exploitation yet there is a lack of concise and comprehensive information on the effectiveness of strategies and interventions to help this population. Research in this field has helped define and illuminate consequences of this lifestyle. The existing literature points to the complexity of this population's needs and the challenges faced when trying to leave 'the life' however there is a dearth of information on what works. The purpose of this project is to identify and summarize the findings of any empirical studies which evaluate interventions that target a successful exit from a life of sexual exploitation. Through a systematic review of results from search term combinations in two academic databases, peer-reviewed journal articles meeting selection criteria were analyzed and themes are presented. Results from the systematic review revealed only a small number of articles for inclusion and they are described in detail in this study. Recommendations for further research and review are also discussed.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to those who helped make this effort a reality. They are the real reason for my success in this endeavor. First and foremost, I thank God and my family. It is through Him and them that all of this is possible. I am also indebted to D'lita Miller from Families Against Sex Trafficking as unbeknownst to her, she was the inspiration that incited me to study this population with such fervency.

I would like to recognize and thank my faculty research supervisor, Erica Lizano, Ph. D. She is a wealth of information and was an accessible sounding board for all of my ideas. She helped me keep my feet on the ground and my head out of the clouds. Her feedback has been invaluable to my personal and professional growth. I also want to acknowledge “Dr. Mac” otherwise known as Rosemary McCaslin, Ph.D., social work professor and always a cheerleader encouraging me to pursue my academic and practice interests for this worthy population.

Additionally, I cannot discount the importance of the foundation I received through my formal education in social work at CSUSB or the support I received from SAMHSA and the Council on Social Work Education as a 2015-2016 fellow of the Minority Fellowship Program – Youth.

## DEDICATION

To all of the people everywhere who feel like they are stuck in situations of commercial sex. May you soon find your way out of the life.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking has become an important issue in recent years gaining both interest and funding on many levels. In today's society most people are probably aware that sexual exploitation occurs every day but the average person likely does not know many details. Certainly debate, research, and efforts which address this major social problem abound yet there is a lack of clear and concise solutions about what works to help victims leave these situations. That is the gap in research that this project aims to fill. After a brief overview provides a background and context for the present study, this chapter provides rationale for utilizing a systematic review to identify effective interventions for sexually exploited individuals and discusses the significance of this project for the field of social work.

#### Problem Statement

The trafficking and exploitation of human beings for sex is a huge problem in the world today and is important to study. However, in order to understand statistics showing just how large of an issue this is, a review of the definition and types of human trafficking is first needed. What follows is a brief overview but terminology will be discussed fully in chapter two. In basic terms, human trafficking is a crime against a person where that individual is coerced, forced or even tricked into being taken advantage of while someone else

profits because of it. It can take various forms and there are primarily two different types of human trafficking: sex trafficking and labor trafficking (Polaris, 2013). The most common definition found in the literature is the one taken from the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) which was initially passed by United States (U.S.) Congress in 2000, (Clauson, Dutch, Solomon, & Grace, 2009; Davy, 2016; Gerassi, 2015; Roe-Sepowitz, Hickie, Dahlstedt & Gallagher, 2014b). The TVPA definition, as cited in Reid (2010) is “sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such acts has not attained 18 years of age; or the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage or slavery.”

Although the TVPA clarified who victims are, the law’s initial intent was to address a growing awareness about sex tourism globally (Schauer & Wheaton, 2006). The truth is people have and will continue to travel to other countries, including ours, to purchase sex (Hodge, 2014; Panko & George, 2012) according to the 2013 IOM report, the U.S. has the fourth highest number of sex tourist visitors each year. This means there are human beings affected by this here in the U.S. People often presume the individuals performing sex acts for money or some other item of value are primarily foreigners but a majority of those in the situations of commercial sex are

actually U.S. citizens (Polaris, 2013). It is interesting that it was not until 2005 when the TVPA was reauthorized, that domestic victims were officially recognized as victims in our country (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Worlak, 2010) while foreign victims were acknowledged earlier.

Worldwide estimates, including adult and child victims of labor and sex trafficking are at 20.9 million people (California Department of Justice, 2013). That is approximately 21 million human beings in what some call modern day slavery across the earth today. Statistics for the number of children who are currently being sex trafficked just in the U. S. on a daily basis is alarming. In the 2013 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report the estimate was determined to be near 100,000 while other analyses of governmental statistics estimated that as many as 300,000 children or more in the United States are at risk of exploitation (Clauson, et al, 2009; Hodge, 2014; Hughes, 2014; Mitchell et al, 2010). One study funded by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) estimated the population of commercially sexually exploited children in just New York City to be at 3,946 (Adamczyk, 2012).

