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Identifying Resiliency Factors in Commercially Sexually Exploited and Trafficked Youth: A Qualitative Study

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Identifying Resiliency Factors in Commercially Sexually Exploited and Trafficked Youth: A Qualitative Study

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A Doctoral Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate Studies Program in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements in the Major Division: Psychology for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology

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Abstract

Although exact numbers are unknown, the largest prevalence study to date has estimated that between 1999-2000 alone a minimum of 244,000 children were at risk for being commercially sexually exploited in the United States, a number based on findings that approximately 70% of street youth and 30% of shelter youth engage in survival sex (Estes & Weiner, 2001). The consequences of commercial sexual exploitation can be devastating and range from mental and physical health problems, substance abuse, physical and sexual violence to death (Kramer & Berg, 2003). While some risk factors have been identified, with childhood sexual abuse being the greatest predictor of commercial sexual exploitation, there has been little research on resiliency factors in this population. Using qualitative research methods, this study examined the resources and resiliency factors that help commercially sexually exploited and trafficked adolescent girls leave the sex trade and move on with their lives. Working closely with the staff at Girls' Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS), the only program in New York City dedicated to serving this population, 19 women ages 18 -26 who were sexually exploited as adolescents participated in focus group discussions about how they were able to leave “the life.” Transcripts of these discussions were coded using Auerbach and Silverstein’s (2003) grounded theory method to systematically identify the resources and resiliency factors that supported them in making this transition. Social support, future orientation, self-efficacy, flexible thinking, knowledge about commercial sexual exploitation, acceptance, gratitude, patience, resourcefulness in meeting basic needs, self-care, and the view of oneself as a survivor were identified as resiliency factors that facilitated exiting the commercial sex trade.
Identifying Resiliency Factors in Commercially Sexually Exploited and Trafficked Youth: A Qualitative Study

**Introduction**

Commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC) are youth under the age of 18 who engage in sexual activities, from sex to pornography, in exchange for something of value, from money to food or shelter. They are also referred to as “victims of a severe form of trafficking,” specifically sex trafficking, under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 (22 U.S.C. § 103(8), 2000). Although exact numbers are hard to pinpoint due to the underground and illegal nature of commercial sexual activity, Estes and Weiner (2001) estimated that a minimum of 244,000 children per year are at risk for commercial sexual exploitation in the United States, with the majority of victims being female. Gragg et al. (2007), in a survey sent to 159 social service and law enforcement agencies in New York State, received responses from 97 agencies which identified 399 CSEC in seven upstate counties (with a 81% response rate) and 2,253 CSEC in New York City (with a 49% response rate). Thus, in a limited sample of agencies in New York that might be working with CSEC, nearly 3,000 established cases were identified. Although there is an abundance of research on childhood sexual abuse (CSA), there is less known about children who are sexually exploited for commercial purposes. Furthermore, most of the empirical research in this area focuses on risk factors and consequences of commercial sexual exploitation, with little research available on prevention or resiliency factors in sexually exploited youth.

**Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) and Commercial Sexual Exploitation**

A number of risk factors for youth involvement in commercial sexual exploitation have been identified, with the major risk factors and correlates being a history of abuse, particularly sexual abuse, homelessness, running away from home, and drug addiction (for a review, see Cusick, 2002; Estes &
Weiner, 2001). Although a number of risk factors are associated with entry into prostitution, none seems to have as much empirical support as a history of childhood sexual abuse. A wide range of research using interviews and questionnaires, with adult and adolescent prostitutes (James & Meyerding, 1977; Kramer & Berg, 2003; Nixon, Tuty, Downe, Gorkoff, & Ursel, 2002; Silbert & Pines, 1983), homeless youth (Cohen, MacKenzie, & Yates, 1991; Simons & Whitbeck, 1991; Yates, MacKenzie, Pennbridge, & Swofford, 1991), abused or neglected youth (West, Williams, & Siegel, 2000; Widom & Kuhns, 1996), youth in foster care (Biehal & Wade, 1999) and sexually exploited youth (Barker & Musick, 1994) has identified a correlation between childhood sexual abuse and involvement in prostitution.

With the exception of Widom and Kuhns (1996), all of the research on the link between CSA and prostitution is based on cross-sectional research designs, and rely on retrospective, self-report of abuse histories. Thus, the Widom and Kuhns study, with its prospective, longitudinal design, is perhaps the most rigorous research to date correlating CSA with future involvement in prostitution. The authors used a sample of 676 abused or neglected children, identified through juvenile or adult court cases between the years 1967-1971 in a large, Midwestern city, and matched them by age (date of birth plus or minus one week), race, and social class during childhood, with 520 children from local schools that constituted the control group (N=1,196). Although the authors started with a sample of 1,575 children, during their twenty-plus years follow up period, they were able to locate 1,291 subjects (81% of the sample), and secured interviews with 1,196 (of the 95 who were not interviewed, 39 were deceased, 9 were found incapable of participation, and the remainder declined to participate, for a 3% refusal rate). For the abused children, physical abuse ranged from bruises and welts to bone and skull fractures, and sexual abuse ranged from fondling to incest. Neglected children endured parental failure to provide food, shelter, clothing, and/or medical care. The authors established social class by whether or not the
child’s family received public assistance, and prostitution was coded as whether or not an individual received payment for having sex with another person. Using this very limited definition of prostitution, Widom and Kuhns found that a history of childhood sexual abuse predicted future involvement in prostitution even after controlling for the demographic variables of race, age, and social class.

Other research has sought to distinguish the impact of CSA on future prostitution involvement from other identified risk factors, with similar results. In interviews with 40 runaway youth and 95 adult homeless women, Simon and Whitbeck (1991) sought to determine how CSA directly and indirectly contributes to future victimization and involvement in prostitution. Data analysis suggested that early sexual abuse increased the likelihood of engaging in prostitution independently of other risk factors such as substance abuse, running away and participation in other illicit activities, but CSA increased the likelihood of revictimization indirectly via involvement in high-risk behaviors. Similarly, McClanahan, McClelland, Abram, and Teplin (1999) sought to differentiate three theoretical pathways to prostitution: CSA, running away, and drug use. Data collection consisted of structured interviews with 1,142 women entering the Cook County Correctional System in Chicago from 1991 to 1993. The sample was stratified to ensure diversity, which resulted in a sample ranging in age from 17-68 that identified as African American (40%), Caucasian (33%), and Hispanic (24%). Prostitution was defined as episodic prostitution (age of first exchanging money for sex) or routine prostitution (age at exchanging sex for money on a weekly basis), and child sexual abuse was defined as an unwanted sexual experience that included touching before the age of 16. Running away was defined as having run away from home and stayed away overnight at age 15 or earlier, and substance abuse was defined as meeting the criteria for cocaine or opiate abuse or dependence on the DSM-III-R at any age. In their data analysis, the authors incorporated discrete time logistic regression, allowing them to calculate odds ratios of entering prostitution by distinct time periods and other independent variables. McClannahan et
al. found that while all three variables were correlated with prostitution, only running away and CSA consisted of pathways into prostitution. However, while running away increased the odds of entering prostitution for a period of time, childhood sexual abuse doubled the likelihood of entering prostitution across the lifespan.

As the majority of studies on CSA and prostitution rely on interviews, Villano et al. (2004) decided to address the lack of large scale, quantitative research using standardized measures, by administering the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), a 28-item instrument designed to retrospectively measure trauma stemming from child abuse and neglect (for information on the CTQ, see Barton & Fink, 1998). The CTQ was read aloud at the end of an intake interview to 171 street walking female prostitutes who entered a clinical trial of counseling services. Villano et al. found that the prostituted women scored in the moderate to severe range on the sexual abuse scale, and the low to moderate range for physical abuse, emotional abuse, and emotional neglect. The authors noted that the physical neglect scale was disregarded as Chi Square tests did not indicate an adequate model fit. Although Villano et al. found that the prostituted women did not score significantly higher on any of the scales than the female substance abuse sample in the CTQ’s manual, 42% of the prostituted women endorsed items on the denial/minimization scale, suggesting that they underreported their abuse. Indeed, the women who endorsed these items reported lower levels of abuse as compared to other prostituted women in the study. Furthermore, the authors reported that some participants categorically denied abuse items, or become overly emotional or agitated when questions were read aloud. Villano et al. concluded that underreporting likely skewed their findings, and that a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods is optimal when conducting research with prostituted women.

Stoltz et al. (2007) also used the CTQ to examine the relationship between childhood abuse and prostitution in a sample of 361 Vancouver street youth who use illegal drugs other than marijuana.
Study participants ranged in age from 14-26, with a mean age of 22. The sample was mostly male, with only 106 females (29% of the sample), and only 23% of the sample (84 participants) acknowledged having traded sex for money or gifts at least once. The authors acknowledged that their sample was not representative, particularly in terms of girls and women, and younger participants (in this study defined as ages 14-18). Nonetheless, Stoltz et al. found higher levels of abuse within the prostituted subgroup than Villano et al. (2004) reported. For Stoltz et al., prostitution was associated with moderate to severe trauma scores for sexual abuse (p < .001), physical abuse (p < .002), emotional abuse (p < .003), and emotional neglect (p < .04). As with Villano et al., the Stoltz et al. study also found no significant association between prostitution and physical neglect.

Other research on CSA and prostitution has used smaller samples and qualitative designs, which has yielded similar findings and provided more details about abuse histories. In interviews with 45 former prostitutes aged 18-26 living in Canada, Bagley & Young (1987) found that 73% reported childhood sexual abuse prior to age 16, and prior to entering prostitution, compared to 29% in a control group comprised of 323 women at a community mental health clinic. The authors also noted that 100% of their prostitute sample reported sexual, physical, or emotional child abuse, whereas only 35% of their community sample reported at least one type of abuse. Additionally, Bagley and Young did a second comparison of the 82 women from the control group with a history of childhood sexual abuse and the 33 prostituted women who reported childhood sexual abuse. They found that the prostituted women endured more severe abuse, which they defined as having an earlier age of onset, a longer duration, was perpetrated by one or more close, biological relatives, and involved more serious allegations, such as sadomasochistic practices and penetration as opposed to fondling. Furthermore, the prostituted sample was exposed to commercial sexual exploitation even before they formally entered prostitution: 25% reported making pornographic movies and photography before the age of 16, as
compared to 0% of the control sample.

In their study of CSA in prostituted and non-prostituted women and girls, James and Meyerding (1978) found similar results. The authors compared the early sexual experiences of women and children not involved in prostitution, drawn from nine research studies conducted between 1938 and 1975, with subject pools ranging from 250 to 5,940 subjects between the ages of middle childhood to adulthood, with and without a history of CSA, with data they collected via interviews and questionnaires with 208 adult female prostitutes and 20 adolescent females involved in prostitution. The authors found that during their childhoods, those involved in prostitution were subjected to more sexual advances by elders (defined as individuals 10 or more years older), were more likely to be victims of incest (most frequently fathers, stepfathers, or foster fathers), and suffered higher incidences of rape. Within the adolescent prostitute sample alone, James and Meyerding found that 65% of had experienced forced sexual activity, with the experience occurring at for before age 15 in 85% of cases. The perpetrators were fathers (23%), other relatives (15%), strangers (15%), and multiple males at one time (23%). Silbert and Pines (1983) reported analogous findings. In their interviews of 200 current and former streetwalking prostitutes in San Francisco, 60% of subjects reported sexual victimization between the ages of 3-16, reporting 1-11 assailants, primarily relatives (33% natural fathers, 30% stepfathers or foster fathers, 4% mother’s boyfriends/common law husbands, 28% brothers, 17% uncles, 15% other relatives, 31% friends of the family/neighbors/acquaintances, and 10% by strangers). Additionally, in interviews of 43 streetwalking prostitutes in a Midwestern city, Dalla (2000) found that 63% had a history of childhood sexual abuse, with fathers, stepfathers, brothers, uncles, and family friends being most frequently cited as perpetrators, and with two women reporting becoming pregnant by family members.

The high rate of incest among this population has significant implications for these young
women because intrafamilial abuse and incest has been associated with more severe psychological
effects than sexual abuse inflicted by someone outside of the family (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, &
Smith, 1990). The devastating effects of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) are well known, and range
from mental health problems and substance abuse to increased likelihood of future sexual victimization
and involvement in the sex industry (for a review of research on the impact of CSA see Browne &
Specifically, among adolescents CSA has been linked to depression, withdrawing, self-injurious
behaviors, somatic complaints, illegal acts, running away, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse (for a
review, see Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993). Thus, for girls who are sexually abused in
childhood, this cycle of victimization may continue through adolescence and young adulthood via
involvement in commercial sexual activity. Indeed, in Silbert and Pines’ (1983) study, 70% of subjects
believed that their history of sexual abuse influenced their entry into prostitution.

Although the link between CSA and prostitution has largely been studied in the U.S., U.K., and
Canada with Caucasian, African American, Indian-Canadian (First Nations and other tribes), and
Latina youth, the relationship has also been found among more recent immigrant groups. Edinburgh,
Saewyc, Thao, and Levitt (2006) conducted chart reviews of all girls ages 10-14 who were brought to a
child advocacy center in the Midwest for health care following extra-familial sexual abuse. Out of 226
cases, they identified 32 Hmong victims. The authors found that 77% of the Hmong girls reported gang
rape, prostitution, and five or more assailants. The authors noted that for Hmong girls who ran away,
assailants threatened to tell their families that they had been raped, thus bringing shame to the family,
in order to coerce the girls into prostitution.
**CSA as a Type of Preparation for CSEC**

Similarities in interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics among survivors of childhood sexual abuse and survivors of pimp-controlled prostitution could explain why CSA is such a powerful predictor of future commercial sexual exploitation. In her book *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror*, psychiatrist Judith Herman (1997) outlays how child sexual abuse and repeated trauma corrodes personality development, spurs the use of primitive defenses that keep children vulnerable to predators, such as pimps, and creates a “contaminated identity.” Herman cites three primary forms of adaptation to CSA: the development of dissociative defenses, the formation of a fragmented identity, and the pathological regulation of emotional states, all of which can render a child vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation.

Herman (1992) notes that by nature of children’s dependent status, they live in a state of captivity with their familial abusers. Captivity has a chilling effect on a person’s psychological functioning, and this is especially true for children, who are more prone to traumatic bonding with their captors than abused adults are. For children who are suffering from familial sexual abuse, their primary relationships with adults are marked by coercion, control, and subordination (by the abuser), or neglect and indifference to their suffering (by the non-offending adult who fails to protect them). The abusive parent uses fear and systematic violence to establish himself as an omnipotent threat to the child’s helpless self, and the child learns that the only way to survive is through complete submission and appeasement. Such an environment teaches a child to be hypervigilent to signs of danger; to avoid the abuser through psychological defenses or behaviors such as running away and hiding; to numb her feelings through somatization, dissociation and maladaptive strategies for emotion regulation, such as cutting or substance abuse; and to surrender completely to her abuser in an attempt to placate him and reduce the likelihood of more severe violence. The challenges facing the child are immense: she must
learn to build trust in those who are dangerous, learn to control her body although others often assume control over it, and build an identity in “an environment which defines her as a whore and a slave” (p101).

In the midst of pursuing survival and coping with her own intolerable emotions, the child must also find a way to preserve hope despite feeling powerless and abandoned, and a foster a sense of interpersonal connection despite being surrounded by abuse and/or indifference. Herman (1992) writes that the child creates hope and interpersonal connectedness by absolving her parents of blame. By assuming the blame for the abuse herself and blocking out the abuse through dissociation, she gains a sense of control over the situation and preserves the relationship with her family. However, by taking in all of the badness inherent in the abusive situation, the child develops a “contaminated, stigmatized identity” and a fragmented self. Since her sense of inner badness preserves the familial relationship, it is not easily given up. Captivity and powerlessness prevents the child from developing a sense of autonomy and independence, and as she grows older she may continue to seek out someone who can take care of her. However, given her early abuse experiences and view of herself as inherently bad, she may choose her partners poorly, and feel powerless to change her situation.

Herman (1992) identifies numerous ways in which survivors of CSA are vulnerable to revictimization and abusive relationships. First, the survivor’s longing to be nurtured and protected can make it more difficult for her to establish appropriate boundaries in relationships, and her tendency to see herself as bad and the other person as good can cloud her judgment and make her less likely to recognize abusive patterns. Furthermore, survivors’ hypervigilence of others’ needs and emotional states, combined with their own unconscious proclivity to obedience, makes them especially vulnerable to those in a position of power or authority. Their vulnerability is heightened by their dissociative style, which makes it more challenging for them to accurately sense danger. Lastly, their own wish to master
their abuse could result in reenactments of abusive scenarios. Pimps capitalize on these vulnerabilities. CSEC may be lured by pimps’ initial offers of nurturance and protection prior to becoming violent and abusive, and dissociation may prevent them from seeing the warning signs about what type of relationship they are getting into. Even once the abuse starts, CSEC may attribute it to their internal badness to preserve the relationship, or may become more obedient in an attempt to preserve safety. They may also form a traumatic bond with their pimp as their new captor and abuser since exploitive relationships are what they have known. They may be less likely to see a way out due to knowledge based on past experience that other adults will not help them, and due to their underdeveloped sense of autonomy and independence.

CSEC and Dysfunctional Homes

While CSA is perhaps the strongest predictor of commercial sexual exploitation, it often occurs in the context of a dysfunctional home life. Dysfunctional families, childhood neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse were associated with prostitution in prospective studies (Widom & Kuhns, 1996), cross-sectional studies (Biehal & Wade, 1999; El-Bassel et al., 2001) and retrospective studies (Dalla, 2000). Gragg et al. (2007) found that in their sample of New York City based CSEC, 69% were the subjects of a child abuse or neglect investigation, 75% were placed in foster care, 45% were PINS cases, and 39% were receiving some other type of preventative services. They found similar results for the upstate CSEC group, where 54% were part of a child abuse or neglect investigation, 49% were placed in foster care, 30% had a PINS case, and 29% were receiving other types of preventative services. The presence of child abuse and neglect in the CSEC population is an important vulnerability factor. Physical abuse in childhood can result in depression, anxiety, anger and aggression, feelings of guilt and shame, difficulty trusting others, sexualized behavior, revictimization, juvenile delinquency, truancy and other school problems, and running away from home (Ammerman, Cassisi, Hersen, & Van
Various types of dysfunctional home environments have been described in the literature on prostitution. Dalla (2000) identified abandonment, manifested directly as death or desertion, or symbolically, as substance abuse, domestic violence, and being disbelieved or ignored upon disclosing CSA to a non-offending parent, as a primary factor in the childhoods of adult prostitutes. Bagley and Young (1987) found that nearly half of their sample reported having caregivers with an alcohol abuse problem. Furthermore, as noted earlier, Villano et al. (2004) and Stoltz et al. (2007), in their studies of prostituted youth and adults using the CTQ, found significant rates of childhood physical abuse, emotional abuse, and emotional neglect.

Longres (1991) conducted a qualitative study of parents of female adolescents who were arrested for prostitution, interviewing 33 parents in a large Northwestern city (21 biological mothers, 1 adoptive mother, 5 female relatives who served as guardians, 6 biological fathers, and 1 foster father) about their lives and experiences. Longres did not ask about prostitution or child abuse, but the court social worker that referred participants to this study reported that “a high percentage” of CSEC had been abused by their parents. The parents reported that none of the CSEC grew up in two parent, married homes, and 87.8% of parents reported going through a divorce, separation or becoming widowed while their children were growing up. Of those who underwent some form of separation, 58.6% reported that they suffered as a result of this relationship ending, and 51.9% reported that their children “suffered a great deal” as well. When these parents remarried or had a partner move in with them and their children, 68.8% of parents reported that their child had “a hard time adjusting” to this life change. These parents also reported financial hardship, with 90.3% of parents reporting lower to lower-middle class incomes, despite 51.5% of them having at least some college education. Over half the sample had received public assistance (57.6%), with 24.2% of parents were currently receiving
public benefits, and 39.4% reporting that they did not have enough money to live on. Furthermore, these parents lived in neighborhoods that were accessible to areas of prostitution, with 60.6% of families living with half a mile to the primary prostitution routes in the city.