Regardless of the type of trafficking, people who are exploited rarely self-identify (Mitchell et al, 2010) and professionals misidentify victims (Reid, 2010). This makes it harder to accurately determine just how many people this social problem affects. Harder still to determine, is the true prevalence of exploitation or commercial sex among males (ECPAT, 2013). Even though it is a common finding in literature and practice that the overwhelming majority of

known victims are females, the previously cited NIJ study identified more males than females in the population (Adamczyk, 2012) so no one really knows how many victims there are.

Nevertheless, this issue plagues not only the numerous individuals directly involved but also the countless people the victims have important relationships with (Muraya & Fry, 2016; Wilson & Butler, 2014). That number is even harder to measure than the number of victims. Because of the magnitude of the scope of this problem, the National Association of Social Worker's (NASW) ethical code of conduct (2006) which dictates our professions' behavior, and the NASW's emphasis on core values such as the importance of human relationships, fighting injustice, and the dignity and respect for all, this problem is more than relevant for study (Hodge, 2014; Thompson & Kotrla, 2012).

When one looks at the deeper issues, dynamics and consequences of being commercially sexually exploited (as in chapter two) thoughts naturally turn to wonder and assume that ending the exploitive situation would be an area of interest to those designing interventions, funding programs or researching the solutions. It seems logical that if exiting means victims end their situation it would be an oft studied process yet does not appear so.

The literature says that even with training victims of sexual exploitation are often difficult to identify (Hardy, Comptom & McPhatter, 2013; Shared Hope, 2013b) and the evidence of best practices for this populations is limited

(Davy, 2016; Wilson & Butler, 2014) therefore more research is needed to better understand the needs of the population and inform the design and utility of interventions to prevent, identify and treat victims. The research base, though growing, is still unfortunately scant and no articles in a preliminary search appeared to have all the answers. Even when searching past presentations at several well-known national and international conferences on the subject, it appears there are novel and tested interventions useful for those affected yet no comprehensive reviews on effectiveness of interventions specific to this population. This may be because the researchers and those who fund the studies are focused on their own interventions so there is an absence of large reviews.

It is a problem that a clear consensus on what works appears to be missing from the academic literature. This problem is what the present research project sought to address. The lack of this information inhibits the effectiveness of efforts poised to stop or address aspects of the sex industry. Due to the gaps in knowledge about the scope of the problem, particular needs of this population, apparent lack of supporting evidence for promising practices especially for the exit process, current efforts are largely missing the mark in their aims. This is evident in the research behind government reports of official strategies for combating this problem from all levels (Shared Hope, 2013a) and points to the need and rationale for this study.

## Purpose of the Study

Given the need for more research in this field, it is important to note that not all research on the topic has equal utility. The necessary body of research to justly inform stakeholders and lawmakers how to improve upon existing practices is one that is narrow in focus because it is nearly impossible to adequately understand the entire scope and extent of every facet of this issue (IOM, 2013; Wilson & Butler, 2014). The existing research on this population and the exit process, despite not having all the answers in one place, has utility for describing the population (Adamczyk, 2012; Farley et al, 2016; Hankel, Heil, Dewey & Martinez, 2016), consequences (Gerassi, 2015; Wilson & Butler, 2014), and impact of trauma (Farley, Baral, Kiremire & Sezgin, 1998). The body of scholarly literature on this population and topic will be explored in detail in the next chapter. It is the research base that this project seeks to interact with to meet the existing practice need for updated and concise information of effective interventions for exiting situations of commercial sex.

Researchers build upon existing knowledge and policy makers can maximize their efforts to combat the issue when research is current and results are readily available. Rather than inadvertently reproduce a study that has already been completed, authors poised to examine various aspects of the problem can expand what is known by having access to key studies which review and summarize previous findings. Similarly, agency administrators and



elected officials can be good stewards of funding and implement best practices when there is a summary or even better a synthesis of empirical literature. This can be accomplished best through a systematic review.

The aims of this research project are twofold. First, is to perform a systematic review of the research literature to identify empirical studies on the effectiveness of interventions for sexual exploitation victims' successful exit from their situation and the second is to synthesize or summarize the findings from identified studies in a cohesive manner. The purpose is to enhance the field of knowledge in this specialization area by surveying the relevant literature in a systematic way.

#### Significance of the Project for Social Work

This study begins to fill the gap between what is known and unknown about the problem of commercial sexual exploitation and has implications for those providing services in this field. Interpretation of the results from the systematic review shows collectively what the scientific community says about what works to help people leave or exit their situation of commercial sex. As this issue impacts many individuals as well as their families (Wilson & Butler, 2014), this study can be the catalyst for improvements in services and also a springboard for additional research

With respect to social work practice, this project was informed by a combination of the planning, implementation and evaluation phases of the Generalist Intervention Model as described in Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman

(2013). Most of this project revolves around the evaluation phase however much planning and care during implementation also took place. The cyclical nature of this model means that there are feedback loops and phases inform each other. For example there was ongoing feedback from the material reviewed in preparation for this project to inform the planning and later implementation of this systematic review. This positive feedback loop between the three phases provides the canvas on which the dynamic relationship between research and practice in this field is painted.

### Summary

This chapter introduced the subject of this research project. It also framed it with an overview of the problem and a discussion about how a systematic review is a logical way to achieve the goals of this project. The field of social work is ever evolving and is poised to help this vulnerable population and this project will contribute to the knowledge base to better serve them.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

It can certainly be useful for practitioners, researchers and policy makers to have concise information about which interventions are effective for people involved in situations of commercial sex however the absence of such research leads us to look deeper into what the literature does reflect. This chapter will review the known literature base to better understand how this social problem has been addressed, the multiple consequences and relevance of trauma to inform effective interventions and the complexity of needs and challenges to exit. A brief review of theories which have emerged to explain the exit process along with highlights of the knowledge learned from previous studies with either subsections of the population of interest or similar ones will close out the chapter.

#### Understanding the Issue

With an increased understanding of what exactly this issue is, how big it is, who it effects and what we have been doing to address it, we can infer what types of interventions would likely be helpful for people trying to change their situation. A clear understanding includes a discussion of terminology and definitions, history and current strategies and efforts on multiple levels to

combat the problem of interest to this project and a review of factors contributing to entry or attributed as causal.

First to be clarified is the subject of terminology. It is important to discuss here because words matter (Martin, 2013; Musto, 2009) and can be powerful labels or descriptors of viewpoints influencing the overall approach or strategy. Gerassi (2015) purports that words divide and the terms used to describe the target populations make it hard to identify victims to be served or accurately estimate the prevalence. Some of the individuals surveyed in the study by Musto (2009) talked about the importance of words as they usually bring stigma and judgment.

As a result of the varied connotations carried by different terms, those who are involved including researchers, practitioners, and victims may tend to use some terms while avoiding others. For example, in at least two recent studies the preference of the term 'prostituted person' as opposed to 'female sex worker' was discussed (Farley et al., 2016; Roe-Sepowitz, Hickie, Dalhstedt, & Gallager, 2014b). Another example is how the article by Roe-Sepowitz et al. (2014b) posits the differences in the way society may view individuals involved in situations of domestic violence as victims but those involved in prostitution, forced or not, as a 'whore'.

Terminology can also be important in defining who qualifies for services or benefits. When there is overlap with terminology it is confusing and contributes to a lack of concise information (Musto, 2009). It can also lead to

individuals seeking services intended for other populations possibly causing them to not receive the specific help they need (Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2014b). Reid (2010) explored domestic minor sex trafficking victims' access to victims of crime services and found that few victims were accessing services due to misidentification.

Although the first chapter mentioned the most common definition in the literature is the one found in the TVPA there are also others. One other common definition which is more likely to be found in research examining issues with foreign victims or policies is the one from the United Nations Palermo Protocol (Caretta, 2015; Musto, 2015). Also passed in the year 2000, the Protocol is legally binding but differs from the TVPA because it has been signed by over 150 countries (Davy, 2016). One primary contribution of the TVPA is that any person being commercially exploited under the age of 18 is automatically considered a victim under the law and entitled to benefits regardless of the presence of force, fraud or coercion as in the case of exploited adults (Caretta, 2015) while a main difference in the Protocol is a broader definition which includes legal ambiguity to potentially offer protection to some victims of smuggling or involuntary migration (Musto, 2009)..

There have been several terms used to describe related but distinct types of involvement in situations of commercial sex (Caretta 2015; Gerassi, 2015). Some examples include 'sex work', 'prostitution', 'exploitation', 'trafficking', 'escort', 'stripping', 'pornography', and 'hoeing' (Thompson, 2012).

While Caretta (2015) points out the nuances of these different terms it can be easiest understood by explaining that the people who are likely to use the term 'sex worker' or 'sex work' imply the presence of agency or choice; conversely, terms such as exploitation and trafficking are more likely to imply that someone is being forced and is a victim (Musto, 2009). Farley et al. (2016) brought up that the circumstances behind one's entry into this lifestyle are unique and complex so it is better to use terms that refrain from collapsing individual situations into categories laden with strong connotations about one's volition one way or the other.