**CSEC as Runaways**

Youth may try to escape an abusive home environment by running away, which, along with homelessness, is a risk factor for entry into prostitution (Cohen, MacKenzie, & Yates, 1991; Dalla, 2000; Estes & Weiner, 2001; Tyler, Hoyt, & Whitbeck, 2000). McClanahan et al. (1999) found that women who ran away in adolescence were significantly more likely to be prostituted than non-runaways, and among women who were involved in prostitution, those who ran away engaged in commercial sexual activity at a younger age. However, the authors noted that running away was a risk factor for prostitution only in childhood and adolescence, and ceased to be a risk factor once women entered young adulthood (defined as ages 18-24). Cohen, MacKenzie, and Yates (1991) developed an interview instrument designed to assess psychosocial functioning in adolescents (HEADSS), and administered it during intakes at a clinic serving high-risk youth. The sample consisted of 1,015 youth, where 63% were homeless or runaways, and 37% lived at home. The authors found that the homeless/runaway youth were significantly more likely to be involved in prostitution than their non-homeless counterparts.

In samples of runaways themselves, running away at an earlier age has also been linked to prostitution. Tyler, Hoyt, and Whitbeck (2000), in interviews with 361 runaway female youths ages 12-22 living in four Midwestern states, found that running away at a younger age and the amount of time on the street were both associated with involvement in prostitution (defined as trading sex for food, shelter, money, or drugs). Furthermore, the authors tested a risk amplification model using path analysis. The results found that trading sex was significantly associated with early sexual abuse, age of
running away, amount of time on the streets, having friends who traded sex, having multiple sex partners, alcohol and drug use, and sexual victimization on the streets. The connection between running away at a younger age and subsequent involvement in prostitution also appeared in Dalla’s (2000) research, where 17 of her 42 subjects permanently left their homes or foster homes between the ages of 11 and 13.

As with running away from a parental or familial home, running away from foster care homes and residential care is also associated with entry into prostitution (Biehal & Wade, 1999; Dalla, 2000). Biehal and Wade (1999), in exploring what happens to youth (ages 11-16) who disappear from foster care, conducted one survey of foster care guardians and social workers regarding 210 youth with a single absence, and a second survey of residential staff regarding 272 children who had absences from 32 group homes over a one-year period. Absences could range from an overnight absence that was reported to police, to running away for extended periods of time. The authors also conducted 36 in-depth interviews with foster youth, and separate interviews with staff at the surveyed sites. Of the 36 youth interviewed, 10 were involved in prostitution, and of the youth that ran away to sleep on the streets (as opposed to running away to stay with friends), nearly two-thirds were 11-13 years old. Seng (1989) in an attempt to identify similarities and differences between sexually abused children, and prostituted children, compared sexually abused children, with sexually abused children who ran away and prostituted children. A sample of 70 sexually abused children (44% ran away from home at least once, 8% ran away 11 times or more) and 35 prostituted children without a history of sexual abuse prior to entering prostitution (77% ran away once, 34% ran away 11 times or more) were selected from a residential center dedicated to serving children with a history of sexual abuse. Data was gathered from intake reports, assigned caseworkers, and records from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. Seng found that CSA victims who ran away and those involved in prostitution were
remarkably similar, and concluded that running away was the moderating variable between CSA and commercial sexual exploitation. However, it is important to note that Seng’s prostitution sample may not be representative of the larger CSEC population given that they had no prior history of CSA before running away.

**Mental Illness, Substance Abuse, and CSEC**

Drug and alcohol abuse are also correlated with prostitution in adults (Dalla, 2000; El-Bassel et al., 2001) and adolescents (Dunlap, Golub, & Johnson, 2003; Seng, 1989; Tyler, Hoyt, & Whitbeck, 2000), but unlike a history of sexual abuse or having an unstable and/or unsafe home in childhood, it is unclear as to whether or not drug and alcohol abuse precedes involvement in the sex industry or if it begins afterwards. There is some evidence to suggest the latter. In an analysis of pathways into prostitution, McClanahan et al. (1999) found that drug use was significantly higher among prostitutes, but did not find that drug use was a pathway into prostitution. The authors noted that while drug use was high among the prostituted women in their sample, once CSA and running away were controlled for, drug use was no longer a risk factor for entry to prostitution. Research has suggested that prostitution can worsen current substance abuse, or it can set off a substance abuse problem that did not previously exist (Anglin & Hser, 1987; Goldstein, 1979). Indeed, Dalla (2000) found that of the 43 current and former prostitutes in her sample, 37% reported entering prostitution to support an ongoing drug habit, while 95% acknowledged routine drug use after having entered prostitution. Thus, substance abuse can be conceptualized as both a risk factor for entry into prostitution and as a consequence of prostitution.

Similarly, mental health problems face the same chicken or the egg dilemma. In a longitudinal study of 602 adolescents, mental health problems, specifically substance abuse, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and conduct disorder, were linked to a number of high risk behaviors in
young adulthood, including prostitution (Stiffman, Dore, Earls, & Cunningham, 1992). In turn, prostitution has been linked to mental illness in adolescents. Estes & Weiner (2001) conducted what is likely the largest study to date on CSEC, using a sample that included governmental agencies, non-governmental agencies, law enforcement agencies, traffickers, CSEC and their customers across the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, and the authors conducted additional, in depth studies in 28 cities based on known trafficking destinations (4 cities in Canada, 7 in Mexico, and 17 in the U.S.). The authors sent questionnaires to service agencies (1130 mailed, 288 received, 25.5% response rate), conducted interviews with stakeholders, held focus groups with experts in the field, and interviewed child victims in groups of three to six. According to Estes and Weiner (2001), CSEC were disproportionately afflicted with serious mental illnesses including clinical depression, disruptive behavior disorders, ADHD, Mania, Schizophrenia, and PTSD. Service agencies working with runaway and homeless youth provided breakdowns of diagnoses given to the youth they served (along with other aggregated information, such as abuse histories and demographics), and CSEC reported diagnoses they had been given. The prevalence of psychopathology in Estes and Weiner’s sample is striking, with nearly 66% of street youth in Seattle alone reporting a mental illness. However, as the authors worked with multiple service agencies across the country, each with their own systems in place, it is unclear exactly how diagnoses were determined at each site.

Mental health problems appear to be connected to prostitution itself, as symptoms of mental illness are not as extreme among related populations. In comparing homeless youth in prostitution with homeless youth not involved in commercial sexual activity, Yates, MacKenzie, Pennbridge, and Swofford (1991), in a review of all clinical intake interviews at a youth homeless shelter, found that commercially sexually exploited youth were at greater risk for depression, drug use, and suicide. While the majority of studies on CSEC populations examining mental illness relied on interviews and
yes/no questions regarding substance abuse and suicidality, Gibson-Ainyette, Templer, Brown, and Veaco (1988) used standardized measures, specifically the mini Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (Mini-Mult), the Indiana Self-Concept Scale, and the Body Cathexis Scale. Gibson et al. administered these measures to 130 adolescents: 44 commercially sexually exploited adolescents, 44 “delinquent” adolescents (defined as “maladjusted” adolescents with no history of prostitution), and 43 normal adolescents. The control groups of the delinquent and normal youths were recruited from correctional facilities and schools in New York and California, and the prostituted adolescents were recruited from a California program that specializes in working with CSEC. When compared to the juvenile delinquents and normal adolescents, youth involved in prostitution exhibited greater psychopathology on all of the clinical scales on the Mini-Mult, with the exception of one validity scale (the K scale). Thus, the commercially sexually exploited group had significantly higher scores (p < .01) than the delinquent or normal adolescents in terms of hypochondriasis, depression, hysteria, psychopathic deviate, paranoia, psychathenia, schizophrenia, and hypomania. Interestingly, the authors concluded that prostituted adolescents are not like juvenile delinquents; rather they are “more disturbed.” CSEC are clearly at significant risk for serious mental disorders. However, given their histories of childhood trauma and the lack of longitudinal and prospective studies on CSEC, it is unclear if prostitution exacerbated an existing mental illness, or if symptoms of mental illness were triggered by their involvement in commercial sexual activity.

The Toll of CSEC

Commercially sexually exploited youth are at a significant risk for developing numerous mental, physical, and emotional problems. As discussed previously, commercial sexual exploitation is correlated with a wide range of mental health problems and drug and alcohol abuse. In addition to being at risk for serious mental illness, there are physical consequences of sexual exploitation. CSEC
are at a greater risk for contracting sexually transmitted infections (STI's) including HIV than are homeless and runaway youth who are not involved in prostitution (Tyler, Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Yoder, 2000; Yates, MacKenzie, Pennbridge, & Swofford, 1991). These risks can be heightened by lack of access to condoms for street youth, and by CSEC customers who refuse to wear condoms or negotiate extra payments to avoid condom use, and pimps and other partners who do not wear condoms (Dalla, 2000; Tyler et al., 2000). There is also the likelihood of physical violence and sexual violence at the hands of customers, pimps, criminals, other prostituted women, intimate partners, law enforcement, and others (Dalla, 2000; El-Bassel et al., 2001; Nixon et al., 2005; Tyler et al., 2000). El-Bassel et al. (2001), in interviews with 106 prostitutes receiving social services from a non-profit in New York City that conducts street outreach, found that 100% of their sample had experienced either physical abuse, sexual abuse, or combined physical and sexual abuse from a customer at some point in their lives. Within the last year alone 23% reported physical abuse, 20% sexual abuse, and 32% a combination of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of a customer. Furthermore, CSEC and women involved in prostitution often suffer health problems such as genital and non-genital trauma, poor nutrition and lack of access to adequate medical care (Estes & Weiner, 2001; El-Bassel et al., 2001; Nixon et al., 2005; Yates et al., 1991). Baker, Wilson, and Winebarger (2004), in a convenience sample of 26 prostitutes, found that subjects reported a wide variety of health problems, most commonly dental problems (23%), health issues related to addiction (19%), gastrointestinal problems (24%), anemia (9.5%), and dizziness (9.5%).

In addition to the health concerns, there is also the increased risk of arrest and criminal justice involvement and even death. Indeed, Potterat et al. (2004), in reviewing health records of 1,969 women arrested for prostitution in Colorado Springs from 1967-1999, identified 117 deaths, for which they were able to locate the death certificate for 100 women. The authors found that the mean age of death
was 34, and the most common causes of death were homicide (19%), drug ingestion (18%), accidents (12%), alcohol related causes (9%), and HIV related causes (8%). Furthermore, Potterat et al. noted that women actively engaged in prostitution were 18 times more likely to be murdered than non-prostituted women of the same age and race.

**Leaving Commercial Sexual Exploitation**

Given the toll prostitution can take, women and girls who are prostituted often want to leave the life, but face daunting challenges in doing so. In interviews with 475 men, women, children, and transgender individuals who were working as prostitutes in five different countries (United States, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, and Zambia), Farley et al. (1998) found that 92% of subjects overall, and 88% of the U.S. sample, reported wanting to leave prostitution. The authors also asked their subjects what they needed to leave prostitution, and for the U.S. sample (114 women and children on the streets of San Francisco), cited resources included: a safe place to stay (78%), job training (73%), drug/alcohol treatment (67%), health care (58%), peer support (50%), self-defense training (49%), personal counseling (48%), legal assistance (43%), childcare (34%), and protection from pimp (28%). The vast array of resources needed to leave prostitution can be overwhelming, and this does not take into account other obstacles such as stigma, discrimination, alienation, blaming the victim, and difficulty accessing social services (Hotaling, Burris, Johnson, Bird, & Melbye, 2004). Difficulty accessing social services may be an even more salient issue for minors who are not of legal age to consent to many services, and for whom leaving prostitution may mean reentering the child welfare system or returning to their parents – places they ran away from to escape abuse. Lastly, it is important to note that not all CSEC wish to leave prostitution, just as not all abused women wish leave their partners, nor do all drug addicts wish to stop using (Cusick, 2002).
Current Responses to CSEC

In terms of providing services to CSEC, legal services (including child custody/foster care placements, probation, parole, and incarceration) are handled by government agencies (often at the state level), whereas non-governmental organizations tend to focus on providing social and clinical services. However, such organizations are stretched thin and underfunded, and many lack CSEC specific protocols, strategies for interagency collaborations, procedures for data collection, or even manuals on how to handle CSEC cases when they are identified (See Estes & Weiner, 2001 for a review of service agencies in the U.S.; and Cusick, 2002 for a review of service agencies in the U.K.). Direct service agencies working with CSEC generally offer a range of social services, from providing food and clothing to assessment and advocacy, although many organizations can only provide a few of these services (for a review of services being provided to CSEC in New York State, see Gragg et al., 2007). In their recommendations for how the federal and state governments can better address CSEC, Estes & Weiner (2001) suggested increased funding to service agencies, a law enforcement strategy that targets pimps and those who exploit children as opposed to criminalizing the children themselves, a larger number of experts in CSEC research and treatment, and more integration and communication among the groups at the state and federal level who work with CSEC.

The focus on comprehensive services for CSEC, as opposed to single services at multiple agencies, is an important one given the wide array of problems CSEC are faced with. For example, in a recent study evaluating CSEC in New York state, only one agency was dedicated to working specifically with sexually exploited youth, the remainder were more general agencies such as child welfare agencies, rape crisis centers, prosecutor's offices, and other social service agencies that often relied upon referrals to meet CSEC’s needs (Gragg et al., 2007). Current service providers also cite gaps in programs and agencies that inhibit their ability to serve CSEC in a comprehensive way. Gragg
et al. (2007) found that staff members at agencies servicing CSEC cited a need for more training for all professionals working with CSEC, including police officers, judges, clinicians, and volunteers, as well as changing the public’s view of CSEC from criminals to victims. Furthermore, they cited tangible obstacles to finding care such as lack of housing options and lack of coordination between federal, state, and local agencies.

In addition to a paucity of one-stop, comprehensive services for CSEC, the research on the subject is limited. Estes and Weiner (2001) describe their study as a “first generation inquiry” into the nature, prevalence, and dynamics of CSEC within the U.S. The authors, in lamenting the lack of empirical research in this area, suggest that future research examine: the long-term effect of CSEC on those who are able to leave “the life,” more thorough profiles of pimps and other adults who sexually exploit children, the role of CSEC in gangs and tribal life, profiles of juveniles who exploit younger children (such as younger siblings or neighbors), CSEC in sexual minorities and transgender youth, and a closer examination of components of American life that support the culture of CSEC, including factors such as male domination, the sexualization of children, and the decline of the family. Although this list is fairly comprehensive, there remain several areas that have not been addressed in the research literature, namely prevention, treatment, and resiliency among youth who are commercially sexually exploited. Indeed, Cusick (2002) in her review of youth prostitution literature in the U.K. suggested that future studies on CSEC populations focus on resiliency and coping, and how their experiences in commercial sexual exploitation impact their development.

Adolescence as a Developmental Stage and CSEC

In addition to all of the previously discussed challenges that CSEC face, they are also dealing with the developmental struggles facing all adolescents. According to Erikson (1950/1985; 1982) the primary developmental task of adolescence is identity formation, a process that involves accepting or
rejecting childhood identifications, including the acceptance or rejection of how the individual is viewed by society. The results of this process become the youth’s identity. The role of societal perception is important here because it is incorporated into how the individual views herself. Erikson (1982) comments that society may “deeply and vengefully” (p. 72) rebuff people it views as willfully unacceptable, and he notes that this is particularly applicable to youth who search for identity in ways that society cannot comprehend, such as through gang membership, or in this case, prostitution. Thus, for CSEC, the low value that societies place on teenagers who engage in prostitution plays a significant role in their budding sense of identity.

The primary conflict during adolescence is role confusion, and youth defend against this threat by over-identifying, in some cases to the point of complete identity loss, with the leaders of a given clique or crowd (Erikson, 1950). For CSEC, this would manifest as an over-identification with the pimp, his “family” of workers, and prostitutes in general, to the point where she takes on a new name, and even a new family. The strength of adolescence is fidelity, which Erikson (1982) describes as a renewal of trust, both trust in others and trust in self, and which includes the notion that one is trustworthy and able to commit to oneself and to a given cause. Specifically, in fidelity, adolescents transfer their need for support and guidance from parents to other leaders, and as such, take in the ideologies of these new figures. In CSEC, the pimp and his circle would take on this parentified role, and the adolescent would in turn adopt his views and assessments of her value, identity, and purpose. Thus a process that can be a strength in normal adolescent development, is used maladaptively in CSEC.

One aspect of fidelity that is essential in identity formation is role repudiation, which Erikson (1982) describes as “an active and selective drive separating roles and values that seem workable in identity formation from what must be resisted or fought as alien to the self” (p73). Role repudiation
could manifest as diffidence (a hesitancy to adopt an identity) or as flat out defiance of available identities. Ideally, adolescents will reject socially unacceptable identities, such as the role of prostitute or criminal, particularly when such roles endanger one’s safety or sense of self. However, this is not always the case. Erikson (1982) notes that without adequate fidelity (including sufficient role repudiation), diffidence and defiance, as well as an attachment to insolent cliques and causes, will result. This appears to be the case for CSEC, who not only become attached to the pimp and his “family,” but may also fail to repudiate the identity of prostitute.

**Resiliency Literature**

In the literature, resiliency has been defined as the phenomenon whereby some individuals, after suffering adversity or traumas that put them at risk for developing serious disorders or maladjustments, are able to avoid such setbacks and have generally good outcomes. Resiliency suggests a resistance to serious environmental stressors or the ability to overcome hardship (Rutter, 2006; Rutter 2007). The concept of resiliency has generally been associated with children and adolescents who have risen above histories of trauma and abuse to live healthy and successful lives (Miller, 2003). The concept of resilience cannot be observed directly but can only be inferred from looking at positive outcomes and adaptation in the face of adversity (Luthar & Zelaro, 2003). Additionally, resilience is always situationally dependent as individuals may be resilient to some types of adversity, but not others, or may demonstrate resiliency only to certain outcomes (Rutter, 2007). For example, an adolescent with a history of CSA may demonstrate resiliency in terms of academic achievement but lack healthy interpersonal relationships.

Resilience research follows the interactions of risk factors and protective factors, as they can inform what individual or environmental traits can increase, or decrease, the likelihood of a positive outcome (Edmond, Auslander, Elze, & Bowland, 2006). In youth resiliency research, a number of
variables have been found to increase the likelihood of better outcomes in the face of adversity; some of these factors are fixed whereas others are more malleable (for a review on resiliency factors in children, see Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Although all resiliency factors are useful in understanding outcomes and identifying those at risk, malleable factors can also be used in treatment, recovery, and in developing resilience because of their ability to change over time.

**Fixed and Historical Resiliency Factors**

In studies of resiliency among children and adolescents, the relationship between the parent and child, and the quality of parental care has long been recognized as a protective factor associated with resilience and positive outcomes. Whether measured as family closeness (O'Donnell, O'Donnell, Wardlaw, & Stueve, 2004), the parental-child tie (Mishne, 2001), parental monitoring (Christiansen & Evans, 2005), perceived parental care (Collishaw et al., 2007), paternal care and support (Lynskey & Fergusson, 1997), or good parenting (Masten et al., 1999), the parents and family play a large role in facilitating resilience. Lynskey and Fergusson conducted comprehensive interviews with a cohort of 1,025 New Zealand youth from birth to age 18 regarding CSA (including severity of abuse), mental illness (as measured by the Composite International Diagnostic Interview, a modified version of the Self-Report Delinquency Instrument, and the Trauma Symptom Checklist-33), adjustment problems, and potential mediating factors such as the quality of parental relationship, parental characteristics, and the quality of peer relationships. Data was collected at birth, age four months, annual interviews until age 16, and a three hour follow up interview at age 18. Information on CSA and the standardized mental health instruments were only administered at the age 18 interview, whereas parent and peer relationships were assessed at ages 15 and 18 using the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment, and parental bonding was assessed at age 16 using the Parental Bonding Instrument. While the authors identified a number of correlates between CSA and later psychopathology (age at time of abuse,
inadequate paternal care, and having delinquent friends), they also noted the reverse: higher levels of paternal care were correlated with better adjustment (p < .05). Furthermore, the authors reported that once paternal care and associations with delinquent friends were controlled for, CSA did not predict mental health problems.