It is not difficult to see the relation between the terms that are used and the opinions or beliefs behind the words or how that can influence policy and practice. Throughout this research project, the language used varies and is sometimes used interchangeably but the preferred terms are 'victim' or 'survivor', 'commercial sexual exploitation' and 'people involved in prostitution', 'situations of commercial sex' or; in 'the life'. Although there are various other identifiers or descriptors found in the literature (Musto, 2009; Thompson, 2012), this study will focus on domestic as opposed to international trafficking, adults and children despite the majority of works focusing on either, females including women and girls even-though males are involved as well, and sexual exploitation as opposed to forced labor. This project included all types of commercial sexual exploitation regardless of where or how it occurs but was

primarily interested in literature about and interventions for street-level prostitution.

Another important topic in the literature to help increase understanding of the issue is which strategies have been utilized and suggested by others. Although the focus of this project was interventions for victims in the U.S., there are research-based recommendations for practice guidelines and policies in place on multiple levels across the globe. On the macro level, policy makers here and in other countries tend to emphasize legislative reform or harm-reduction policies (Shared Hope International, 2013; Weitzer, 2009) among other strategies such as implementing trauma-informed care programs (IOM, 2013b) or coalition-building (Perdu, Prior, Williamson & Sherman, 2012). Other macro approaches include funding major undertakings such as compiling detailed reports and listings of programs so gaps in systems can be identified and addressed. Some examples include a thorough survey of existing services of sex trafficking (Shared Hope International, 2013a) and guidelines for practice (California Department of Justice, 2013). The extensive report by Shared Hope (2013a) highlights directions for expanding knowledge and expertise through interview answers from residential program staff across the country about the services they provide. Shared Hope's Protect Innocence Challenge (2013b) is a state by state evaluation of the laws and efforts to prevent and combat sex trafficking with detailed recommendations for future

legislation while the IOM report (2013) details in 448 pages whom the problem affects, identifies risk factors and service needs.

On the micro level some of the same strategies are used but targeted at the individual. For example, the review by Abad et al., (2015) highlights research studies seeking to reduce the risk of harm of HIV or sexually transmitted infections for female sex workers as a form of harm reduction. And those who advocate for collaborative service models and interdisciplinary teams show the advantages of comprehensive or trauma-informed case management models (Muraya & Fry, 2016; Pessa, 2014) while others tout multi-level responses as key (Caretta, 2015).

Current systems of care to address the myriad needs of trafficked individuals are ineffective at impacting lasting change (IOM, 2013; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010) largely due to the complex nature of this problem and the required comprehensive services (Thompson and Kotrla, 2012; Pessa, 2014). Literature on this population has helped illuminate some of the risk factors for entry into 'the life' (Gerassi, 2015; Wilson & Butler, 2014) but the discussion on literature will remain focused on the consequences and challenges for exit.

#### Consequences of 'The Life' and the Importance of Trauma

There is abundant documentation about the consequences experienced by individuals involved in situations of commercial sex. These consequences occur on multiple levels. Gerassi (2015) articulates the micro,



mezzo and macro problems associated with sex trafficking. An important study by Wilson and Butler (2014) describe the consequences and correlates which occur across the stages of someone's exploitation: pre-entry, post-entry, and peri-/post-exit periods. Some that they mention are criminalization, physical and psychological health hazards, lack of resources and support, poverty, difficulty with close relationships, shame, captivity and violence, and addictions. Hodge (2014) also underscores the multiple consequences of the life which must be addressed if victims are to be assisted while Salmon (2008) discussed motherhood as an often unplanned consequence of that lifestyle.

Because there is often violence before and during a person's exploitation, there are high rates of trauma prevalent in the population of interest. According to Farley et al. (1998), when analyzing results from the 475 currently or formerly prostituted people across five countries in their study, they found that 67percent of them met the criteria for a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosis. The review by Muraya and Fry (2016) talk about the consequences of trafficking for children in the literature and report that PTSD is among one of the most common reported symptoms along with depression and anxiety. The history of abuse and violence common among this population makes it challenging to complete even specialized programs (Roe-Sepowitz, Hickie, & Cimino, 2012).

Because of the high rates of trauma responses or symptoms and resulting functional impairments, it is extremely important that interventions

designed to aid this population take into account the prevalence of trauma. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has prepared a best practices guide to help improve the quality and effectiveness of service delivery which emphasizes the use of trauma-informed interventions (2015). In the 311-page guide, it discusses that a trauma-informed approach incorporates three key elements: realizing trauma's prevalence, recognizing how it affects everyone involved in the program from staff to clients, and utilizing this knowledge to develop a response and to implement it in practice (SAMHSA, 2015).

#### Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Clearly there are many negative consequences from being in 'the life' and when individuals first learn of the complexity of their trauma, the repeated violence many of them endure and the amount of time victims remain in their situation, it is not uncommon to wonder why they do not just leave. However, a review of the literature yields a deeper understanding that getting out of their situation is not as easy as it sounds and that victims often try to leave on their own (Sanders, 2007; Farley et al, 2016). Most of the time, it took years of adverse experiences to create the circumstances surrounding and perpetuating their exploitation therefore it may take a long time to undo (Wilson & Butler, 2014). Exiting prostitution or sexual exploitation then, is not a single event, it is a process (Dalla, 2006).

Although there were several dozen studies read in preparation for this and previous projects, there were only a few articles explaining the theories behind the interventions. A few models for understanding the exit process have been extolled in the literature. Some have focused on the following: changing the behavior (Baker, Dalla, & Williamson,, 2010), predicting or assessing readiness to change behavior (Cimino, 2012), using the social effects model (Williamson & Folaron, 2003) viewing exiting as a career change (Cusik, Brooks-Gordon, Campbell, & Edgar, 2011), or transitioning from a deviant career (Sanders, 2007), and general strain theory (Reid, 2011).

The main point will be that the exit process is a process which is complex and varies so we need a comprehensive and targeted program.

### Summary

Certainly the life of someone involved in prostitution or commercial sexual exploitation has many challenges especially when attempting to exit. A review of the literature increases understanding about how the terminology matters and defines our work as well as how consequences of the 'life' often include violence and trauma. Despite some helpful information for those looking to identify interventions to determine their usefulness, there is still a paucity of research on effectiveness for those interventions which are being used.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

Though there are many methods of scientific inquiry, the systematic review was the most appropriate for a research project of this nature. An explanation of the study design and rationale for using this method is presented first, followed by details on study sampling and data collection. The chapter continues with a description of procedures used to perform the systematic review and analysis performed on the results.

#### Study Design

This study aims to explore the existing literature to summarize findings about effectiveness of interventions designed for aiding individuals to exit situations of commercial sex. The purpose was to identify and evaluate the empirical literature on interventions useful to the exit process and to contribute to the knowledge base for practitioners, policy makers and researchers alike. This research project was designed to answer the following research question: what does the literature have to say about the effectiveness of trauma-informed interventions for individuals attempting to exit a life of commercial sex?

A systematic review of the literature and summarization of findings from results were utilized to address and find the answer to the stated research

question. This method was selected as it is the most ideal method for exploring this type of question because it requires a survey of the literature base. This method typically allows for good generalizability to the larger population.

In most instances, systematic reviews are primarily quantitative in terms of research design in that these projects gather ordinal and numeric data from other sources. This research project utilized secondary data which was obtained through the stated methods and procedures.

There are methodological implications and limitations inherent with the systematic review research design. A recent MSW graduate utilizing the same project design reported that the primary limitation of systematic reviews is that the strength of this method “is only as strong as the studies that go into it” (Kimes, 2016). This means that if the studies which are located through the systematic review have inconclusive results then their results as a collective are also therefore inconclusive.

The primary research question this project sought to answer is: what does the research literature say about the effectiveness of trauma-informed interventions on the process of exiting a lifestyle of commercial sex, trafficking or prostitution? Because of the plethora of information in the known literature about prevalence of trauma and consequence of this lifestyle a hypothesis was developed prior to data collection. It was hypothesized that a systematic review of the empirical literature would yield several articles in peer-reviewed

journals so that results can be collectively evaluated and findings synthesized and that the majority of the research studies located from this systematic review would be evaluating trauma-informed interventions.

### Sampling

The sample for this project is taken from the articles which are available through the PsychInfo and ProQuest databases. The articles were expected to be located across the human services disciplines. Journals in the fields of social work, sociology, psychology, criminology, child welfare, domestic or interpersonal violence and trauma work were all anticipated to be found in the results of this systematic review.

The target population intended to be located through the systematic review are participants in programs designed specifically to aid in the exit from situations of commercial sexual exploitation. In other words, people who receive services in what Oselin and Weitzer (2013) call ‘Prostitution Helping Organizations’ or PHOs are the participants expected to be studied by the original researchers and included in the sample for this project. The total sample is  $N=308$  and was obtained by determining the sum of participants from all studies accepted for inclusion in this project.