The impact of parents on the resiliency of their children applies across different groups. Family closeness and parental care was associated with resiliency (defined as low levels of mental health symptoms, including lack of suicidal ideation or attempts) in a sample of 879 poor, urban adolescents, primarily of African American and Latino backgrounds (O'Donnell et al., 2004), and in a community sample of adolescents in the Isle of Wight, a small island off the southern coast of England (Collishaw et al., 2007). While the O'Donnell et al. study used a cross-sectional sample, Collinshaw et al. used a prospective, longitudinal design. The Collinshaw et al. study followed up with 378 adults aged 42-46 years old, that had participated in the original Isle of Wight study in childhood (ages 9-10) and again in adolescence (ages 14-15). The original study in adolescence looked at mental health, parental mental health, peer relationships, family functioning, and general demographic information. The authors were able to successfully contact 70% of the original sample (13 had died, 16 were severely mentally retarded, and 2 refused to participate). Of the 378 participants, 364 consented to interviews, and 11 only consented to a questionnaire. Within the sample, 10.3% reported childhood sexual abuse (7.8% reported severe sexual abuse), and 4.7% reported physical abuse. The resilient youth were defined as those who experienced child abuse but did not develop any psychiatric symptoms over the 30 year period between adolescence and follow up. Using logistic regression, the authors were able to predict resiliency within the abused group on a number of protective factors, including: high scores on neuroticism (as measured by the neuroticism subscale on the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire), having a caring parent, a high quality of peer relationships in adolescence and/or adulthood, and having
a stable romantic relationship as an adult.

The protective role of a caring parent has also been noted in case studies, which are less methodologically rigorous, but often provide more detailed, richer information. Mishne (2001), in comparing two case studies, one of an adolescent girl struggling with trauma and loss and the other a Holocaust survivor who suffered significant losses during adolescence, observed that the single most predictive factor of resiliency was the quality of the parental-child tie. However, while the quality of parental and family relationships can foster resilience in those who have such intact families, for children coming from more dysfunctional homes, this is one environmental and relational protective factor they cannot rely on.

Other empirically supported resiliency factors are more tied to the individual directly. Intelligence, as measured by IQ, has been correlated with resiliency in some studies, but other studies have found these associations not to be statistically significant. Masten et al. (1999) in a longitudinal study using an urban community sample of 205 school children, found IQ to be associated with good outcomes, even when severe and chronic problems were present. Furthermore the authors reported that intelligence served as a protective factor against anti-social behavior. However, Collishaw et al. (2007) did not find any differences in cognitive ability between resilient and non-resilient adolescents. Religious beliefs have also been shown to support resiliency, and for traumatized children, membership in a religious institution and a belief in a higher power can be protective factors against mental health and substance abuse problems, even in the most dire of situations. Indeed, Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz, and Jarvis (2001) found that a belief in a higher power helped runaway and homeless youth overcome trauma and reclaim self-efficacy and a sense of meaning.

Malleable Resiliency Factors

Other resiliency factors have been identified that are more amenable to change, and they vary
Resiliency Factors in CSEC

from more internal variables such as locus of control to more external factors such as school involvement and peer relationships. Blocker and Copeland (1994) looked at 41 male and female adolescents aged 17-19 facing significant social stressors. The authors noted that resilient youth (resilience was defined as academic success and positive social experiences) differed from their non-resilient peers in that they scored higher on measures of an internal locus of control. While an internal locus of control may help individuals feel a stronger sense of self-efficacy that enables them to overcome adversity, it can also work to prevent some negative life experiences. In a study of 73 college women who had histories of childhood sexual abuse as measured by the CTQ, a high internal locus of control (as measured by the Internality, Powerful Others, Chance Scale) was a protective factor against coercive sexual assault, but not sexual assault by physical force, in early adulthood (Walsh, Blaustein, Knight, Spinnazolla, & van der Kolk, 2007). The authors suggested that women who believe they have some sort of control are less likely to be overwhelmed by coercive attempts at forced sexual activity.

In addition to having an internal locus of control, future orientation (i.e., one's belief about their future) has also been found to be a resiliency factor. Wyman, Cowen, Work, and Kerley (1993), in a prospective study of 136 children ages 9-11 who were exposed to psychological and social stress, observed that future orientation was linked to better affect regulation, a healthier sense of self, and social adjustment in school. Similarly, Werner and Smith (1992), in a longitudinal study that followed 504 children from age two, when they were first characterized as high risk, into adulthood, found that future expectations, such as having vocational plans by late adolescence/early adulthood, distinguished resilient adolescents from their non-resilient peers. It appears that a future orientation can help adolescents look beyond their current circumstances and give them hope and confidence. A future orientation appears to foster resilience in populations similar to CSEC. For example, in interviews with 99 adolescent girls in foster care who had a history of childhood sexual abuse, Edmond et al. (2006)
found that resilient girls (as defined by scoring below the clinical threshold on the Youth Self-Report) were more confident of achieving of their educational plans (finishing high school, getting a GED, etc.) than non-resilient girls, and also had a more positive future orientation (as measured by the Life Orientation Test-Revised and a shortened version of the Future Time Perspective Inventory).

While a focus on future orientation can foster resilience in adolescents, success in school also plays a protective role. Luster and Small (1997), in a sample of 42,568 sexually abused adolescents, found that school success reduced the likelihood of mental health and behavioral problems, such as suicidality and binge drinking. Indeed, Hyman and Williams (2001) noted that when adolescents felt a sense of accomplishment in one area of school life (academics or athletics, for example), they have better outcomes despite any adversity they might face, and this is the very definition of resiliency. Even in a nationally representative sample of 12,118 adolescents, who were interviewed as part of the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, school connectedness was a protective factor for a wide variety of health risks including emotional distress, suicidality, alcohol and marijuana use, cigarette smoking, and age of becoming sexually active (Resick et al., 1997).

The importance of school success could also be related to the role of friendships as a protective factor. Similar to the value of family and parental relationships, solid relationships with one's peers have also been linked to resiliency. Christiansen and Evans (2005), in a survey of 992 high-risk adolescents at both urban and rural schools found that social connectedness was a protective factor against poor outcomes. Similarly, as noted earlier, Lynskey & Fergusson (1997) found that strong adolescent peer relationships were correlated with positive mental health outcomes, and Collishaw et al. (2007) found that among the adolescents in their study with a history of abuse, peer relationships were one of the strongest predictors of resiliency. Such findings make sense in light of the role friendships have on providing social support. Blundo (2002) has noted the beneficial effects of peers
and other social relationships in reducing stress and promoting mental health and resiliency. Peers can provide social support, but they also model healthy behavior. Lastly, as mentioned earlier, Edmond et al. (2006), in her study of sexually abused girls in foster care found that resilient girls had friends that engaged in more positive behaviors than non-resilient girls.

**Conservation of Resources Theory and Resiliency**

One way of looking at resiliency is through conservation of resources theory. According to conservation of resources theory (COR), people work to build, secure, and protect resources, and stress occurs when individuals are faced with the loss or perceived loss of resources, or the inability to gain resources after making an investment of other resources to do so (Hobfoll, 1989). Hobfoll has a broad definition of resources, one that allows for resources to be internal and external, as well as physical or ideational. Specifically, Hobfoll (1989) defines resources as “those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual or that serve as a means for attainment of these objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies” (p516). Thus, resources include previously identified resiliency factors such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, having an internal locus of control, intelligence, future orientation, religious beliefs, and interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, Hobfoll (1989) points out that resources have both an “instrumental value” and a value in terms of what they mean to the individual’s sense of identity. For example, the resource of a career as a police officer could provide income and status, but it can also provide the individual with the identity of being a cop, or the view of oneself as a person who makes a difference.

Hobfoll (1989) organizes resources into four categories: object resources, conditions, personal characteristics, and energies, but notes that some resources can be considered as belonging to more than one group. *Object resources* are material goods and physical objects, and their value often stems from some component of their physical nature or from the status they can provide due to their monetary
worth, such as a house or a car. *Conditions* can be considered resources when they are valued and pursued, such as marriage or employment. Hobfoll (1989) states that this category often needs to be examined more closely for its value, for an abusive marriage or exploitive job may not be a resource but rather a source of stress. *Personal characteristics* are internal resources that serve as protective factors against stress, such as self-efficacy and optimism. The final category of resources, *energies*, derives their value from their ability to assist in securing additional resources. Time, money, and knowledge would all be examples of energy resources. Lastly, Hobfoll (1989) notes that interpersonal relationships and social support can be considered both resources and stressors depending on what capacity the relationship is serving. He describes social support as a “meta-construct” that constitutes a “family of resources” and is process-based, meaning the value that this resource provides depends upon the perception of having support, the individual feeling supported, the presence of positive interactions, and other aspects of the self (Hobfoll, 2002). While social support is a resource under COR, various components of social support fall under different categories of resources.

COR argues that the loss, or perceived loss of resources is stressful, and in times of stress, individuals use resources to cope with the stress and to protect themselves from additional resource loss (Hobfoll, 1989). For example, in the case of job loss, an individual may fear further loss of resources, such as her home, money (in terms of lost income and use of savings), status, identity, feelings of self-worth, and so on. She may use her existing resources to buffer herself from these additional losses, relying on friends for support, borrowing money to make her mortgage payments, and focusing on mastery in other areas to maintain self-esteem. This process is what COR refers to as *resource replacement*, the notion that direct replacement or symbolic (indirect) replacement of resources stops the cycle of resource loss, which is inherently stressful. In addition to replacing resources when they are depleted, COR also contends that individuals accumulate resources during periods of relative calm.
that they can draw upon later. Friendships, savings, additional professional certifications are all examples of resources that people may gather during non-stressful periods. However, regardless of whether resources are replaced or stockpiled, using resources to cope with stress is not always successful. Hobfoll (1989) points out that if the resources invested are used up and not replaced, a negative outcome will result and the individual will have fewer resources to draw upon when the next stressor hits.

Furthermore, Hobfoll (1989) takes an ecological approach and notes that resources are not distributed equally, and those who have the fewest amount of resources are least equipped to deal with additional stressors. According to COR, individuals with fewer resources overall are more vulnerable to loss spirals, where they lose resources, employ available but inadequate resources to offset these losses, and wind up having fewer and fewer resources to draw upon (Hobfoll, 1989).

CSEC would appear to be particularly vulnerable to loss spirals, as they have fewer resources by nature of their childhood histories, current circumstances, and developmental stage – they lack safe homes, money, high education levels, maturity, stable identities, and access to resources that adults can call upon, making them both more vulnerable to exploitation and less equipped to escape it. However, there are some who are in fact able to leave “the life” and steer their development in a different direction.

The Current Study on Resiliency Factors in CSEC

This research attempted to identify resiliency factors in adolescent girls who were commercially sexually exploited and trafficked using *grounded theory* research methods. Grounded theory is used in hypothesis generating research, with the goal of constructing theory based on people’s life experience as opposed to testing hypotheses that have already been quantified and discussed in the existing literature (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Specifically, the research used qualitative methods to
examine the resources, both internal and external, that CSEC draw upon when they escape sexual exploitation and attempt to turn their life around. Given the large number of obstacles to leaving the life, combined with the developmental vulnerabilities and challenges adolescents face, girls who were able to make the transition out of prostitution and into another career path, either by returning to school, entering in a job training program, or taking a legal job, were defined as resilient. The focus on resiliency in this population is a direct attempt to provide empirical research on a topic that is generally neglected in the literature. Empirically based findings on what fosters resiliency in CSEC can inform treatment programs, prevention programs, and help guide policy makers and practitioners on how to best serve this vulnerable population.
Method

Sample and Participant Selection

This study used a convenience sample of 19 adult women who were prostituted as adolescents, which was sufficient to reach theoretical saturation (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Theoretical saturation occurs when new ideas, or novel data, no longer surfaces over the course of the research. Subjects were recruited from Girls' Educational Mentoring Services, Inc. (GEMS), the only organization in New York City that specifically works with CSEC. GEMS provides services to commercially sexually exploited girls between the ages of 11 – 24, but only accepts new members ages 21 or younger, and receives referrals from a number of other programs in New York City, including the juvenile justice system and the shelter system. In 2008 alone, GEMS worked with over 275 victims of sexual exploitation (R. Lloyd, personal communication, September 2, 2009). GEMS offers three types of programming: intervention services, outreach services, and youth development services. Intervention services are comprised of holistic case management; transitional, independent living for up to eight girls ages 16-21; court advocacy for girls under the age of 16 who have cases in the family court system; and trauma-based counseling. Youth development services consist of recreational, educational, and therapy groups; the GEMS youth leadership program, which focuses on empowerment, communication, public speaking, and related skills; and the GEMS fellowship program, which offers girls paid, part-time positions at GEMS and helps them transition into an office work environment. The final program, intervention services, allows the girls to get involved in helping others exit commercial sexual exploitation through street outreach in areas rife with prostitution, and through facility outreach, which involves having girls conduct educational presentations on CSEC and related issues in foster homes and correctional facilities (GEMS, 2009). Girls who are involved in the outreach teams are
typically members of the fellowship program, and successful completion of the leadership program is required to secure a fellowship. For more information on GEMS, see www.gemsgirls.org.

To participate in this research, participants needed to be 18 years or older, self-identify as being out of the life for a minimum of three months, have no arrests for prostitution since they reported leaving the life, be enrolled in school, a job training program, or be legally employed, and were identified by GEMS staff as participating in groups, therapy, or other related services the organization provides. Subjects were given $20 gift cards to a clothing store (Old Navy) for their participation.

Participants were 19 young women between the ages of 18-26 (M=20.89, SD = 2.23) who reported first entering prostitution between the ages of 12–19 (M = 15.31, SD = 2.08, Mode =14). Three participants entered prostitution at age 18 or older, but as all three entered through force and coercion, they still met federal criteria to qualify as “victims of a severe form of trafficking in persons” and as victims of sex trafficking under the TVPA (see Table 1 for frequencies of ages of entry). They also met the criteria for receiving services from GEMS, where girls are eligible to enter the program until age 21, which is consistent with New York City foster care policy. Two of these older participants entered within a month of turning 18, and the subject who entered at 19 did so after running away from a foster care group home. Their reported experiences in the life and their paths of entry did not differ from those of other participants, and as such, they were included the study.
Table 1: Age of Entry into Prostitution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of Entry</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<td>4</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>52.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>68.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>84.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>94.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants identified as African American (N=11), Hispanic (N=4), Biracial (N=3) and Caucasian (N=1). Eight participants had one or more children they cared for, and one participant had given a child up for adoption prior to entering prostitution. Participants reported that they were commercially sexually exploited for time periods ranging from 3 months to 6.5 years (M = 36 months, SD = 19.85 months). Depending on the amount of time since participants had left the life, and whether or not they worked at GEMS, they reported having been involved with GEMS from between 3 months to 8 years (M = 34.95 months, SD = 28.95 months). Two participants simultaneously described themselves as having left the life but being “one foot in and one foot out.” Both participants explained that they did not consider themselves “in the life” because they escaped their pimps and were no longer working on the street or posting ads on Craigslist and Backpage. However, they also acknowledged that they had kept in touch with two or three “regular customers” that they would occasionally see if
they had no other way to make ends meet that month. Both participants, and other subjects in focus
groups, described this behavior as part of the process of leaving. Since eligibility criteria was based on
self-identifying as having exited the life, and many subjects endorsed this behavior as a common step
in the exiting process, both participants were deemed eligible.

Table 2: Race of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>57.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>57.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>21.1</td>
<td>78.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biracial</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>94.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
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<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Time (in months) Participants Reported Being Commercially Sexually Exploited

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time in Life</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
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Table 4: Descriptive Statistics on Participants

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<tr>
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<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age (in years)</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<td>20.89</td>
<td>2.233</td>
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<tr>
<td>TimeInLife (in months)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>36.00</td>
<td>19.852</td>
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<tr>
<td>TimeAtGEMS (in months)</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>34.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>AgeEntered (in years)</td>
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<td>12.00</td>
<td>19.00</td>
<td>15.3158</td>
<td>2.08307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TimeOut (in months)</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>32.00</td>
<td>23.274</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valid N (listwise)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Materials and Procedure

The clinical director of GEMS, a licensed clinical social worker, and GEMS case managers identified girls they worked with who met eligibility criteria for the study, and read them a script describing the research (Appendix A). If girls were interested, they agreed to come to a scheduled focus group 30 minutes early to meet with the principal investigator. The principal investigator spoke with each participant individually to explain the study and answer any questions she may have had prior to meeting as a group. After speaking with participants individually, the principal investigator reviewed informed consent with the group as a whole and again offered participants the opportunity to ask questions in the group or to speak with her privately. Participants also filled out a brief demographic questionnaire that was used to gather information about age of entry, length of time in the life, and to compile descriptive statistics using SPSS 19.0 (see Appendix B for demographic questionnaire). The principal investigator ran four 90-minute focus groups with participants. All groups were recorded (audio only) for transcription purposes. Three groups had five participants and one group had four participants (N=19). Groups were kept small so that they were more manageable and each of the girls
had the opportunity to speak. This sampling was not random, and in fact the clinical director and assigned caseworkers have intimate knowledge of the girls they work with, and thus could identify youth who not only met the criteria, but also had the competency and emotional stability to participate in the focus groups. Furthermore, as the study’s eligibility criteria incorporates both concrete (school or job enrollment, arrest history, self-report of exiting) and observational factors (attending and participating in groups), multiple sources of data were used to determine resiliency.

Focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes, and one primary discussion question was asked: “I’m interested in learning how you left the life. What can you tell me about that?” The principal investigator posed additional questions as needed to facilitate discussion (see Appendix C for a list of supplemental focus group questions). Groups were audio recorded for translation purposes, and a member of the coding team transcribed each group session. The principal investigator reviewed all transcripts to ensure accuracy. Copies of each group transcript were provided to the coding team, which consisted of the principal investigator and three doctoral level graduate students trained in grounded theory research. The coding team was trained using transcripts from a study on parents of chronically ill children to ensure that the coding process was well understood. They were also provided with chapters from Auerbach and Silverstein’s (2003) book on grounded theory research.

Data Analysis

In grounded theory research, theory is generated from the coding process, which consists of the following steps: highlighting relevant text, identifying repeating ideas, grouping these ideas into themes, generating theoretical constructs, and producing a theoretical narrative (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). The coding team read through each group transcript while keeping the research concern in mind, specifically, how CSEC escape prostitution and the resiliency factors and resources that enable this process. They then highlighted relevant text and discarded text that was unrelated to
this question, making the data more manageable and easier to work with. Each member of the coding
team emailed the principal investigator transcripts of each group with relevant text highlighted. The
principal investigator reviewed all transcripts and if at least three of four coding team members
considered text relevant, it was kept for analysis. If two members considered text relevant, it was set
aside for further review. Once all transcripts were reviewed, text that was highlighted by only two
coding team members was sent to other team members for their feedback. If after additional
consideration, this text received at least three team members’ approval, it was added to the final list of
relevant text.

The second step is for the coding team to review the relevant text and group it into repeating
ideas, which are “similar words and phrases expressing the same idea,” (p.37) and which occur both
within focus groups and across focus groups. The coding team reviewed each list of relevant text by the
group that articulated it (within groups). Each coding team member organized the relevant text for each
group into a list of repeating ideas and emailed this list to the principal investigator for review. For
example, quotes where participants described going to a shelter were listed under the repeating idea
“went to a shelter.” Again, if three of four coding team members grouped quotes under the same
repeating idea, it was accepted as a final repeating idea to be included in data analysis. If a quote did
not garner three members’ approval under a repeating idea, it was added to a list of “orphan text.” In
total, 50 repeating ideas were identified between and within all four groups. Once all transcripts were
reviewed, the principal investigator provided the coding team with a list of agreed upon repeating ideas
and the list of orphan text. Team members were asked to file orphan text under repeating ideas already
identified or to use orphan text to create new repeating ideas if applicable. As with the prior coding
steps, three members needed to agree on the placement of each piece of orphan text for it to be
accepted for data analysis. Some orphan text was placed under existing repeating ideas, but no new
repeating ideas were agreed upon. For example, in the second focus group, only one participant mentioned her role as a mother as being a motivating factor in leaving the life. Since no other participants in this group discussed parenthood or family as playing a role in their exiting commercial sexual exploitation, this quote was initially considered orphan text. However, in other groups, the role of parenthood in exiting commercial exploitation was discussed. Thus, in the final review of orphan text and repeating ideas, all four coding team members included this participant’s statements about motherhood under the repeating idea “Family, including children, spurred exit.”

Once repeating ideas, and the quotes that illustrate them were finalized, the coding team organized similar repeating ideas into overarching themes. Themes take two or more repeating ideas and place them under the umbrella of a more general topic. For example, among participants, the repeating ideas of “GEMS as a family/Make your own family” and “Surround yourself with the positive” were categorized under the theme of “Building healthy and supportive relationships.” The principal investigator sent the final list of repeating ideas to the coding team and asked them to organize them into themes. Coding team members created themes based on repeating ideas and sent them to the principal investigator for review. The principal investigator reviewed the list of themes for agreement, and if three of four coding team members agreed upon themes, they were accepted for inclusion in data analysis. The coding team then met as a group to discuss areas of disagreement, finalize the language describing themes, and determine if the identified themes best expressed the repeating ideas they represented. For this coding team meeting, 100% agreement was reached on all themes, including the title of the theme and the repeating ideas comprising the theme. The themes were sent to project consultants, two staff members at GEMS, to see if the themes reflected their work with CSEC, and in the case of one consultant, her experience as a survivor of commercial sexual exploitation. These consultants reported that they found the themes to accurately reflect their
Once themes were selected the principal investigator organized them into theoretical constructs, based on the coding team’s agreement as to why they were connected to each other. The rationale for how these themes are related was then used to connect them to existing theory in the larger psychological literature. For example, the theme “Building healthy and supportive relationships,” described above, was grouped with the theme “The importance of being around other survivors/Survivor-Based Help”, and placed under the theoretical construct “Social Support,” which is an accepted component of psychological health and which has empirical support in resiliency literature. The principal investigator was responsible for connecting the coding team’s grouping of related themes and their explanation for this grouping, with relevant theory in psychological literature, as well as within the more specified CSEC and resiliency fields. Five theoretical constructs were identified. The coding team was consulted to make sure that their groupings and rationales for groupings were accurately reflected in the theoretical constructs, and they expressed support for the theoretical constructs proposed. These constructs were then sent to consultants at GEMS for additional review. The GEMS consultants also reported that the constructs appeared accurate and well thought out.

The final step of data analysis required that the theoretical constructs are organized into a theoretical narrative, that is, a retelling of the subjects’ stories as relates to the larger theoretical constructs. Theoretical narratives state the research concern and explain the theoretical constructs by breaking them back down into themes and repeating ideas, using participants’ own words, so that the reader can both understand participants’ experiences and see how the theoretical constructs are grounded in the qualitative data itself. The principal investigator was responsible for the writing of the theoretical narrative and final report.

In grounded theory research, the concepts of validity, reliability, and generalizability, that are so
central in quantitative research, are replaced by justifiability and transferability (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). In order to know that the data coding is justifiable, it needs to meet three criteria: transparency (readers should be able to see clearly how researchers arrived at their conclusions), communicability (anyone should be able to read and understand the results, not just academics), and coherent (it needs to make sense to outside readers). If these three conditions are met, then the analysis is justified, even if all readers do not agree with the findings. The results should also be transferable to similar populations. Thus, for this study, while the results may not speak to all CSEC, similar populations, such as sexually abused adolescent girls in the foster care system, may also relate to the processes described and the resiliency factors identified.
Results

This research attempted to identify resiliency factors that help adolescent girls escape commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. Nineteen young women who escaped commercial sexual exploitation participated in 90-minute focus groups run by the principal investigator. The four focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed by graduate students on the coding team. The coding team consisted of three graduate students and the principal investigator. For the relevant text and repeating ideas stages of coding, three out of four coding team members needed to agree in order for that text or concept to be used in data analysis. Reliability between individual pairs of coders was not calculated. For the themes stage, the coding team reached 100% agreement, and for the theoretical constructs stage, all three coding team members expressed support for the theoretical constructs identified by the principal investigator. Using text from focus group transcripts, the coding team identified 50 repeating ideas, which were broken down into 13 themes. Within these 13 themes, five theoretical constructs emerged: Leaving is a Complex Process that Involves More than Behavior Change, Motivational Thinking, Meeting Basic Needs and Self-Care, Social Support, and Recovery and Post-Traumatic Growth (Table 5). These theoretical constructs were then used to write the theoretical narrative.

Table 5: List of Theoretical Constructs, Themes and Repeating Ideas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Constructs</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Repeating Ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Leaving is a non-linear process that involves emotional, cognitive, and behavior change | Leaving the life is a process that continues after sexual exploitation ends. | • Cycling in and out of the life  
• Fear of the outside world keeps you in the life  
• Leaving is a long, lonely process – it takes patience  
• After the life a girl still needs help with her life |
| Emotional challenges of leaving the life | • Leaving is overwhelming |
## Resiliency Factors in CSEC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Interpersonal challenges of leaving the life                  | • Cutting off people from the life  
• Difficulty trusting, connecting to others  
• Increased vulnerability to domestic violence and unhealthy relationships  
• Stigma keeps you isolated |
| Motivational thinking                                         | • Realizing the life is not the life you want  
• Had enough: Tired and fed up/Hit rock bottom/Bad experience spurring exit  
• Scared to stay in/Getting out before it’s too late  
• Criminal justice involvement  
• Family, including children, spurred exit |
| Learning about commercial sexual exploitation                 | • Learning it wasn’t my fault/Learning about CSEC  
• GEMS’ lessons stay with you |
| Recognition of accomplishments and progress                   | • Focus on accomplishments, even small ones  
• Going back to school changed perspective  
• Be thankful  
• I’ve come too far/Point of no return |
| Meeting basic needs and self-care                             | • Went to stay in a safe place  
• Went to a shelter  
• Ensuring personal safety while exiting  
• Tried other programs but they were unsafe  
• GEMS as a safe haven |
<p>| A pivotal moment of realization                               |                                                                           |
| Safety                                                        |                                                                           |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resiliency Factors in CSEC</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Money</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lack of money and inability to meet needs results in relapse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Having to accept being broke/Letting go of fast money</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Doing what you need to do for yourself</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Our main concern is functioning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Take control of your life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Take care of yourself first</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It’s okay to ask for help</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social support: Survivor-based and general</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The importance of being around other survivors/Survivor-based help</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No judgment because we’ve all been through the same thing/GEMS as survivor based model</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When I was in the life I didn’t ever think a place like GEMS would exist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Listening in groups at GEMS is the first step, it builds connection to others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Other girls as role models and inspiration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Building healthy and supportive relationships</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Importance of encouragement and support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• GEMS as a place of unconditional support and acceptance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• GEMS as a family/Make your own family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Surround yourself with the positive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learning to love and finding real love</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recovery and post-traumatic growth</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Needing to deal with the past, and past traumas, to move forward</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Importance of dealing with trauma and getting therapy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Talking in groups relieves burdens</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Being honest with yourself and others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You have to accept the things you cannot change (Serenity prayer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When this sample of commercially sexually exploited and trafficked adolescents escaped prostitution, they drew upon a large number of resources, both internal and external, to guide them through the process and help them in their recovery. These are their stories of how it happened.

**Theoretical Construct 1**

Participants noted that they tried to leave multiple times before they were able to stay out of the life. They described exiting as a process that involved changes to their identity, thought processes, perceptions, interpersonal relationships, and behavior (*LEAVING IS A NON-LINEAR PROCESS THAT INVOLVES EMOTIONAL, COGNITIVE, AND BEHAVIOR CHANGE*). This process of making changes in so many areas of functioning was an ongoing struggle for participants that continued even after the sale of sex stopped (*Leaving the life is a process that continues after sexual exploitation ends*). Participants described the exiting process as one that involves cycling in and out of the life: “I would enter and get out, enter and get out.” They would try to leave on their own, but were unable to do so. “From the ages 14 to 16 that is when I was in the life and the whole time I wanted to leave. I just, I honestly did not want to open up to anybody about what I was going through. I kinda just felt like I wanted to handle everything on my own and I kept going back and forth even though I didn't really want to. I tried to stop.” This process of cycling in and out took a long time for many participants: “I was on and off with a pimp for a long time,” even if they were receiving services from

| (Re)building and reconnecting with a sense of self | • Reconnecting with who you were before the life, recognizing talents and self-worth  
• Believe in yourself and keep moving forward  
• Being a survivor, having personal strength |
the GEMS program. “I was definitely coming back and forth with GEMS to him, GEMS to him.”

The pattern of cycling in and out, however, would ultimately result in decisiveness and leaving for good. “It took me a year to fully leave the life... I was mandated to GEMS and I think I was with GEMS for maybe 2 months. My mandate was for 2 months...I was just back and forth through GEMS. I was very indecisive, very like clouded in the head. And after that year I got on my own two feet.” Two participants described themselves as “one foot in and one foot out,” identifying themselves as having left the life, despite occasionally seeing former regular customers if these men reached out to them and they needed the money. “I consider myself like ‘one foot in one foot out’ now because it’s not like I go outside everyday and I am looking for somebody, but if somebody calls that I used to be with or something like that, I will go.” The gradual stepping down from pimp controlled/street-based or internet-based prostitution was part of the process of leaving for many participants. “In the beginning when I started [at GEMS] I had people that I was dating then that still called sometimes and I would go.” However, the two participants who identified as “one foot in, one foot out” were quick to point out that they did not seek out customers and would only see men with whom they had an existing relationship. One noted that “It’s not like he leaves the money on the dresser and we’re done, like we hang out and stuff.”

Participants also discussed how cycling in and out of the life was partially due to fear of the outside world, which now seemed so foreign. “I think that is why I went back to him so many times, because it was the fear of the normal world. I would walk down the street like ‘Is that a trick or a pimp? Is that a trick or a pimp? Like how much can I get out of him?’” The thought processes and perceptions that allowed participants to function in the world of sex trafficking were obstacles to leaving the life, and as such, changing them was an essential part of the process of escaping commercial sexual exploitation. “It is just a process. It’s just realizing that that is not something that I
Participants described leaving as a long and lonely process that required patience. “It was a very lonely process. Like even though there was always GEMS. There was always something that I felt was not there as far as attention…it was lonely.” They identified patience as a necessary trait to successfully transition to the world outside of sexual exploitation: “Patience, I had to have a lot of patience.” Patience was particularly important in readjusting to the different norms and expectations common in mainstream society. “I think patience is the largest thing when we are talking about how we deal with life after trying to exit because you are so used to everything being like [snaps], and then it is like ‘Ok, sit right here. Don’t go back and do this. Just allow it to happen.’ A lot of us have to learn that life takes time. And it is not like ASAP.”

In discussing escaping prostitution as a long and ongoing process, participants observed that many aspects of this process continue long after the behavior of selling sex stops. They strongly advocated that even after a girl exits the life behaviorally, she still needs help with her life: “Even though a girl gets out of the life, it is important that services continue and that they don’t stop.” They reported that survivors of commercial sexual exploitation require ongoing support as part of the exiting process. “There are certain psychological things that go on with you that make you want to accept certain things. To be able to come here to talk about these things and get help with it even though you are not in the life, it is important that you have these people to talk about these things with.” They also made the distinction that in addition to social support upon leaving, other needs come up as part of the exiting process that need to be continually attended to. “Making sure that services are provided so that once you are in school people don't stop helping you out with that type stuff. Things like employment… Making sure that girls still have opportunities available to them and it’s not just about getting a girl out of the life, because after the life, she still needs help with her life.”
Participants described the emotional issues they encountered while going through the exiting process as particularly challenging to deal with (*Emotional Challenges of Leaving the Life*). They found the process of leaving to be overwhelming, even with program support. They noted that they were now thinking about things they had not considered when they were being prostituted, and that the sheer number of things they had to do to move forward felt like an impossible task. “You’re not thinking about certain stuff, like as far as getting an education. So when you come to GEMS and think ‘Oh, I have to get my GED. I have to get this. I need to get my birth certificate. I need to get that.’ It is overwhelming. I guess to have somebody sit down and go thought those steps with you, it makes it easier but it is overwhelming because you feel it can never get accomplished.” They also noted that feelings of fear underlie the sense of being overwhelmed. “It is like a scary feeling when you get out of the life. You’re just like scared. Like how do I go back to where I left off at? It seems kinda easier just following instructions from somebody else. Like you know, he told me to do this. I did it and that is it. Rather than just thinking for yourself and knowing what it is that you want.” Feeling afraid and overwhelmed was often enough to keep girls from walking away from their pimps, even if the opportunity to escape presented itself.

When I was younger I would tell myself “I’m going to run away from this man.” “I’m going to do this.” But then I would try to run and I would be down the block and I would be like “Where the hell am I going to go? Am I going to sleep on this park bench? Like what am I going to do? I have nowhere to go. I have no clothes, no food. What am I going to do? There is nothing for me out there.” And I used to go right back because that is how I felt. Like or he would come behind me “Ma, where are you going? Tell me where you want me to drive you.” And I be like “I have nowhere for you to drive me.” “All right then, get your ass back in the house.”

In addition to feeling overwhelmed, girls struggle with increased vulnerability to painful feelings when they escape commercial sexual exploitation. They noted that when they were being
prostituted, they blocked out, or dissociated from distressing emotions. “I know, for me, when I was in the life, I didn't really have feelings, I was so numb.” However, in trying to reintegrate into the regular world, girls would begin to open themselves up, and by allowing feelings into life and relationships, they felt more vulnerable, and allowed themselves to hurt. “Us trying to come out of the life, be better people, be different. We are, you know, slightly letting our guard down. Then somebody coming to just like, mess us up in the brain and stuff, and it’s like how are we supposed to react to that? Like it hurts because we’re used to not having feelings. On this side, it’s like there’s feelings involved.” Other participants talked about the struggle to contain feelings now that they could experience them. “I have noticed that I have gotten like more aggressive…like they really fucking just beat me and yelled at me, and screamed at me enough to cause me to be over-aggressive. I’m like overly aggressive now and I’m always ready to fight and I don’t care who you are. Like, I’m just angry. I’m overly emotional.”

Other more specific emotional conflicts emerged. Participants spoke at length about coping with feelings of shame, particularly the process of coming to terms with how the stigma of prostitution follows you even after you have escaped commercial sexual exploitation. “It’s like after you step into that life and you are trying to step out, you can’t be regular again. It’s like okay, you are prostitute or you are an escort… People screaming like all kinds of opinion and things at us, and like really thinking the lowest of us, and a lot of times not knowing that we have the biggest problem doing what it is that we are doing every night.” They expressed frustration that no matter how much they turned their lives around, other people continued to look down on them and reduce them to the simplistic, derogatory role of whore. “It’s like, once you, once you lowered yourself to do something like that, you can never bring up yourself to a higher state of life. So when you do start doing good, it’s like, ‘You’re not really doing it, somebody gave that to you.’ Or ‘You used what you knew in that game.’ Like, it doesn’t exist for you to be better as a person.” They shared stories of being called “whore,” “dirty prostitute,”
“GEMS ho” and other insults, and talked about how painful this experience was for them. “We try to reverse who we are and what we are coming out of and people just make it worse. It really hurt, [crying] it hurt worse than what I thought it would.”

For participants, part of the process of leaving involves changing your outlook on how others see you, and rejecting the stigma and judgments that go along with having survived commercial sexual exploitation. “Some people gonna know your business and some people might throw it in your face. But you have to be that person where you have gone through it and you are a much better person, it does not matter what they think.” Part of the strategy involves letting go of wanting approval and not wasting energy trying to control what others might say. “I tell people, don’t stress about what other people think, cause people are going to talk about you regardless.” They also reported that thinking critically about the messenger helps. “I recognize that that is their ignorance, but she was throwing it up in my face and I wasn’t being disrespectful with her. It hurt, but I had to look at it as that is her ignorance. I know what I am doing with myself.” They refused to be defined by an identity others picked for them, especially one that did not take into account the changes they have worked so hard to make. “I’m not a GEMS ho. Maybe yeah, I was an ° ex-ho but you can’t tell me anything. You can’t tell me anything about the person I am today. Doesn’t matter what you think about how I was in my past. Think about some present thing. Say something about now. You can’t say anything bad about me now because everything I am doing is good.”

They emphasized that keeping past experiences in mind, specifically knowing that you have survived worse, can mitigate some of the emotional pain that comes from being stigmatized. “It hurts, but I look at it like I have gone through way too much to let your words hurt me anymore. Like I’m not going to sit there anymore and let you try to bring me down or bring me back to the state of mind that I used to be.” They also talked about the importance of self-acceptance in coping with other people’s
judgment: “My new thing is like, ‘This is me, so if you don’t like it keep on pushing.’” Some rejected judgment outright, and relished the opportunity to push back against stigma through openness and disclosure. “Girls be like ‘Wow, don’t you ever feel embarrassed? Aren’t you scared?’ And I tell them like ‘No. I am never embarrassed about what I been through. I am not scared of who want to confront me’ and stuff like that. I think that is important.”

One emotional challenge however, once reached, enables girls to exit commercial sexual exploitation and helps them cope with other obstacles they encounter: being ready and willing to change. “You gotta be willing to change. If you don't wanna change, you are not gonna change. You are gonna do what you are going to do.” They noted that all the steps involved in leaving require being in a place mentally and emotionally where change is the top priority. “My advice would be to be ready and know what you want to do. Like no matter what, like you have to be ready. And you have to be willing to want to help yourself in order for other people to want to help you.” They spoke about the need to really want to change your life, to lose any feelings of ambivalence about leaving and really embrace the process. “If you have it set in your mind that you want to do different in your life and you want better for yourself, then you are gonna get the help and the help will be there. But if you don't have the state of mind and you keep thinking like, if you’re weak, if you’re a weak person as far as emotional stuff, and you keep thinking about money, things like that, and being worried about it, then it's not gonna work.” They noted that change is a difficult, natural part of life and the exiting process. “I had to learn that change is okay. Change can be better than before, and it may be hard, but it’s okay.”

These young women talked about coping with relationship changes as a key facet of escaping sex trafficking (Interpersonal Challenges of Leaving the Life). As a first step in the process of leaving, they often had to sever many of their existing relationships, most notably their relationship with their pimp. “I went to my friend’s house. He came back up here and he was calling my phone and basically I
didn’t answer it. And that was just it. I spent Thanksgiving at my friend’s house and I’ve been out of the life since then. I just stopped talking to him. I changed my number. I didn’t even tell my family where I was at, I would just call my mother or my aunt and let them know I was alright.” They found leaving their pimps behind to be difficult: “It definitely was hard, it was hard leaving him.” They expressed frustration that even after they made the painful decision to leave their pimp that they still weren’t free of him. Their pimps would not let them go and continued to pursue them. “I’m also struggling with him, because there will always be times that I’m gonna see him, and like, he has my number now. I don’t know how he got it, but I’ll have to change my number again. I mean, it’s just very annoying, cause I feel like I’ve been going through this a million times now, and I just wish he would give up, you know.”

While the relationship with their pimp may be the most salient relationship they had to terminate, all other relationships from the world of commercial sexual exploitation also needed to be severed as part of the exiting process. “I don’t tell anybody my whereabouts, everybody doesn’t have my number. I stopped talking to everybody that I talked to before. I don’t talk to any of my old friends…I just cut everybody off and started fresh.” They severed all ties to the life as part of leaving, and expressed concern that keeping these relationships alive could compromise their own ability to escape commercial sexual exploitation. “I believe everybody got to go through their process, you understand? And I’m not gonna like, I’m not going to get fucked up because you’re not ready to change, you know? Like I’m not going to like, go back and use PCP because you’re not ready to stop smoking, or tricking or whatever the case may be, you know.”