The selection criteria determined prior to performing the searches dictated the inclusion and exclusion of the articles yielded from the searches. See Table 1 for a list of selection criteria. Each of the limiters was selected for specific reasons and are explained in the following paragraphs.

Table 1. Limiters Setting Exclusionary Criteria for Inclusion in the Review

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Research articles for systematic search must be:

- In the English language
  - Published between 2000-2017
  - Articles in peer-reviewed, scholarly journals
  - Research studies evaluating interventions or programs designed to aid in the target population's 'exit'
  - have participants who are involved in prostitution, sex trafficking or commercial sexual exploitation
  - be about populations in the United States (studies on populations in Canada or United Kingdom will be noted and may be considered for inclusion)
- 

Due to the scope of this project and the absence of interpreters, only research studies published in the English language were included. Recently published articles are definitely desirable and expected to have the most up to date information but it is the question of how far back to search that researchers performing systematic reviews must decide. Fortunately, in this case, there is justification for choosing to only search for studies published in or after the year 2000 (Caretta, 2015; Gerassi, 2015). That year is significant because it was a landmark year defining trafficking on a national and international level with the passage of both the TVPA and the Palermo Protocol (Musto, 2009). This project also sought to only include scholarly sources such as peer-reviewed journals as they would be most likely to have rigorous research with sound methods and generalizable results. Additionally, this project aimed to evaluate the collective findings of articles that tested the effectiveness of interventions or were outcome oriented program evaluations.

Articles that describe programs or interventions do not demonstrate if they are useful or not, they typically purport that they would be and suggest the interventions be implemented and tested (Davy, 2016). Those articles are not useful for answering the research question in this project and are excluded. Arguably, the most important limiter in the systematic review is the population being studied. Because their situations are so unique and the interventions to assist them so specific, only research articles that are about people involved commercial sex or being prostituted or trafficked are included. Lastly, the geographic region of the population being studied was considered relevant as there are great variations in the causes ascribed, strategies used and challenges for exit across the globe (Caretta, 2015; Cusik et al, 2011; Weitzer, 2009). In this project, the primary focus was the United States however due to the known dearth of literature on this population, studies performed in the United Kingdom (U.K.) or Canada were not immediately excluded. It was believed that because there are similarities between the U.K., Canada and U.S. studies on populations from Europe or our neighbors to the north might be applicable.

#### Data Collection and Instruments

The data collected for this study consists of articles which are available through PsychInfo and ProQuest databases from the results of search term combinations in each of the databases. The dependent variable was the successful exit from prostitution, trafficking, sex work or exploitation as defined



by individual studies. Due to the variation in how programs track or fail to track outcomes there was a lack of consensus regarding what measure to use as an indicator of successful exit. The independent variable is the trauma-informed intervention that was evaluated in each of the studies located in the systematic review. There were no standardized or author-created instruments used in this project.

### Procedures

Studies were gathered through a comprehensive search or systematic review of the research literature which utilized a combination of search terms related to the research question in this project. For a list of terms see Table 2. Each of the terms deemed relevant for inclusion was used in two-term combination searches in two major academic databases commonly used in the practice and profession of social work: PsychInfo and ProQuest.

Searches were conducted in the Spring of 2017 by the author and the resulting number of articles located from each of the search term combinations were tracked on an Excel spreadsheet (see Appendix A). Each of the relevant terms were combined with other terms until all terms were exhausted. A procedure was developed to ensure that each search was saved and provided a unique identifier for the terms used for easy reference upon completion of all searches.

Following the searches the next step was to evaluate each of the results based on the chosen selection criteria. This was accomplished by

reading the article titles and abstracts. Articles not meeting inclusion criteria were excluded and those fitting all of the criteria were noted on a separate sheet of the author's Excel workbook. This process was repeated until all resulting articles from each of the searches in each of the databases was reviewed.

The next step in the systematic review was to print out and read each of the articles noted for possible inclusion. After reading the entire research article a determination was made again using the selection criteria regarding the article's inclusion in the study. This step further refined the results from the systematic review and allowed for maximum comparison and synthesis of the findings.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

Due to this research project utilizing secondary data, there were no issues of concern regarding the protection of human subjects. For this research project, no interaction was required with other people and no data or information were collected from human sources. All of the data used in this study were obtained by interacting with academic databases only.

#### Data Analysis

Because the exit process for individuals involved in commercial sex situations is drastically understudied and the literature documents that there are no clear paths for exit applicable to everyone, there is no consensus on

outcome measures which could be compared across the studies yielded in the systematic review. This means that there will be no compilation of data from a particular measure used in multiple studies.