While past relationships are severed, building new ones was a challenge since they had a hard time trusting and connecting to others. They described friendships as “kind of not existing” and talked about how difficult it is to make friends after having been commercially sexually exploited. “Building
friendships and things like that are not really easy. Just because there are so many stereotypes and there’s a lot of judgment going around.” They noted that their own feelings of shame kept them from being able to open up and trust others. “I used to think like, I was so stupid. I was ashamed. I was embarrassed. I couldn’t talk to nobody because nobody would understand. It was something that I didn’t even have an understanding.” They talked about how the thought processes that are necessary to functioning in the world of sex trafficking were clear obstacles to forging relationships in the outside world. “Like it makes it very difficult because you look at everybody as like a pimp or a trick. So it’s like ‘What do you have to offer me? You don’t have nothing. You are trying to take something from me. Goodbye.’ It is very hard to have a regular conversation without, you know, the state of mind coming out of you wanting something, or him wanting something.” Despite the bad experiences and difficulty in trusting others, participants were not hopeless about forging new relationships, and vowed to keep trying. “It is like I am trying and I keep getting knocked down, but it is a process, you know. And I know, I know within myself that everybody is not like that. I still find myself dealing with it. ‘The next person is not going to be like this. Just give people a chance.’ You know, cause you can’t like push everybody away cause then I will always be lonely, but it’s really hard.”

Romantic relationships were particularly complicated for participants, who reported having an increased vulnerability to physically and emotionally abusive relationships after leaving the life. “I feel like when you get out of, when you get out of the life, you’re a lot more susceptible to what you were saying. Like, to domestic violence… it seems like that’s a really big reoccurrence.” They noted that part of the difficulty is distinguishing between those you can trust, and those who might be dangerous. “I feel that when you get out of the life, like you are so vulnerable that you can fall victim to anybody, because you don’t know who’s what and what’s who.” They also mentioned that after having been in a world where they were exploited, abused, and poorly treated, that standards of acceptable treatment
change. “Sometimes you end you comparing your relationships, whether it’s friends, or boyfriends, or guys you’re dating. You end up comparing, like ‘At least he doesn’t do this. My pimp was doing this, but at least he is not doing this.’ You end up settling for things that aren’t good, you just think they are better than what you had.” By comparing current relationships with those from the world of commercial sexual exploitation, particularly relationships with pimps, even abusive men can appear to be good partners. As one participant explained her initial thought processes about relationships when she first left the life: “‘My pimp used to beat me. He don't beat me, but he calls me names. I would rather he calls me names than put his hands on me.’” You know, it is still a bad situation, but you won’t understand that until you are fully recovered. And even then I think you never fully recover because there are scars that will never go away, but you understand the difference as you move on.”

Participants emphasized that part of exiting commercial sexual exploitation required a change in thinking about relationships that is necessary to move forward. “When you come out of the life and you have these thoughts in your head and these feelings, if you don't fix it then you are always going to be in a relationship that’s unhealthy.” They noted that in hindsight, behavior they tolerated because it seemed like an improvement from what they knew was in reality unacceptable. “I stayed with him for two years because I felt like it wasn’t nothing compare to what the other niggers put me through. That’s nothing, like if I dealt with them, I could definitely deal with that, when in all reality I should have said ‘No, I am better than that.’” Some participants shared stories of the abusive relationships they entered upon exiting prostitution, which included domestic violence (“He was fucking me up left and right”); a forced miscarriage (“He was trying to get me pregnant, and then he was trying to give me a miscarriage… And I feel that it was because I told him that I was in the life”); and a boyfriend who upon learning of a participant’s history, forced her back into prostitution (“I met a guy and I thought we was in a relationship but he found out that I was in the life before and he said, ‘Oh, well, you know, if
The stigma surrounding prostitution has a tremendous impact on participants’ relationships, both in terms of new relationships they hoped to build, and relationships that have already been established, and this keeps them further isolated. “Everybody kind of just draws away from you. Like whoever was your friend before, they draw back. Whoever is your friend now was either in the life or trying to be a part of it and the people who should just want to be your friend are non-existing. It’s like it doesn’t exist.” For participants, disclosing their past is a difficult decision. “Like I get scared if I am going to tell them like I’ve been in the life. Cause everybody is like really judgmental and you tell them ‘I was in that, but I got out of it.’ They are not going to understand. It’s really hard.” In addition to the fear of rejection, they also expressed fear that any information they disclosed might be shared or used against them. “It's scary, it’s like, damn you give this information to somebody, you don't know who else they can tell if it don't work out.” Participants expressed further frustration that people see them as complicit in their exploitation and do not recognize them as victims of human trafficking: “They didn’t want to see me as a victim, they didn’t.” For existing friendships, they reported that once others learn you have been prostituted “they don’t want anything to do with you,” a process one participant described as “a wall factor.” They noted that even after having escaped commercial sexual exploitation, old friends simply avoided them. “My best friend for 8 years, me and her used to be like two peas in a pod… and then she found out that I was in the life. Stopped talking to me. And then when I got out of the life, I talked to her like the other day, maybe for 15 minutes and then after that 15 minutes she didn’t want to talk to me at all.”

In romantic relationships, they worried about how disclosing commercial sexual exploitation would change the relationship. “You think about what if he would have treated me different if I would have never said that to him? What if now he has a different outlook on things because he now thinks I
am more experienced, so now that is how he is going to treat me, instead of treating me in that innocent way when you first met a girl, now he knows like, I know the game.” They feared having their disclosure used against them in fights. “When they are mad they will put it in your face. Like eventually little things will be like that, and you think ‘Damn maybe it’s because of what I said.’” Even when partners insist that it is safe for girls to disclose, fear of judgment and differential treatment haunts them. “Everybody can say that, if they’ve never been through it, never lived that type of life, ‘I am not gonna judge you. Tell me.’ And then you tell them and then like, still, their mind changes. Even though they might not say it out loud, but sometimes they might think of things differently.”

Despite the clear difficulty in telling new romantic partners about their history of being commercially sexually exploited, participants insisted it was important to do so: “Every man I date knows that I was in the game.” They reported that the risk of not disclosing was one that was ultimately worth taking. “It’s no secrets, it’s no hiding…I’m not going to get to thinking I love you and you love me and then you calling me the next day telling me you can’t do this cause you found out. No, I’m being honest and I’m being straightforward and if you don’t like it, then bye, see you later. You’re not the person meant for me, obviously. I come with flaws. I’m human.” They recognized that telling partners about being commercially sexually exploited had some benefits in that it screened out people who were not good candidates for serious relationships. “One of the things that I have learned is that if you can’t accept what I do or went through or whatever. If you already know, then you are not the right person. I am not going to be in a relationship with somebody that when we get into an argument they want to throw it out.” They noted that while disclosure is important at some point, in the early stages of relationships it is not necessary to open up about everything. “I feel that you don't have to come out and tell somebody your whole life.”

The most difficult disclosures involved telling family members. “I don’t think I can tell my
family. I can’t take their reaction… I can’t tell them. But I told my fiancé. I told my selective ex-boyfriends. I can’t tell my family. Like I can’t take it.” They talked about family as being the most rejecting in terms of changed relationships. “Family, they are the worst. Like ‘I love you unconditionally, I’ll be here for you, I don’t care what you do. I don’t care if you are a bum on the street, I love you.’ But when the situation actually comes up and I am out here doing something that is not the norm. It is like ‘Oh no don’t talk to me.’” They often regretted telling family members what happened to them: “I thought I could and look what happened. I would have been better off not telling them.” Family members insulted them and stopped speaking to them. “Like my mom wouldn’t talk to me. Like she wouldn’t talk to me, I couldn’t get a ‘I love you’ or nothing. My sisters were like, I had every name in the book… They didn’t accept me as a person.” The rejection from family was particularly painful for them. “I’ve been married four years now. For the first two years of my marriage I had to go through a lot with my in-laws cause they’re like ‘You married a prostitute, really?’ But they forgot that I was still the little girl that grew up next door to them for fifteen years. They forgot. And that hurt the most because these are people I grew up with.”

**Theoretical Construct 2**

Before they could begin the process of exiting commercial sexual exploitation, they needed to be ready to make significant changes in their life mentally, emotionally, and behaviorally. Preparation for this type of transformational change began with developing alternative perspectives and a more positive mindset (MOTIVATIONAL THINKING). As with the transtheoretical model of change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984), where the contemplation stage meets the action stage, they began to seriously think about leaving, and gradually worked up to a point where they knew they wanted to leave and then took steps to make it happen. In getting to this point, they reported that different events, experiences and conclusions led to an awakening that hastened their escape from prostitution (*A pivotal*
Resiliency Factors in CSEC

moment of realization). They came to understand that the life is not the life they wanted for themselves: “It's hard, but at the end of the day this is not what you want to do…This is not the life that you want because either you gonna be beat to death, end up as a drug addict, or you are going to end up using yourself until it's too late to get out.” They reported that despite the popularity of movies like Pretty Woman and the glamorizing of prostitution, “This is not a fairy tale” and that “It’s not a pretty life.” They recognized that ultimately they wanted a better life and began to think it was possible. “I wanted more from my life. Like, I have never been a dummy, I always been a head. I went to the [X] school…I was there on a full scholarship. I got kicked out dealing with pimps, cause I couldn’t wake up on time to go to school, because I was too busy on the track at night.” They came to the conclusion that if they wanted more for themselves, they needed to leave prostitution behind. “I just wanted something different and I knew that I was better than this… Like this is not where I wanted my life to be because I was always raised with morals and I knew things that you was not, you just wasn’t supposed to do. And I was like, ‘I’m out.’”

They had enough of being commercially sexually exploited. “I got out because my body started to get tired and I just felt like disgusted. I felt like it wasn’t worth it anymore. I felt like I was in it for too long. So I just had to leave.” They reached their limit with what was happening to them day in and out. “I got fed up. I got tired going to jail, and I was miserable. I was unhappy, and I had like a three hour conversation with him telling him why I didn't want to be there no more.” The thought of continuing to be commercially sexually exploited became too much to bear. “I realized that there are girls out there that went through much worse than I went through. And even though I would have to clean up my face from bruises and everything, I realized, I don’t want to get beat up for the rest of my life. I didn’t want to have to be making money for the rest of my life.” They got tired of having no control over their lives. “I’m the thimble. They’re just playing monopoly and they’re just rolling a dice
and moving me around wherever… I was tired of being a pawn in somebody else’s game.” They reported that they hit a low point, and from there, they realized that enough was enough. “I was in and out of detention centers, jail, state to state, I mean it was a lot of bad things that had happened before I really came to my senses… Like you know how they always say like you go to your lowest point before you come back up. Yeah, like once I hit rock bottom that was when I realized that it’s time for a change.”

For some, specific, violent events served as markers of what brought them to their breaking point, and ultimately prompted their exit from commercial sexual exploitation. “When I was 16 I nearly died, and then that made me feel like I don't want to die and that I am scared. So I started coming to GEMS or whatever. And even then it was hard, but I just kind of put the value of my life and I understood the realities of it.” Brushes with death, often at the hands of the pimps who were supposed to protect them, precipitated the decision to exit. “He whipped my ass. He tried to kill me. Like my neck was out to here. I was passing in and out. That was the first time I was ever beaten like that. I was passing in and out. I think I was going to die. Like my hands was just, I was trying to pull him off my neck. I just remember that day, everybody was in the house and they just left me cause they were scared. Like, nobody called the cops or nothing.” Other violent events that prompted their exit included: anal rape (“He [pimp] tried to stick his dick in my ass… I’m telling him ‘Stop, no.’ He don’t want to listen.”); forced miscarriage (“The first time I left him was because he gave me a miscarriage. At six months I lost my baby. I still like, don’t forgive him about that to this day, cause, you know, that was my baby. I had to push out that baby at 6 months, so… it was like, really devastating.”) and violent attacks by pimps and johns (“Let me show you my scars…This is from trying to leave the life, this is from trying to leave the life, this is uh, from trying to leave the life and this right here is a trick who tried to kill me.”).
These young women reported that fear was a powerful motivator to leave and that they wanted to get out before it was too late. “Finally I stopped cause I realized it wasn’t worth it. I’m better than that. It started to get real scary and every time I would go somewhere I’d just think that somebody is out to kill me or something, so I figured it wasn’t worth it.” They worried that their pimps would eventually kill them. “I was scared for my life, I really was. I was scared for my life because he had went out of town to go get some guns and I was like ‘Oh no, I can’t do it.’ Like with him not having that around, he’s putting his hands on me and violating me and it was like ‘I’m scared of this place.’” The fear of being killed was a universal concern, and many participants knew other girls who met that fate. “I thought like, I was like going to get killed. And one of the girls that was out there with me ended up getting killed. Her face is still, like on the 42nd train station and they’re trying to um, find out, like, who murdered her. And she was really young, and I remember her from out there.” Losing friends was a powerful, terrifying, and agonizing experience for them. “This has pained me. One of these girls who was over at the Covenant House, this girl, [X], she had died over there, and she was wrapped up in a carpet after she was killed…She tried to get out of the life. And I knew her. And that’s why she was there, because she was trying to get out of the life and she ended up dying trying to get out, because somebody found out that she wasn’t selling no more.” Even though participants had their own horrible experiences, sometimes seeing what happened to their friends brought home the reality of the situation. “I had to stop cause all the people that I know that's in the life, they is getting they ass whupped. My friends are missing.”

For some participants, criminal justice involvement facilitated their escape from commercial sexual exploitation directly and indirectly, usually by bringing them to the GEMS program. They were often mandated to GEMS as a condition of their arrest. “I came to GEMS because I was mandated. I got locked up in Queens.” Others were linked to GEMS through the program’s jail-based outreach.
services. “I was arrested. I went to jail for a year and a half and then I met GEMS through their outreach program. And I got out of detention and then I came to live with them.” In other cases, different legal agencies, such as the FBI, the District Attorney’s Human Trafficking Division, and the drug courts, referred girls to GEMS to help them escape commercial sexual exploitation. “I left him and I ended up catching a criminal court case, in drug court. They like, you know, they were trying to help me. They wanted me to go back to the [GEMS] house, because they like said it wasn’t healthy for me to be in Far Rockaway where he’s at.” One participant reported being referred to GEMS by a police officer that simply wanted to help. “The first time I came to GEMS, I was brought here by an undercover cop that I met on the track… I thank him like to this day... Like, the first time I came to GEMS I was homeless. I had left my pimp, all this shit... I was on the streets, and bumped into this detective and he like, found health in me.”

Despite the drawbacks of being involved in the criminal justice system, participants were able to benefit from being linked to GEMS and by being physically removed from the world of commercial sexual exploitation. “I was happy when I got locked up. I didn’t get locked up for prostitution. But I used to pray walking down the streets that somebody would stop and ask me ‘What are you doing out here? Where is your mother? Where is your parents?’ That never happened and I felt like when I finally got locked up that was my chance to get away.” If they did serve time, they used it as an opportunity to reflect on where their life was headed. “When I went away for a few months, I had time to think because I couldn’t see the outside world…I had nothing but thinking time. After a while I started realizing that I need help and I can't do this on my own, and in order for me to get help I have to open my own doors.”

Participants reported that relationships with family made them rethink their life. “My brother’s birthday came and it hurt because I didn’t know him and he was four now. And I was like, ‘Damn, I
don’t even know him.’” In some cases, family members asked them to leave their pimps: “I left him because my mother, my foster mother told me to come back. You know, to come back and live in a nice quiet home in New Jersey, just chill out… So I left because my mother actually wanted me back.” Others left because of pregnancy: “I left the life when I found out I was pregnant with my son.” For those who were parents, the role of motherhood had a significant impact on their decision to escape commercial sexual exploitation. “I want my life to change. I don’t want my daughter to grow up around that…I don’t want her to see me fucked up, or to see me and I’m not able to provide for her. So I became humble because I have a child. You have to. There are things I had to push my pride away and say listen, I need to do this, because I have to support my child. And that’s how I got to where I am at now.” In some cases, the thought of having their children removed from their care spurred their exit. “Things were getting really bad between me and him and he was becoming more, I guess physical, and at that point I had both my kids. I had just had my second son. He was still an infant. And I was just, it was really bad, like he beat me up really, really bad, and I was scared that I was going to lose my kids. So I couldn't do it anymore, and that’s it.” While children were a powerful motivator for escaping prostitution, those who had children with their pimps had a more complicated decision-making process. One participant explained how weighing the desire for her children to know their father with the realities of commercial sexual exploitation led her to recognize that she needed to leave:

It was hard because I had children, and the fact that I even had a child by my pimp, so like for the first year of my youngest son's life, it was like a constant struggle within myself because he would play on the fact that I had his baby, and he needs to be a father. But then it's like I had to come to terms and reevaluate. Like he wants to be a father, but what kind of father can he possibly be if he, you know, he is a pimp and you know, he is taking advantage of me, and he is taking advantage of young girls. You know what I mean? I had to look at it in that way…I had to really sit back and reevaluate the type of environment I was putting my kids in. Like ‘Do I really want my kids to grow up in the life?’ and that kind of thing. And ‘How can he be a positive kind of role model to my kids when he can’t even, you know, take care of himself?’ I have to provide for him and my kids. I had to realize that it wasn't healthy.
Psychoeducation on commercial sexual exploitation, which is part of the GEMS program, made a big difference in changing their views of themselves and their perspective on prostitution (Learning about sexual exploitation). “When I came to GEMS I felt like all the information I learned about sexual exploitation, how the fact that he took advantage of me cause I was young, just all the different things, I felt angry that this even happened to me.” They changed their assessment of adolescents involved in prostitution overall. “Like now you look at people differently. And when I see hos, sexually exploited girls, now I don't look at it like ‘Oh well, they nasty’ or whatever. I think they went through stuff.” The change in language from “prostitution” to “commercial sexual exploitation” was a powerful distinction for them. Indeed, one participant corrected another when she used the word “prostitute”, saying: “It’s sexually exploited.”

The most salient lesson for participants however, was learning that being commercially sexually exploited was not their fault. “I used to be like ‘Dang, I did this to myself. Like this is all my fault. Like if I wouldn't have did this, and if I wouldn't have met these people or if I hadn't stayed around with them.’ But it wasn't really my fault and now that I understand that it helps me to cope and deal with it.” The revelation that they were not at fault enabled them to move forward. “When you understand that what happened to you wasn't your fault, and all the logistics of how this happened, it helps you take that block off and be able to move on and help other people also.” Knowing that they were not to blame allowed them to better understand themselves and to view themselves less harshly. “It took me like a while, till I came to GEMS to, you know, understand like that it was not my fault. Like this is what I am used to, so now, you know, I’m doing this because of what I learned. And, you know, when you need money, it’s like you already know that so you go the easy way.”

After coming to GEMS, the messages they received and the relationships they forged with staff stuck with them, even if they relapsed and returned to their pimps. They internalized the message and
the messenger. “It was kind of crazy because once I had GEMS installed in me it was kind of hard, because I started thinking about Rachel and stuff.” They named specific messages that made a difference: “You are beautiful;” “You are intelligent;” “You are strong;” “You can do this, like you don’t have to be with him;” “It may be hard, but we’re gonna get through this;” “The cravings are not going to be there forever;” “Right now just try, like, relax and smoke a cigarette.” They appreciated that staff didn’t mince words when talking to them (“Rachel goes hard, too,”) noting that by speaking to them so directly, GEMS earned their respect and trust: “Rachel goes hard so you will always come back.” Participants internalized these lessons and pieces of advice. “I like programs like GEMS, cause you know how you said, even when you left, you still have that GEMS stuff in your head. ‘Oh my God, I don’t have to do this.’ That’s stuff for life.” The internalization of the message and the messenger had a significant impact on them. “I have Rachel who’s bettering and telling me these things, and showing me that there is another way and you can do it, like it’s not the end of the rope. And even if, I think even if people do go back to the game or the life, you can never forget Rachel. You can never forget her words.”