For this project the data was organized into themes and categories of research study type, population surveyed, and methodology. Special attention was paid to the findings of each study selected for inclusion. Any themes or common ideas were noted and the results are presented in chapter four.

### Summary

The systematic review may be a method not often seen in the literature bases of many topics yet it is useful for surveying the existing information and compiling all of their findings into one discussion. This project sought to identify and evaluate empirical studies on the effectiveness of trauma-informed interventions on the sexual exploitation exit process. By utilizing two popular databases in the field of social work a systematic review was performed and studies were selected for inclusion based on established criteria.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

This chapter will present the results of the systematic review and the data analysis which was conducted. The findings will be articulated in a factual manner. A discussion will also take place regarding the types of methodology used and populations sampled in the research studies which were located in the systematic review.

#### Presentation of the Findings

The systematic review yielded a total of nine studies for possible inclusion from the searches conducted in the two databases. There was a total of 36 different searches and a total of 4,519 results from all of the searches combined. Upon further review of the nine studies identified for possible inclusion, six of them were determined not meet the stated selection criteria and were thus excluded from this study.

Only three articles were found to meet all of the criteria. Of the three research studies which were included in the systematic review there were basically two types of articles: outcome evaluations (Roe-Sepowitz, Gallagher, Hickie, Loubert & Tutelman, 2014a; Twill, Green & Traylor, 2010) and an article which was a process evaluation of three programs. See Table two for a breakdown of the studies located.

Table 2. Descriptions of Included Studies

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Sample type and size</i>	<i>Exit Outcome (DV)</i>	<i>Intervention or program (IV)</i>	<i>Key finding(s)</i>
Gibbs et al. (2015)	To perform process evaluation of three OVC-funded sites providing services to victims	Domestic minor sex trafficking victims N= 201	•Closing Status form listing reasons cases were closed such as lack of contact	Intensive Case Management services using comprehensive services model	•loss of contact was a common reason for case closure at all three sites (15%, 45% and 51%)
Twill et al. (1994)	To describe participants completing a specialized residential program for sexually exploited children involved in juvenile justice or child welfare and program effectiveness	Adolescent females referred by court for engaging in prostitution N= 22	•Recidivism for any new offense during data-collection period	Comprehensive rehabilitation program designed to meet multiple needs	•50% of participants were arrested for a new offense after completing the program but none were for prostitution
Roe-Sepowitz et al. (2014a)	To explore the impact of a pilot prostitution diversion program on recidivism rates for 12 months following the intervention	Adults engaging in prostitution N=43 treatment group N=42 comparison	•Prostitution-related recidivism	Two day collaborative event to provide services and resources	•There were no significant differences between the groups on attendance, completion or recidivism

The two outcome evaluations will be described first. Although both used recidivism rates as part of the outcome measures evaluated, they were quite different in their aim and methodology. One article explored the impact of a pilot-intervention prostitution diversion program aimed at connecting adults involved in prostitution-related crimes with an array of services (Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2014) while the other was a descriptive study about the participants in a residential program for justice-involved youth who have engaged in prostitution.

The pilot intervention was called Project ROSE (Reaching Out to the Sexually Exploited) and appeared to be a thoughtful and trauma-informed,

approach to engaging people involved in situations of commercial sex with information and an opportunity to choose services as opposed to court processing as usual (Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2014a). There was also a comparison group who were originally contacted during the same period by law enforcement for prostitution-related crimes. It was comprised of 42 adults agreeing to participate in the study in exchange for a plea deal instead of court-processing as usual. The article compared the two groups (N=43 and N=42, respectively) and essentially found no significant differences between them on diversion attendance or completion and recidivism rates for the 12 months following the two-day intervention (Roe-Sepowitz, et al., 2014).

The other study considered as an outcome evaluation by the author of this project was focused on a residential program designed specifically for sexually exploited children. The article by Twill et al., (2010) presented data which was collected as part of a program evaluation and used archival records from 2003. The purpose of the study was to provide stakeholders with information describing 22 participants who completed the program using various measures which included participant recidivism rates as evidence of program effectiveness. Records covering a period of 28 months were assessed and arrests were categorized as delinquent or status offenses. The authors found that 50 percent of the participants were re-arrested however the researchers were unable to assess arrests or other events at standard

intervals. As such, there are some challenges with interpreting the results in relation to the research question at hand.