Once they began the process of leaving, or made the decision to leave, positive thinking that focused on accomplishments and growth helped them maintain gains and continue to progress (Recognition of Accomplishments and Progress). They concentrated on their successes instead of their trauma histories. “I mostly focus on my accomplishments and how I overcame it. I really rather not talk about the past and all the things I have been through, but am more focused on what I am going through now, you know. And it helps me, it makes me stronger.” They looked for opportunities to do things that would give them a sense that they were moving forward. “Do something for yourself. And like you can be just a month fresh out of the game or out of the life, and like, just accomplish a certificate for some random program…This is what I did for me.” They felt that it was important to recognize their
accomplishments, no matter how small. “I got excited when I got my GEMS certificate that I
completed my mandated sessions. I was excited about that [laughter]. Like, ‘Yeah, I got a certificate!’”
They noted that by acknowledging these small steps forward, they began to change their perspective
about their situation. “When I came into the GEMS house I went through my suitcase and all my bags
and it was like condoms, condoms, condoms… I’m like, ‘What the hell is wrong with me?’ I think just
throwing all that stuff away was like ‘Yes, I’m free.’ Yeah, it just opened my eyes. Like I realized this
is a start.” They reported that the focus on accomplishments was not limited to their own successes, but
extends to their peers at GEMS, and that focusing on shared accomplishments is empowering. “I feel
like the inspiration I get from here is like the success, like being able to see other people succeed. Like
when a girl graduate, they celebrate it. When people are doing good, they post it up, and you just stand
there and it keeps you in a mind frame of one day I’ll get out of it.”

One specific accomplishment that changed their perspective was returning to school. “I was 16,
and at one point I kind of thought my life was over, when I was 16. And so being able to eventually
have the opportunity to go back to school, and like having a brand new start and be able to do other
things or whatever, was like ‘I can make my life into something.’ Like ‘I have something to work
towards.’” One participant reported that as she was in the process of exiting commercial sexual
exploitation, going back to school helped her realize that she had certainly had enough of prostitution.
“Little by little my mind started changing. And then I started to enroll into school and I got fed up with
it.” Returning to school had a normalizing process on participants. “For me it was good when I
eventually went back to school, because I had never had a boyfriend before, and I had been away from
kids for so long, or like regular things that kids do.” Once they returned to school, they brought their
new perspectives with them. “When I went back to school, my life felt different. Like I had new friends
and I felt like, you know, I could do different things. I can hang out and maybe not drink or smoke and
think that I have to go have sex with someone because I'm drunk or something.”

These young women expressed gratitude for the positive changes in their lives, regardless of where they were in the process of leaving: “You got something to be thankful for every day.” They were grateful for having been able to escape commercial sexual exploitation (“I’m so happy I got out, oh my God, y’all don’t even understand, so happy.”) and for having the ability and opportunity to talk about their experiences (“I thank God every day for like, you know, being able to talk about it.”). They also expressed the belief that they had reached the point where relapsing, or going back to their pimp, was no longer a possibility. “I have reached a level independently and I think that we all reached a level independently where we are not going to go back. Like that is not an option for us no more.” They saw themselves as having come too far to go back now. “I have come such a long way. Like, I am at a point in my life where I am doing good. I have my own apartment. I’m taking care of both of my kids. I completed my first year in college… I have my own now. You know what I mean? That is something that will always be mine, and that is something that I can't just walk away from and enter the life.”

Theoretical Construct 3

In addition to discussing the mental and emotional resources necessary to exit commercial sexual exploitation, they also identified fundamental, survival-oriented resources as essential to escaping the sex trade (MEETING BASIC NEEDS AND SELF CARE). Participants noted that their security was a primary concern (Safety). They needed refuge from the danger that their pimps and the world of commercial sexual exploitation posed, and they would seek a safe place to stay upon leaving. They reported going to people and places they could trust, including: boyfriends (“I lived with my boyfriend when I left the life”); relatives of boyfriends (“I was staying with a boyfriend’s aunt”); friends (“I was looking for someone to help me and I moved into a friend’s apartment”); churches (“I ran to the church and I waited for the pastor”); and the foster care system (“I went back to foster care
and they replaced me, they put me into another borough and that was the first step”). They often went to a shelter (“I have been in and out of shelters ever since I was 14”), most notably Covenant House (“I ended up in the Cov”), or the GEMS housing program (“I came to GEMS and GEMS put me in the house”). They often escaped with just the clothes on their backs. “I just went to a friend’s house. I didn’t have, all I had was the clothes I had on, that was all I had. I didn’t have no money. My phone bill was paid for like two months so I didn’t have to worry about that, but I didn’t have anything. But I felt like not having anything was better than having everything and being miserable.”

Participants took specific steps to ensure their personal safety. “When I first went out of the game, like I used to be so scared, like I used to be scared for my life…I literally stayed in Staten Island for like three years without coming to Brooklyn at all because I was scared that you know, I was gonna run into him and things was gonna happen or whatever.” They avoided certain neighborhoods in Queens (Hillside, Flushing) and Brooklyn (Bushwick, Brownsville, East New York, Flatbush, Bedford-Stuyvesent), and specific public transportation stops (“I don’t get off at Southern, I don’t mess with South Row”). They had strategies for avoiding potential kidnappings in neighborhoods where prostitution was common: “I don’t walk nowhere in Brownsville without other people, I don’t walk nowhere in certain parts of Bed Stuy without other people.” They altered their traveling schedules: “I be extra early.” They talked about safety in numbers. “When I was in the Covenant House I made two friends…and wherever I went, we went together when it’s time to leave. We was all from 3 different parts of New York or whatever. So we would all leave together, get on the train and everybody would split up on the train. Make plans like that.”

These young women described safety strategies as particularly important for girls living in the shelter system. “You gotta be careful down there cause a lot of girls from [Covenant House] be dying.” They reported that pimps were well acquainted with the shelter system, and would go to Covenant
House to look for girls who had escaped, or to recruit new girls to exploit: “They got a lot of pimps out there.” This undermined any sense of safety they may have had there: “A lot of guys sitting outside the shelter where you are supposed to be protected and alright.” Their safety was further compromised by the inadequacy of services provided. “And it’s hard to get away from [pimps] over there [at Covenant House] because they don’t give you Metrocards.” Even inside the shelter walls, they reported feeling unsafe emotionally and physically. “There is no support. They act like they give you support, you know what I mean, but in all actuality, they are judgmental. The girls are horrible there. That is not a safe place to be.” They expressed frustration that the shelter also serves males on a different floor, and that the guys would prey on them as soon as they entered the shelter. “The guys come through and it’s just like ‘Oh, you’re new?’ And it’s just like, I don’t know, it’s like…They’re on it.” They talked about how their vulnerability to male residents would increase if their history of sexual exploitation came to light.

I mixed up the covenant with GEMS, and I opened up to somebody and I told them my situation and what I’ve been through. And then I found myself as I was leaving the building I had to put my head down and walk past. I’d put headphones in my ear and stick the plug in my pocket, no MP3 player, act as if I was listening to a song as they walked by, cause the guys was like ‘Hey, hey, hey, what’s going on? I got an apartment up in Brooklyn…”

Since safety is such a basic and fundamental need for those escaping commercial sexual exploitation, having a safe haven emerged as an essential resource. Participants cited GEMS as one safe haven in the process of leaving the life. “I thank God for places like GEMS because GEMS is the place that gave me a safe haven. I felt like safe here, like I didn’t have to worry about nothing. So, like thank God for GEMS.” They reported that GEMS staff took specific steps to ensure their safety, such as keeping the program private (“People aren’t allowed to know the address, or the [phone] number and stuff like that’), creating a positive environment (“It’s a good vibe, it’s nothing but positiveness coming
out”), and limiting access to the building (“You don’t see just like random people”). While it is likely that pimps know where GEMS is located, participants did not feel unsafe on the surrounding streets because they felt staff protected them. “They [Rachel & Julie at GEMS] know everyone on this block. And they are like ‘Listen, don’t mess with our girls. If you see girls coming into this building that we know…’ They are our advocates here. They advocate for us. They are there for us. If we need something, they provide it for us.” They also cited the comprehensiveness of services as contributing to a safe environment. “They help you get yourself back on your feet, get your identification. They point you in the right direction with whatever you need. If you’re going through a court case, they have court advocacy going on. So GEMS is what it’s about.” However, perhaps most significantly, they felt that GEMS was a place that would accept them and protect them no matter what.

Just knowing that I can relapse and come back to GEMS and not have nobody, you know, getting mad at me. Cause even when I did relapse, I always felt like “Damn, Rachel is gonna be disappointed with me. Julie is not gonna sit down and talk to me. Like the girls are gonna look at me different,” you know what I mean? Cause I was doing good and then now I am back in the game. Just knowing that I can come to GEMS and not have nobody look at me no type of way, and just kinda pick up where I left off, whether it is school or whatever. It’s a good feeling, and I just think that’s something that everybody needs.

Money, or lack thereof, was a primary reason for returning to pimps and prostitution, simply because participants were unable to meet basic needs without a stable income (Money). “Sometimes in the back of your head you say ‘I wish I could go make some money fast.’ So you know, having security as far as money, and you know your basic needs, those are some of the things like that, it just will put you in a bad position, like and make you want to be back into the life.” For those who exhausted their financial resources, they felt they had no other option. “It's you need money and where else are you going to go?” They reported that lack of sufficient funds, even for those who were receiving shelter services, often resulted in commercial sexual exploitation because the services...
provided were not enough for them to survive on. “It’s hard cause that [lack of support] just pulls you back further. And I ended up doing the same thing that she did and calling up my regulars. Like ‘Look, I need to get my Metrocard money up. I need to get my food money up.’ Cause all I get is lunch and dinner and that’s it, I can’t bring food inside.” Money was cited as the final obstacle to exiting the life: “I think after we let go of the feelings, the attachments to the pimps, the situations. The last thing is the easy money. It’s like ‘Okay, I will let go of all of that, but damn like I have rent to pay and this check is like not enough.’”

Participants described coming to terms with not having money as an important step in the process of escaping commercial sexual exploitation: “Coming out you just gotta deal with not having that amount of money, you just gotta be really focused and strong.” They reported using different strategies for raising money. “I had to go get some food stamps. I had to go to groups just to get money. I had to clean up my mother's backyard.” They grasped on to opportunities to increase their income in spite of their limited work histories. “In the summertime I applied for Summer Youth. I got a Summer Youth job.” Raising money often involved difficult choices. “I had to ask for money, I had to borrow money. I had to cash my food stamps without eating. It's so hard.” They noted that difficulty finding employment, and thus making money, made the transition out of prostitution very difficult. “It’s hard to keep on the straight life when you have no job.” Nonetheless, despite their financial hardship, they maintained a positive mindset and a determination not to go back to the world of commercial sexual exploitation. “I’ve never been happier…I’m broke, but I’m happy, cause you know, even if I have one penny, one dollar, nothing, at least I know that’s my nothing. You know what I mean? I don’t have to answer for it. I don’t have to answer to nobody.”

A focus on self-care and prioritizing your own needs was important for those exiting the sex trade (Doing what you need to do for yourself). They limited their focus to simply doing what they
needed to do to get by each day: “Our main concern is functioning.” They tried not to rush the process. “Just take one day at a time. Well, like for me sometimes to think about the days, it’s too long, so I just think of every minute at a time, you know. Like, to just take it like slow and easy.” They took control of their life and began to systematically figure out the next steps to take to reach their goal. “Once you know what you really want to do, even if you don’t know, if you have a general idea right now of what you want to do and how you gonna do it. Cause I had to sit down and write it step by step. ‘Okay, today I’m going to Safe Horizon, I’m going to talk to this person, about this that and the third. Check it off my list, what’s next.’ You know what I mean - just have a plan of action.” They identified what was important to them, and then diligently worked towards these goals, which gave them a sense of independence while also fulfilling basic needs. “I think what was pushed me is like, wanting to have my own. I mean, like right now, I have my own place, with my name on the lease, and it’s me, you know.... I pay for my food and I pay for my clothes, and it’s like I did this... I feel a whole lot better being independent now.”

These young women put their own needs ahead of what others wanted or needed from them. “Try not to focus on what everybody wants of you. Try to focus on you want of yourself and work on your self-esteem. Work on what you want and what need and what you like in life.” Putting themselves first was a new experience for them, as they reported having spent most of their lives prioritizing others’ needs at their own expense. “It got to this point where here I am ignoring my feelings for all of these other people. Like [X] needs to take care of herself. [X] needs her needs met before [X] dies or whatever.” This self-sacrificing relationship dynamic was particularly relevant to them as survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. “I used to think, you know, pleasing [my pimp] was pleasing me. I had to realize that is not making me happy, pleasing him and doing all these things.” They felt conflicted about putting themselves first, but came to recognize that it was okay to do so. “I’m a helper, I want to
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help you get through whatever you’re going through. I want to sit there and talk to you about it. I want
to make it better, but I realize that I can’t make everything better for everybody, cause I gotta work on
me, make stuff better for me.” Ironically, coming to the realization that self-care is essential to their
survival and functioning allowed them to meet their needs and then freed them to resume caring for
others in a healthy, adaptive way. “I realized it’s all about me. I gotta deal with me. I gotta take care of
me. I gotta help myself before I can help somebody else. I can’t keep trying to help other people and I
am not helping myself. So when I got to that point that I could help myself, then I helped people.”

Part of putting themselves first and prioritizing their own needs required them to do something
they had a very hard time doing: asking for help. However, given their age and circumstances,
commercially sexually exploited youth need assistance, and they need to know that they can ask for it.
“The message I got is that [X] can’t do everything by herself. Honestly, no matter how grown you think
you are, and all you went through, you are still your age. And you need help. And you need to accept
that and be real with yourself. It is one of the most hardest things to do in your life.” They needed to
hear that it was acceptable for them to need assistance, ask questions, and to use the resources available
to them. “It’s okay to say ‘I need help.’ It’s okay to say ‘I don’t understand this, can somebody explain
this to me?’ And it’s okay to ask questions.” They tied their reluctance to ask for help to feeling like
they needed to be an adult and take care of everything on their own, since that is the role they were put
in when they were commercially sexually exploited. “Once you are out of the life it’s okay to act like
you are 15 and it’s okay to act like you are 16 even though you feel this age. … I had to realize that I
had to start acting, not acting my age, but doing things that people my age were doing. Understanding
that just because I felt 26 doesn’t mean that I had to continue to pretend that I was 26.”

Theoretical Construct 4

As is consistent with much of the literature on resiliency and mental health, social support, in
The forms of friends, peers, staff and family members, was an invaluable resource for participants (SOCIAL SUPPORT: SURVIVOR-BASED AND GENERAL). The role of social support surfaced across and within all aspects of the exiting process and emerged as a theoretical construct in its own right. However, specific types of social support proved particularly helpful. Support from survivors of commercial sexual exploitation was incredibly powerful (*The importance of being around other survivors/Survivor-based help*). Being around other survivors who escaped commercial sexual exploitation introduced the possibility that they could leave too, and that life went on after sexual exploitation ends.

I think for me, like what the biggest awakening experience for me was the fact that I came to GEMS and could be around somebody like Rachel who has been there. Like been though this and look, she started her own organization. The fact that I walked in the door and my case manager was a survivor. Like to me, that to me was huge. My case manager was a survivor. I never, it never dawned on me that you can actually move on with your life.

Participants embraced the fact that GEMS is a survivor-based organization. “Survivor based I think is one of the best things that GEMS is about, because like seeing the success stories is what really helps. Like, you have to know that you’re not alone and that other people have survived it.” They liked that they had the shared experience of being commercially sexually exploited, and felt that this commonality created a sense of safety because they could not judge each other for it. “We can't judge each other, so I feel like a comfort zone.” The lack of judgment and the validation GEMS provides allowed them to open up about their experiences in a new way. “[GEMS] really make us feel good, for like, just being open. You could have just cried and say, ‘Yo, fuck that bitch’ and they’re like, ‘Okay, that’s great. Yeah! Get it off!’...It feels good cause it’s like, you deserve to be able to get all that out and we’re not going to judge you and nobody is going to tell. We all basically been through the same thing so there is no reason for you to be all like ‘Oh no’.” They noted that belonging to a survivor-
based program, as opposed to a more general program geared towards troubled youth, was a motivating factor for exiting the sex trade. “It [GEMS being survivor-based] makes it easier for you to want to be a part of the process of exiting the life, because like lot of people will be there, like they want to talk to you. But this is actually for somebody who has been in the life.”

These young women also appreciated that since GEMS is survivor-based and founded, staff could understand what they had been through on a personal level. “It’s not from a clinical point of view, it’s from an ‘I’ve been there. I know what you are feeling’ point of view.” They reported that knowing staff had also survived commercial sexual exploitation meant that they had an understanding that other people in the helping professions lacked. “It’s not like people are just talking from like ‘Oh, the psychology,’ you know. They have been there. They have experienced what you are talking about. And that makes it more comforting…She knows what she is talking about, and it’s like easier to come and talk to her.” They expressed feeling pleasant surprise upon learning that a survivor-based organization existed, and wished they had known about it earlier. “When you’re in the life and you try to leave and you do leave, you don’t think that there is ever a program like this. You don’t think that people will ever understand what you’ve been through or why you even went that way… but there are people who went through this and there are people who can help you.”

Participants noted that when they first came to GEMS, it was difficult to talk about their experiences, even at a survivor-based organization, so they often started by just coming to groups and listening to their peers. “It’s hard to talk about it…The listening helps. I think that’s the breakthrough. Hearing the story.” By actively listening, they began to see that they had similar experiences to other survivors. “For me, when I was coming, it was I feel like in the first two weeks, I was like, I didn’t want to talk to nobody. It was like: ‘I don’t know…And still…Yeah, she could probably be my sister…She could be my sister in law…Right…No, not that one!’” Once they started coming to groups,
they began to feel more connected to others, had a sense of belonging, and realized that they were not alone. “I came a couple of times, like, I came three times before I actually like spoke up in a group or talked back. So the listening is part of the process. Like let me see if anyone here is like me, or has been to a situation similar to mine. It’s just the acceptance factor that makes you feel like you belong there.”

These young women cited another advantage of being around other survivors: having access to role models. “Coming to GEMS is seeing people and role models...All of us. We are survivor role models for girls who come in the door, and they see us in these, not powerful positions, but they see us as role models, going to school doing what we gotta do. That gives them hope. And motivation.” They had a range of role models and success stories to emulate, from GEMS staff to their peers in the program, and having access to survivors they could look up to gave them a sense of confidence and pride. “GEMS is survivor based, so for me coming to GEMS knowing that Rachel was a survivor, my case manager at the time was a survivor. Seeing other girls who are out of the life, they were survivors. So that, that is a strength, that is empowerment.” In addition to groups they also cited seeing the GEMS documentary, *Very Young Girls*, as an opportunity to be inspired by their peers. “That [seeing a member injured in Very Young Girls] really, really hurt me...Look at her now, she's outstanding now. Like to see somebody and then, and now you look at them. You never thought that would happen to them. It makes you feel like if she can do it, then I can do it.” Those who escaped commercial sexual exploitation and stayed involved with GEMS worked hard to serve as role models and offer peer support to the newer girls coming in. “If there is a girl that wants to tell me something I need to be able to listen, because it took me a long time before I could open up to somebody. So if somebody wants to open up to me... I have to be able to listen and relate in a way and also be able to give out good advice. Like how I got past it. How they can do that too.”
As they became more interpersonally connected, they started to take stock of the relationships in their life overall, and worked to establish more balanced and adaptive relationships (*Building healthy and supportive relationships*). Encouragement and support emerged as essential components in the relationships they wanted and needed to escape from commercial sexual exploitation. “I feel like the most vital part I guess about getting out of the life is having a real support system.” They found that having someone care about them gave them the confidence to keep going. “You want somebody to empower you, and like push you, and call and check up on you, like ‘You’re good, right? I’m just letting you know somebody cares about you’ and hang up like that. That allows you to get through the process a whole lot easier.” They needed others to follow their growth and successes, and cheer them on. “Having people be like ‘How did you do on your test? How did you do on your grades?’ It makes you feel more confident. And be like ‘Oh I want to brag about it, I want to tell people.’ you know. Cause it makes you feel good, like someone actually cares.” For many, the GEMS program demonstrated what these supportive relationships were like. “Going to Rachel’s group helped me a lot because I needed that support…There was somewhere I could come and somewhere I belonged. Like it feels good to have somewhere you come and you don’t have to give them nothing but they offer you a lot. Like a lot of love, a lot of support, and there is other girls you can relate to.”

Participants reported that having support and encouragement kept them from relapsing and returning to their pimps. “For me, being able to have someone here, and be able to talk about things. Like sometimes when I felt bad about myself, like I wasn't doing anything, or I might as well go back or whatever, it was nice to have the encouragement to just keep on going and keep trying.” One participant asked GEMS to stay on top of her progress, as a persistent parent or teacher might. “I told [GEMS] that no matter how hard I feel like not wanting to do things, no matter how much I curse them out, that I needed somebody who would continue to push me no matter what I do or what I say to them,
because I will be mad for that moment, but I don't really mean it later down the road. And I know if they said ‘You just cursed me out, I’m not going to push you anymore,’” I would go right back.

Some participants cited other sources of social support, including: family members (“My mother's a lot of support and she don't judge me. My little sister know what I did and she don't judge me.); boyfriends (“He helped me get out of it. He supported me, you know. He was there for me.”), and friends (“If I needed anything or whatever she was there”). However, most participants cited the GEMS program and fellow survivors as their primary sources of support and encouragement. Regardless of where the support and encouragement came from, all agreed that it is essential to the exiting process. “There’s not too many people who can just get up and leave their pimp and go and live and start a whole new life and just be alright. You would never be alright. You can’t… I’m not going to say it’s impossible because maybe there’s somebody out there, but I have never met somebody like that yet. Because I know I needed help.”

These young women reported that part of what made the support at GEMS so powerful was the fact that it felt unconditional. They knew that even if they relapsed, or made a mistake, GEMS would still try to help them. “It's like they don't judge you. Even if you still in the life, they still like. You can't live in the house, but you can come to the program and they will feed you and they will help you and they are not trying to like make it bad for you. Tell you you did this, this, this. They let you make your own decision and they help you. So it's like you feel safe, more safe.” By not giving up on girls, even if they went back to their pimps, GEMS sent girls the message that they were cared about, that they were more than their behavior. “I think like that’s really nice because you know, a lot of people just judge you and they don’t give a shit about you after that. These people still kept in contact with me when I was still in the life.”

Participants came to realize that they had the ability to construct and develop new supportive,
loving relationships, and that they were not always going to be dependent on the maladaptive relationships in lives. Nowhere was this realization true more than with family. “Another thing I learned is family is just a name, it is a category. It doesn’t mean anything.” They came to the conclusion that they were not bound to their birth family, but had the opportunity to redefine family in a way that better suited them. “Your family is basically the family you feel. It doesn’t have to be your blood family. It could be anybody.” They noted that “it hurts more” to only consider blood relatives family, and began to expand their definition of family to include GEMS. “[GEMS] don't feel like a program. This feels like a family that you come, and see your family, and you go and chill with your family. And you have sisters, like some girls in here I call my sisters or my homies, because we all been through the same thing.” They commonly described their relationships with each other as sisterly. “Like we all laugh. Everybody had their ups and downs. Everybody have their arguments, everybody have their differences, but at the end of the day I feel like some girls are my sisters.” They contrasted their relationships with their biological family with their family at GEMS, and found that in their GEMS family their needs were actually being met. “It was cool that while I'm in this place or whatever, that I had people that were there to support me, like they were my sisters or whatever. Like the stuff that I didn't have at home, like the same things.”

These young women identified other characteristics of healthy and supportive relationships. They found it important to surround themselves with people who are positive and bring out the best in them. “What I learned, is that my mood is easily influenced. I’m easily influenced by people that I am around. So if I’m around positivity, I’m going to be positive, I’m gonna do positive things. If I’m around negativity, it brings my mood down, and then my focus is different.” They also expanded their definitions of love and loving relationships. First, they understood that their relationship with themselves could be a wonderful source of love and support. “The best love is your own love. You can
love yourself so good that that is the love no one can give you. That love for yourself.” When they
began to appreciate themselves, they noticed that doing so impacted their relationships with others.
“The best love I feel, like is loving yourself. And I started taking pride in my relationships.” They
looked at where love came from in their lives, and stopped weighing some sources as more important
than others. “I think the biggest thing for me too is that you have to realize that love isn’t always have
to come from like a man.” With less pressure on feeling loved by specific people or types of people,
they opened themselves up to new possibilities. “You can get love from anybody. You can get love
from strangers. You can get love from people you don’t even know…And your love doesn’t have to
come from family either.”

**Theoretical Construct 5**

Participants also described an internal component of the process of escaping commercial sexual
exploitation, one that focused on recovering from trauma, and identifying with and building a stronger
sense of self (RECOVERY AND POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH). According to Herman (1992),
recovery, which can only occur in the context of relationships, involves the empowerment of the
survivor and the building of new connections with others that foster the establishment of trust,
imintacy, initiative, autonomy, competency, and identity. A related concept, posttraumatic growth,
occurs when an individual experiences positive psychological change following a particularly traumatic
event, notably in five areas: relating to others, personal strength, appreciation for life, spiritual change,
and new possibilities (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). However, while recovery focuses on the rebuilding
of a damaged self, posttraumatic growth refers to the development of additional positive changes above
and beyond what a person might have been capable of pre-trauma. For CSEC, both processes are at
play: they rebuild aspects of themselves that were damaged by repeated trauma, but they also learn
from the experience and come out the other side changed for the better.
First, participants spoke about the need to address what happened to them as essential to moving on with their lives and being able to fully function mentally and emotionally (*Needing to deal with the past, and past traumas, to move forward*). They noted that if they did not address their trauma histories, they would continue to be haunted by them. “There are things you gotta make sure you deal with. Cause what happened to you when you are in the life is trauma. If you don’t deal with that, even though you are not in the life anymore, it’s gonna affect you in your everyday life. I remember when everything first happened to me I used to go through dreams constantly, constantly, constantly.”

These CSEC survivors cited therapy as an important part of the process of exiting and coming terms with trauma: “I think that one of the things that has been good for me was therapy.” One participant reported that she used groups at GEMS and individual therapy outside of GEMS to process her traumatic experiences and cope with the emotions and posttraumatic stress symptoms surrounding them:

> Certain things can trigger it, but you gotta, but after all that happened I made sure to put myself into therapy. And I used to go to group and talk about it or whatever. Now they don’t happen to me as much. Maybe every now and then. Like if I leave the TV on and somebody gets murdered or something or whatever. But even when I have those things I have learned to break them down in therapy and deal with them. Because some stuff you don’t remember and so I have learned to break those dreams down and find out what they mean for me.

Participants recognized that they were psychologically vulnerable prior to being commercially sexually exploited, and that these vulnerabilities would continue to impact their lives if not addressed. “How you even got into the life. All those risk factors and stuff. If you don’t deal with that stuff, this stuff is probably still ongoing in your life today.” They found the insights they gained in therapy to be helpful in coming to terms with what happened to them, and to understand where their feelings were coming from. “It took like my therapy. I fought traumatic stuff, so it's like I understand what was going on with
myself. I understand why sometimes I would get depressed. I understand why sometimes I wanted to use. I understand because all that stuff was bottled up in me.”

While not all participants received ongoing individual therapy, they all recognized the value of it. “It's been so long since I been in the game, but it still affects my life because I never ever sat down and actually got out all the feelings, and all of the things that I went through, and actually spoke to somebody about it… It still does affect me mentally.” Those who didn’t have individual therapists expressed a desire to find one outside of GEMS. “I think that is something I have been lacking because even though I had counselors and intense services here, it is still a lot of stuff that comes up out of nowhere that I didn’t even realize happened to me until we are sitting down discussing it…And I don’t deal with it. I think it’s important for you to seek outside therapeutic resources because it’s still a lot of stuff that you can tap into.” They recognized that they made significant progress at GEMS, but still had work to do. “I think at a certain point when you go through the phases of GEMS and you kind of get to this level where you are not okay, but you are at a different place than when you first came.” They recounted traumatic events prior to their exploitation that they had not yet addressed, and wanted the opportunity to do so with an outside therapist.

Talking about some of the stuff that happened prior to you getting into the life…Cause I came from a house where there was a lot of domestic violence, like serious domestic violence…And not even addressing that, that was one of the leading factors as to why this kinda happened to me. The fact that I was raped… There was just a lot of stuff that happened to me, even before I got into the life that I never even had a chance to sit down and talk to somebody with. That is something that I think all of us should still seek, like an outside therapist.

Participants used different strategies to process their trauma. They reported that writing was a valuable outlet for them. “Talking helps you, writing and talking. Like if you can't talk to someone, I know I used to have this problem, I write. Write to someone. Cause I can express more by writing than
by talking to someone. Why? Cause when you are writing, you go through all the emotion on that paper.” Some participants kept diaries and wrote poetry. They also cited the serenity prayer, from Alcoholics Anonymous, as a calming, and inspirational saying that helped them accept their past and their present. “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change…I like that one too.”

Group therapy at GEMS was a primary way for participants to work through trauma. They described talking in group as a way of removing a heavy, emotional weight. “I’m thinking that at the end of the day, we’re all happy that we got something off. It’s like, a relief of many burdens.” They noted that the recreational groups GEMS offers were often just as therapeutic as more trauma focused groups. “In certain programs you don’t have to just sit there and just talk about what the program is based on, but you get to talk about other stuff. And I think cooking group helped us open up and you like, we shared stories about what happened in the life. And it’s like oh, wow, you connect with people and it’s like, ‘Oh, that happened to you?’ And a lot of these things happened to me.” They commented that even when they have to force themselves to go to groups, they find that once there, they become engaged in the group process and benefit from sharing. “A lot of time I don’t want to come here. I think it’s just the facility thing, you know, it’s just like sitting on front of people and talking and whatever, it’s something to do with me. But after I come, and I leave, I actually do feel a whole lot better. I feel like I relieved a big burden that was on my chest, so it is helpful. A lot.”

These young women felt that in order to fully deal with the past, they had to own up to their behavior and recognize some painful truths. They needed to be honest with themselves and others, no matter how difficult. “I have to stop being in denial and be real about myself and everything else…There is a reason for everything in life, and you have to be open enough and willing to go through that because this is a scary process. And nobody wants to go through that but you have do it. That was one of the most difficult things that I had to do for myself. Just to be willing to be open and
honest with myself.” By looking at themselves critically and openly, they came to some realizations that were ultimately helpful in understanding themselves, and this level of self-reflection allowed them to identify ways to facilitate the exiting process. “I had kept like diaries throughout the whole time I was in the game. And just going back and reading my mind state and just the certain things that was happening to me, I could see why certain things was happening. What some of the things that I was allowing to happen. I could figure out the areas where I needed to step up and be strong. I was recognizing a lot of different things about myself.” Indeed, they reported that self-awareness could serve as a protective factor against relapse. “I thought it made me feel good that all these men were looking at me, giving me attention. I began to realize that that is not what I really want. There are things behind that that I had to figure out. Why is it that I want this attention? Eventually as I started dealing with that stuff, that is what keeps me out of the life.”

Participants also came to appreciate the value of being honest with others. “One of my biggest things that I learned was I was always lying even about the smallest thing…I had to learn to tell the truth because I wasn’t going anywhere continuing lying.” They came to realize that sooner or later, they needed to make sure they told the truth no matter how frightened they were of the consequences or other people’s reactions. “You can’t continue to lie and be in denial about things that happened. You have to tell the truth. You have to start somewhere start with telling the truth and face your fears because that is what is going to help.”

These young women described integrating their trauma and experiences into their sense of self, building a new and stronger identity as part of the exiting process (Rebuilding/Reconnecting with a sense of self). They reported that when they entered the world of commercial sexual exploitation, that they lost a part of themselves. “Like your past, a lot of the stuff that you used to do or liked to do prior into the game, you forget all that because like, you become like a whole different person. Like when
you are in the game, like you are just, you are not the person you was.” After they escaped prostitution, they gradually began to rediscover old talents. “I felt like when I got out of the life, I didn't know what I was good at… And I forgot that I used to like to play basketball, and I forgot that I used to like to do this, and I forgot all about these things, and then I guess like, as you go on, all the things come back and you remember what you were good at.” Once they escaped prostitution, they noticed that they had plenty to offer. The process of exiting allowed them to begin “recognizing our own talents and our own abilities, and the all the good qualities about ourselves,” which in turn, kept them moving forward.

They discussed the importance of believing in themselves, in their ability to escape commercial sexual exploitation, and in their self-worth. “I feel like believing in yourself is one of the most important things just because I told him I wanted to leave a couple of times. Any little thing he would say would get me back... It is just really believing in yourself. And you know, believing that you can do something and you are better than that.” They reported that escaping commercial sexual exploitation requires taking a risk, trying to bring about change, and having the fortitude to try again if at first you do not succeed. “Sometimes you gotta take that risk. Like I’ve said it before, I won’t know until I try...You gotta take that step and if it doesn’t work, then you pick yourself up and you try something different. It’s a step. Things aren’t always going to go right. Life gets harder before it gets better, but things happen and you gotta take that step. You gotta try that change.” They noted that each success strengthened their belief in themselves, and gave them the confidence to keep forging ahead. “And building ourselves, our confidence. It’s something that you can be like ‘Oh I accomplished this. I wanna accomplish that.’ It’s like being hungry for success cause now you know that you can do it.”

Personal strength, and an identity as a survivor, were also factors that helped them escape commercial sexual exploitation. “Realizing that I’m not a weak person, and that I have a whole lot of strength in me, and even when I am down and out and I feel like I can’t take anymore, that I always
will have that strength inside of me to pick me back up. I feel like if can survive them three years out in
the streets with nowhere to go, and being pimped out, I can survive anything. And I feel like that’s the
strength that we all have.” Having an identity as a survivor gave them the strength to continue to grow
and work towards their goals. “I think that was one of the things that probably helped through getting
out of it and still you know like going on with my life and trying to better myself. It's being a survivor.”
They saw themselves as having grown as a result of their experience of being commercially sexually
exploited, noting that in the end, the trauma made them stronger. “My life is no longer about the life,
but it is still a part of me because it made me the person I am today. I am a much stronger person now, I
would say, being that I went through the life, seeing the things that I saw, that I’ve seen.” They began
to view their past as illustrative of their strengths, not their weaknesses. “I have always focused on the,
not the negative, but I felt like my past defined who I was today. But my past only defines the positive
of who I am today. It doesn't have to define the negative.”
Discussion

The interviews and data analysis illuminated how CSEC escape commercial sexual exploitation, and what resources they use to foster resiliency and make this transition. Using COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989; 2002) as a guide, different categories of resources were helpful in facilitating the exiting process. For object resources, having a safe place to stay, a refuge from commercial sexual exploitation, was helpful in that it met their basic need for safety and shelter. A safe haven, such as GEMS, where girls could be accepted and get assistance in all aspects of leaving, was also incredibly beneficial. However, these were the only object resources participants identified. This could be related to the fact that CSEC, due to their young ages and socio-economic status, often lack the material goods and physical objects, such as owning property or having savings accounts, that other adults can rely on in times of distress. Nonetheless, the need for shelter and safety are primary human needs, and as such, account for the first two levels of necessary conditions on Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs in order for humans to continue to develop. For CSEC, shelter and safety are essential resources that must be provided in order for them to begin and continue with the exiting process. This finding is also consistent with Farley et al.’s (1998) study of adolescent and adult prostitutes. In the Farley et al. study, 78% of participants cited having a safe place to stay as necessary to escape prostitution, as well as other factors related to maintaining safety, such as self-defense training (49%) and protection from their pimp (28%).

Some conditions were identified as helpful resources to leaving. One condition that was helpful in motivating CSEC to escape their pimps was motherhood. On a practical level, CSEC found it difficult to sell sex during pregnancy. More important however, was that they wanted a better life for their children. They didn’t want their children to grow up in the life, and they noted that continuing to spend time with their abusive pimps could lead to their children being removed from their care. They
also expressed concern about how being in the life could affect their children, both in terms of seeing their mothers be exploited, and having men around who sexually exploit their mother and other young girls. This finding is similar to the resiliency factor of family closeness, reported by O’Donnell et al. (2004), and the findings of Collinshaw et al. (2007) and Mishne’s (2001) which cited the parent-child tie as a significant resiliency factor. However, for this sample of CSEC, the there is some role reversal: for CSEC, being a parent who wants more for her child appears to be a resiliency factor as opposed to having a caring parent serve as a protective factor.

The other condition CSEC reported as being beneficial to building resiliency, was being enrolled in school. Going back to school gave participants the opportunity to work towards something positive, and helped them come to realize that they could still accomplish more in life. They reported that going back to school made them feel more similar to other kids their age, and that they returned to school more determined to make use of the opportunity getting an education represented. These results are similar to Edmond et al.’s (2006) finding that certainty about attaining educational goals was correlated with resiliency in adolescent girls with a history of childhood sexual abuse who are currently in foster care. It is also consistent with Schissel and Fedec’s (1999) study on youth prostitutes in Canada. Schissel and Fedec reviewed a random sample of youth probation records on adolescent offenders in the cities of Regina and Saskatoon between 1980 and 1996. Their sample consisted of 401 delinquent youths, with 52 participants (45 females, 7 males) who had been involved in the sex trade between the ages of 9 and 18. While the results of school success being a protective factor or a risk factor for involvement in prostitution were inconclusive, the authors did find that returning to school resulted in lower rates of prostitution for both aboriginal and non-aboriginal youth.

The COR category of energies, which are resources that allow one to build and accumulate additional resources, were also useful to participants. Knowledge about commercial sexual exploitation
was particularly helpful in motivating CSEC to take the steps necessary to leave. It allowed them to see CSEC as victims, as evidenced by their change in language from “prostitute,” which suggests a level of choice, to “commercially sexually exploited” which moves the blame and responsibility from the adolescent girl onto the adult men who buy and sell her. By learning that CSEC often have abuse histories, and that they have been and are being victimized, participants were able to feel empathic towards other survivors, and towards themselves. Learning that they were not at fault had a huge impact on how they saw themselves and helped them move forward. This is a unique finding in the literature, as no other studies on CSEC have looked at how knowledge about commercial sexual exploitation affects survivors of sex trafficking.

Participants cited other energy resources as helpful in making the transition out of commercial sexual exploitation. Money, not surprisingly, was another energy resource that helped CSEC escape their pimps. While participants noted that they had to find new and creative ways to increase their access to money, having the necessary financial resources to meet their basic needs, such as food and clothing, made it easier to leave their pimps and stay out of the life. This finding also reflects Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs theory. If CSEC are unable to meet basic, primary needs, they will need to sacrifice other needs, such as esteem or self-actualization, to secure these necessary resources for survival. Finally, therapy was also identified as a key energy resource in helping CSEC escape commercial sexual exploitation. They used individual therapy and groups at GEMS to process the trauma and relieve the emotional burdens they carried, and along the way, they gained insight into themselves and their experience. Therapy and the therapeutic process helped them gain a level of self-awareness that enhanced their sense of self and strengthened their relationships with others. Given that most studies define resiliency as the absence of mental health problems, therapy is rarely discussed in resiliency literature. However for those who are resilient, yet symptomatic, like CSEC, the finding that
Resiliency is associated with involvement in therapy is a welcome addition to the field.

*Personal characteristics* was the category of resources that CSEC described most frequently in terms of what helped them leave the life. They described numerous personal qualities that they felt enabled them to leave their pimps, the world of commercial sexual exploitation, and their old view of themselves behind. They cited being ready and willing to change as an essential first step in the process. This level of readiness was matched by a sense of self-efficacy: the belief that they could leave, change, and turn their life around. Along with self-efficacy, resourcefulness in getting basic needs met (finding creative ways to increase income, identifying services and steps to take, etc.) was an adaptive trait for exiting commercial sexual exploitation because it reduced their vulnerability to their pimp as they were no longer dependent on him for these things. In a small study of resilient homeless and runaway youth using a case study design (N=3 for resilient youth, N=2 for non-resilient youth), Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz, and Jarvis (2001) identified similar resiliency factors. In their study, resilient youth cited determination and self-efficacy in attaining goals and a readiness to accept help as helpful factors in not just survival, but also in fostering growth and change.