The other article included in this review was a process evaluation of three programs which received federal funding through the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) to identify and serve minor victims of domestic trafficking (Gibbs et al, 2015). Although the program sites evaluated appear to be agencies which provide similar services and collected the same information from participants, there appears to be great variation in the agencies surveyed; the three programs were in different areas of the country and had a range of 35 to 111 participants in their programs. Additionally, the length of time in programs varied greatly; one program had 15 days as a median length of engagement in services for closed cases while the others had 65 and 117 days as median engagement periods. The article also mentions that the main focus was to describe the client's service needs and services delivered rather than assessing client outcomes which was closer to the primary interest of this systematic review. Despite these and other limitations the study was included because one of three measures collected by each program was considered useful to this discussion; the Closing Status form noted the reason cases were closed and highlighted that many of the participants from all three sites closed cases due to lack of contact. This may be an indicator of a failure to engage the youth effectively in program services and/or interventions and signal a participant's failed exit and return to 'the life' (Gibbs et al., 2015)

## Summary

This research project performed a systematic review of the academic literature to identify articles in scholarly, peer-review journals about interventions or programs designed to aid victims or survivors of sexual exploitation exit their situation and summarized the findings of the identified articles. There were only three articles meeting all criteria for inclusion including two outcome evaluations and a process evaluation. The hypothesis of locating several studies in the systematic review, enough to synthesize findings about effectiveness of trauma-informed interventions was not supported in the results. The two outcome evaluations and the process evaluation included in this review were described and discussed. All had limitations in their applicability towards answering the research question for this project. This project points to the need for more research about the exit process in general and for efficacy studies about interventions designed to help people find their way out of 'the life'.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

The final chapter in this work discusses the results in relation to the project goals and intent as proposed and gives consideration as to possible reasons for the results yielded from this systematic review. Limitations for interpreting these results are presented along with recommendations for future research exploring the issue of what works for helping people leave a life of commercial sex. This work closes with a brief discussion about the significance of this project for the field of social work in serving victims of commercial sexual exploitation, trafficking or prostitution.

#### Discussion

Although the expectation was that the systematic review would yield several research studies about interventions, especially trauma-informed interventions or programs, it was not found to be true based on the results. This outcome highlights the serious need for researchers to focus on evaluating the efficacy of existing interventions for both children and adults involved in commercial sex and for their findings to be published in peer-reviewed, academic journals. It was surprising to read over 4,500 article titles and abstracts resulting from combinations of specific search terms and to locate only three articles even close to addressing the topic of interest to this

project. Additionally, this review noted that recidivism rates were evaluated as dependent variables of the interventions however recidivism may be just one aspect or indicator of an individuals' progress towards a successful exit.

### Limitations

The limitations of this project lie primarily in the lack of ability to generalize the results. There were too few studies identified from the systematic review to identify themes or make comparisons in a meaningful way. The absence of a standardized way to quantify or measure a person's exit from a life of commercial sex also severely limits the ability to generalize any evaluation studies to others involved in commercial sex. The literature reviewed for this project describes the challenges of exiting and points that just as a person's pathway into 'the life' is unique so is their way out (Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2014a).

### Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

In reviewing the results, research project design and methodology chosen for this project, some recommendations come to light which inform future studies. First, is a consideration of the search terms used in this study. Inclusion of additional terms such as 'efficacy', 'evaluation', and 'effectiveness' or 'treatment' in addition to 'intervention' may have enhanced the number of studies identified for inclusion allowing for better synthesis and interpretation of the findings. Next, is a consideration about the sources which were

searched. Although it was expected that searching two popular academic databases common for social work perhaps expanding the systematic review to include clearinghouses for evidence-based practices, government and non-governmental organization websites and other databases would have increase the number of articles identified. Finally, the choice of methods is also relevant for future research. Some studies located through the review but not meeting inclusion criteria were comprehensive reviews which used a combination of methods to systematically review the literature, just exploring a different research questions. Would this project have included other techniques such as backwards literature searches or a form of snowball sampling additional articles may have been identified.

Despite the results not supporting the hypothesis and being unexpected this is still a worthy area of research. In fact, because of the results, it should be a call to action for social work practitioners and researchers to directly address this dearth of information. Regardless of what researchers are able to measure, the fact remains that there are many human beings who suffer from this life and want help to leave it. This is a goal that social work as a profession should continue to work on.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, this project reveals that there is in fact a clear lacking of information about which interventions are useful for people involved in commercial sex to exit their situation. It also highlights that although there

were many discussions in the literature about trauma as both a major consequence and consideration in strategies for this population, the relevance of trauma was not clearly identified or addressed in the included articles. Nonetheless, this project contributed to this understudied area of research and points the way for future studies and interventions for this population.

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