A flexible thinking style was a key resource for CSEC trying to escape commercial sexual exploitation. Participants described implementing numerous changes to their thought processes as they moved from contemplating leaving the life to taking action to do so, in maintaining gains they made, and in continuing to move forward. They needed to be able to challenge their assumptions and beliefs about life, relationships, and identity. They talked about the importance of changing mindsets that are adaptive in the world of commercial sexual exploitation, but inhibit progress upon leaving, beliefs such as everyone wants something from you and that you cannot ask for (and will not receive) help. They cultivated a more positive thinking style, one that focused on gratitude for what they have, particularly thankfulness for all the changes that come with escaping commercial sexual exploitation, and on their
accomplishments, including having left the life. They began engaging in goal-directed thinking, taking control of their life and planning out the steps they needed to take to continue the transition out of commercial sexual exploitation. They had a future orientation, and put a lot of time, energy, and effort in identifying future goals for themselves and mapping out ways to reach them. In the process of leaving, they needed to think critically about their life, their future, their choices, and the people around them. In the end, the ability to constructively evaluate and make changes, and to be open to doing so, was a personal strength and characteristic that guided them through the process. Similar traits were also identified as resiliency factors in female college students with a history of childhood sexual abuse, but were referred to as “positive coping,” which was defined as problem-focused thinking, seeking support, and focusing on the positive (Walsh et al., 2007). In Walsh et al.’s study, positive coping as measured by the Ways of Coping Measure (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985), and was correlated with resisting coercive sexual assault. Given the coercive nature of pimp-controlled prostitution, the similarities in these findings are reasonable. Verona, Dillon, and Steiner (2009), in their study of 182 female college students who reported some type of traumatic event, had similar findings. They found that proactive coping (p < .01), defined by the authors as thoughts and behaviors that increase resources which foster personal growth and goal attainment, and gratitude (p < .05) were associated with lower levels of PTSD symptoms as measured by the PTSD Checklist (PCL-S). Additionally, Williams et al. (2001) in their case studies of runaway youth cited gratitude and problem solving skills as adaptive traits in fostering resiliency.

CSEC also applied these flexible, and critical, thinking skills to their beliefs about themselves. They had to start recognizing their value as a person in their own right, and building a sense of self-worth and self-acceptance. Building an identity as a survivor was part of this process, and it gave them a sense of empowerment and confidence that kept them moving forward. Seeing themselves differently
also helped them to cope with the stigma and shame surrounding prostitution, as they began to reject other peoples’ judgments and definitions of who they are. They worked on being honest with themselves and others, and started putting themselves first and attending to their own needs. They changed the value they put on other people’s opinion, recognizing self-love as a valid form of love, opening themselves up to new a new sense of love and empowerment.

Lastly, they cited a personal trait that weaved through every step of the exiting process: patience. They were patient with the process of leaving and all of the obstacles that surfaced. They worked to accept that life takes time, and that even though everything happens quickly in the world of sexual exploitation, in the outside world paychecks come late, people take their time to return phone calls, and needed appointments are dependent on other people’s schedule. They also were patient with themselves in terms of leaving and in terms of their personal recovery. They worked diligently towards gradual change, taking life one day at a time, and building on each success.

In COR, social support is viewed as a “meta-construct” due to its overlap among other categories of resources. For CSEC, social support was an invaluable resource that impacted participants every step of the way. Social support from fellow survivors was imperative. Being around other survivors allowed them to feel safe from judgment and bonded them to each other through shared experiences. They saw other survivors who were further along in the exiting process as role models that inspired and motivated them. These role models gave them hope that change was possible, and demonstrated how they too could achieve success. For those who were considered role models, they worked harder to progress in their recovery so they could be available to mentor younger girls they way they felt mentored. They noted that social support was a key factor in preventing relapse and provided a sense of belonging to a family. Knowing that there were people who loved and accepted them gave them the confidence to continue with the long and difficult process of exiting. Once they had
established close relationships with other survivors, they had a model for healthy relationships and were able to work on expanding their social support system to include boyfriends, therapists, and non-abusive relatives. The relationship between social support and resiliency has been found in multiple studies. The longitudinal study by Collinshaw et al. (2007) found peer support to be correlated with resiliency, Edmond et al.’s (2006) study of adolescent girls in foster care with a history of childhood sexual abuse found that positive peer influences were associated with resiliency, and Vogt et al. (2008) in a longitudinal study of marine recruits at Parris Island, found that for the women in their sample with high levels of perceived social support, stress reactions actually enhanced hardiness, whereas stress reactions reduced hardiness for men and women with low levels of perceived social support. As specifically pertains to CSEC, Brown (2006) looked at the presentation of two CSEC survivors who spoke to service providers as part of a larger workshop on sexual exploitation. In this workshop, CSEC cited the importance of social support, most notably having advocates that listened, allowed for autonomy, and worked with them no matter what as helpful to making healthier choices, including leaving prostitution.

**Specific Resiliency Factors in CSEC**

Based on the resiliency literature, and the results of this study, there are multiple resiliency factors at work in helping CSEC escape commercial sexual exploitation. Resiliency factors already identified in the literature that were also found in this study on CSEC include: social support, particularly in the form of peer-survivor relationships; having a future orientation; self-efficacy, notably the belief that you can escape the world of commercial sexual exploitation; and strong family relationships, however in the case of CSEC, the definition of family is more open and flexible and the parent-child bond is not the bond to the survivor’s mother, but the strength of the survivor’s bond towards her own child. Thus, for the field of resiliency research, CSEC is another adolescent
population that can be included in discussions of these resiliency factors. Some resiliency factors identified in adolescent populations do not appear to hold for CSEC. Specifically, religious beliefs and the quality of the bond with one’s parent were not cited by CSEC as factors that facilitated their exit from commercial sexual exploitation. Locus of control was not cited, but the related concept of self-efficacy was. For CSEC, they did not report a belief that they had the ability to exercise control over events, or even their own lives, but they did have a strong belief that they could escape commercial sexual exploitation and take steps to make their lives better. Given the lack of control CSEC have had over what happens to them, it makes sense that they might have a more cautious, guarded view over what is, and what is not, within their control. Intelligence was not measured, so this study cannot speak to what role IQ might play as a resiliency factor in CSEC. Other resiliency factors seem to be specific to CSEC themselves. These resiliency factors include having a flexible thinking style, including positive thinking and goal directed thinking; knowledge about commercial sexual exploitation; the personal traits of acceptance, gratitude, and patience; resourcefulness in meeting basic needs and attending to self-care; and the view of oneself as a survivor.

Other Lessons Learned from this Research

Some of the valuable information from this study is not limited to the data itself, but is gleaned from behavioral observations in the focus groups. Participants in this study had a difficult time discussing resiliency. They found it hard to identify strengths and actually appeared more comfortable discussing trauma. All groups continually returned to the topic of how they entered the life, even though this was not inquired about, and shared details of child sexual abuse histories and other events that preceded their entry into prostitution. They also consistently shared stories of traumatic events that happened at the hands of pimps and johns, even these experiences were not in their view precipitants to escaping sexual exploitation. The principal investigator gave participants room to discuss trauma when
they brought it up, would make an empathic statement if other participants did not do so first, and would gradually steer the conversation back to the topic of exiting. There could be many reasons for this tendency to discuss trauma. First of all, participants have all taken part in groups at GEMS, and thus they may be used to discussing this type of material in group settings with other survivors. It is also possible that the process of being in a focus group about commercial sexual exploitation brought up memories that they needed to share as a way of processing the experience and remaining psychologically present with the group. The discussion of trauma may also have been their way of connecting with each other, as some participants never met prior to the start of the focus groups. Finally, they may not yet see themselves as resilient, depending on where they are in the exiting process, so this could be a new concept that they have not yet fully integrated into their sense of self, and as such, it is much harder to talk about.

The relationship dynamics in the group also provided a wealth of information. Participants demonstrated the level of social support that they talked about. They applauded each other after they told their story about leaving, they gave each other advice on dealing with boyfriends and family, and they related to each other’s experiences in the moment, saying things like “That happened to me too!” If a participant was hard on herself, other participants would point out her strengths and accomplishments. In two instances where a participant discussed difficulty accepting that she was not somehow at fault, other participants broke it down for her, explaining why she is not to blame and encouraging her not to accept responsibility for her sexual exploitation. They applied their knowledge of commercial sexual exploitation in the focus groups, correcting language from “prostitute” to “sexually exploited” and explaining how pimps and traffickers manipulate CSEC and prey on their abuse histories. The focus groups, apart from the content, demonstrated the process of how CSEC leave the life mentally and emotionally.
The groups were also notable for what was not discussed. Participants largely did not discuss their relationships with their pimps. While a few participants expressed love for their pimps or feelings of missing their pimps, the vast majority expressed the feeling of relief and good riddance. This is not to suggest that the relationship with the pimp is not an integral component of what draws many survivors into the world of commercial sexual exploitation. Indeed, in discussing entry into the life, numerous participants noted that they dated their pimps prior to entering. However, while pimps may draw CSEC into the life, they also push them out, motivating them to leave through their acts of violence and betrayal. As participants made their way through the exiting process, the pimp’s relevance declined significantly. Pimps largely remained relevant to participants as someone who is dangerous, won’t let you go, and must be avoided at all costs. Participants also did not frequently discuss substance abuse. Only two participants cited addictions as motivating factors for entering the life, and one of those participants reported that her boyfriend, and subsequent pimp, helped get her hooked on drugs so that he could sexually exploit her, namely by cutting off her access to drugs unless she agreed to work as a prostitute. Three of the nineteen participants discussed struggling with an addiction while exiting commercial sexual exploitation. The other sixteen participants did not identify substance abuse as significant concern in their lives.

**Lessons for Service Providers**

One of the more telling findings in this research is that CSEC often have a different definition of escaping commercial sexual exploitation than what service providers, researchers, or stakeholders may have. While we may measure success by a black and white category of selling sex or not selling sex, for survivors of commercial sexual exploitation whether or not one has escaped is very nuanced. By using the definition of leaving that CSEC survivors advocate, service providers have numerous ways they can assess growth and progress apart from a simple measure of whether one is still engaging
in sex for money or items of value. Thus, girls who are “one foot in, one foot out” are best viewed not as girls who cannot leave, but as girls who are moving through the exiting process slowly and deliberately. Service providers will need to adjust their expectations of recovery to better reflect the experiences of CSEC, and the gradual process of exiting.

Service providers and agencies could benefit from taking a harm reduction approach to supporting CSEC. Participants specifically stated that knowing they could relapse and still be accepted and receive services was a crucial aspect of engaging them. Not punishing CSEC for returning to their pimps is essential given the cycling that is inherent in the exiting process. Additionally, since CSEC need to be ready and willing to leave, service providers can play a vital role in helping them move through the stages of change model. Motivational Interviewing (MI), developed by Miller and Rollnick (2002), may be a particularly useful tool in this process since it is based on the transtheoretical model and aims to resolve ambivalence about change and increase motivation for change. In MI, the therapist works to raise awareness of the problems the behavior causes, the consequences the client experiences, and the risks the client faces as a result of the behavior. MI is based on four therapeutic principles: 1) Assess the client’s stage of change and perspective on the problem, and communicate empathy and understanding of client’s position; 2) Gradually develop cognitive and attitude discrepancies towards maladaptive behavior, namely to help the client come to recognize the benefits of change by exploring the difference between how clients want their lives to be and how their lives actually are; 3) Accept the resistance and view the client’s defenses as steps in the change process, not as pathological character deficiencies or as an indication of failure; and 4) Promote self-efficacy and autonomy by supporting the client’s decision to change, or not to change, and facilitating the client’s decision-making and taking action (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). In treatment, MI therapists focus on expressing empathy, developing discrepancy, work with the resistance, and support self-efficacy, all of which CSEC cited as processes
helpful to escaping commercial sexual exploitation. Motivational interviewing techniques could help CSEC reduce feelings of ambivalence about exiting and recognize the significant drawbacks of sexual exploitation. It would also let them feel that leaving is their choice and not something being forced on them. Such a strategy would also enhance feelings of autonomy and independence, as also suggested by CSEC in Brown’s (2006) article. Furthermore, now that multiple, specific adaptive thoughts that help CSEC escape have been identified, service providers can work with their clients to foster similar thinking and realizations depending on their client’s needs.

There is some evidence to suggest that MI could benefit CSEC, as it has been found to increase readiness for change in similar populations. For example, in a sample of 20 women living in a domestic violence shelter in San Diego, women whose therapists used MI had a significantly higher score on readiness for change (p < .02), as measured by a dichotomous motivation for change variable on the University of Rhode Island Change Assessment (URICA), than those who received the regular clinical services the shelter provides (Rasmussen, Hughes, & Murray, 2008). However, while MI may be a helpful intervention for many CSEC, it would likely best be used with those who have gone through the exit/re-entry cycle at least once, as this seems to be a key part of the exiting process, or with CSEC who are clearly in the contemplation stage. For those who see prostitution as a good personal choice, are in the precontemplation stage, or are still very much in love with, or attached to their pimps, the techniques associated with Motivational Interviewing may not be effective. Clinicians working with CSEC in these earlier stages of change will need to be very careful not to undermine clients’ autonomy or push too hard to develop discrepancy, as this could come across as judgmental, condescending, bossy, and possibly discourage CSEC from seeking therapy when they are in the contemplation stage. Since the young women in this sample cited the importance of feeling accepted no matter what, and being empowered to make their own decisions, however dangerous, clinicians working with CSEC in
the earlier stages of change may be better off adhering to a harm reduction model and focusing on the components of MI that are common across therapeutic modalities, such as expressing empathy and working with resistance.

Service agencies need to do better in terms of providing practical support to CSEC. In order to exit, CSEC need facilities that are safe physically and emotionally. They need help with basic needs such as food and clothing, and navigating larger systems so they can get identification and apply for state benefits. They need Metrocards to get out of dangerous neighborhoods and away from pimps, and they need education about commercial sexual exploitation that explains how CSEC are blameless victims, not delinquent criminals. They need access to other survivors, and preferably, groups specifically for survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. Seeing role models and being able to connect with other survivors, to know that they are not alone, is essential to building connection and fostering hope for recovery. The role of fellow survivors as potential role models is a key component of the self-help movement, notably in programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. Although research on the efficacy of self-help groups is mixed, as it is often confounded by participants having had, or currently receiving counseling, the founding principles of anonymity, different levels of psychiatric functioning between members, member self-selection, and poor research designs, meta-analyses on more rigorous studies and reviews of the literature suggest that it is beneficial, whether led by mental health professionals or peers, although the exact mechanisms for why they work remain unclear (Kelly, 2003; Pistrang, Barker, & Humphreys, 2008). However, what the current study determined is that participating in groups specifically for CSEC helps them feel connected and stay motivated to change, and as such, survivor-based groups are a necessary direction in service provision. Now that service agencies are aware of what helps CSEC escape prostitution, they can and should take steps to meet these needs.
Lastly, service providers need to take into consideration where CSEC are in the long exiting process. Those who have just stopped being exploited have different needs than those who have been free from exploitation for a longer period of time. Services should continue for those are further along in the process, but the type of services will need to change. CSEC who have been out of the life for longer periods of time may benefit more from individual therapy that looks at early childhood traumas, or focuses on identity formation, as opposed to the more practical, immediate needs that those earlier in the process face. Given the difficulty CSEC face in forming relationships and connecting to others, an interpersonal approach to therapy may help CSEC address underlying relationship fears and difficulties, and integrate trauma into a survivor identity.

**Limitations of the Present Study and Future Directions**

The purpose of this study was to add to the limited CSEC literature by identifying potential resiliency factors in adolescent girls with a history of commercial sexual exploitation. Using qualitative methods, this research illuminates what resources help survivors turn their lives around, what services are most beneficial in this process, and gives a voice to a group that it is often pathologized or overlooked. This study provides a unique opportunity to add to both the CSEC literature and the resiliency literature, as commercially sexually exploited youth are missing from resiliency studies, and resiliency factors are absent in CSEC studies. In addition to contributing to the knowledge base on this population, this study also has the potential to inform treatment, prevention programs, community services, and policymakers. Given the dearth of empirical research on this subject, this study is a welcome addition to a burgeoning field.

However, this study has a number of limitations. First of all, there is no comparison group to compare CSEC youth to so we will not be able to determine how unique these factors are to sexually exploited youth as they likely apply to other victimized adolescents as well, such as incest survivors,
who also deal with sexual abuse in the context of captivity, and issues of shame and stigma. Secondly, participants were reporting retrospectively on their experiences. This study focused on a group within the larger CSEC population – urban, adolescent girls involved in prostitution. It is likely that boys, rural children, and CSEC exposed to other types of commercial sexual exploitation, such as pornography, have different experiences and as such, may use and require different resources in order to transition out of commercial sexual exploitation. For example, Gragg et al (2007) found substantial differences in the experiences of and services received by CSEC in upstate New York as opposed to those in the city. Furthermore, since these girls are all in the GEMS program, we cannot determine if there are differences between girls who are receiving services at GEMS and those who are receiving services elsewhere or those who are not receiving services at all. Similarly, since all participants received some form of therapy, whether through groups at GEMS or by seeing an outside therapist, we cannot determine the impact of these services on their resiliency or reported coping skills.

There are a number of directions future research can take to further our understanding of the CSEC population. Resiliency studies could focus on girls who are incarcerated or actively on the street (and thus not in programs), boys and transgender youth, CSEC in suburban and rural areas, and CSEC who have been trafficked in from other countries. Other types of studies, such as needs assessments and program evaluations, would also be welcome. Lastly, longitudinal studies that examine where these girls go after they leave the life and stop receiving social services would be helpful in determining resiliency over the long-term.

This study was a first step in identifying resiliency factors in CSEC. Additional research needs to be conducted to determine if the resiliency factors reported here hold in studies with larger samples, using quantitative methods and standardized instruments. Longitudinal studies that look at CSEC throughout the exiting process could shed light on how the resiliency factors identified here develop.
For example, standardized measures of quality of peer relationships, motivation for change, self-efficacy, coping styles, and posttraumatic growth that are administered over time as CSEC gradually move through the exiting process could illuminate how resiliency grows, and which resiliency factors are more relevant during different stages of change. More rigorous research is needed to back up these findings before they can be generalized, and given the large number of CSEC, quantitative research is a logical next step as the field develops. Nonetheless, these results provide some guidance as to what resiliency factors help CSEC leave, and what obstacles they face, and it is a welcome start to a much larger discussion in the field.
References


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Appendix A

Script for GEMS Caseworkers

I’d like to tell you about a research study that that you may be interested in participating in. The study aims to identify resiliency factors, such individual strengths or resources, which help girls leave the life and move on with their lives. Pam Guthrie, a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology, who used to run groups here five years ago, is conducting the research. Pam will be running the focus groups here at GEMS. The groups will consist of approximately five girls and will last about an hour and a half. Participants will be given a $20 gift card to Old Navy for their time. The services you receive here at GEMS will not be affected whether or not you choose to participate. If you’re interested in participating, we will set up a time for you to meet her so she could explain the study in more detail and give you an appointment for a focus group. Do you think you would be interested in participating?
Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your birth date? ________________

2. How would you identify your race/ethnicity?
   A) African American  B) Caucasian  C) Hispanic  D) Asian
   E) Pacific Islander  F) Other ________________

3. How long have you been at GEMS? ________________

4. Would you say that you are “in the life?” ______ If no, how long ago did you leave? ______

5. About how long were you “in the life?” ________________

6. At what age did you enter “the life?” ________________

7. Do you have any children? If so, how old are they? ________________
Focus Group Questions

Main Question: I’m interested in learning how you left the life. What can you tell me about that?

Other questions to draw upon if necessary:

1) What personal characteristics or beliefs do you think helped you leave the life?
2) Were there times when you tried to leave the life but couldn't do it? What happened?
3) What advice do you have for a girl trying to leave the life?
4) Is there anything you think I should know about leaving the life that hasn't come up yet?